Michael Beißwenger* and Steffen Pappert

How to be polite with emojis: a pragmatic analysis of face work strategies in an online learning environment

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1 Introduction

Empirical, data-based analyses of linguistic and interactional practices in an emerging field of human communication typically start with small-scale qualitative studies which are designed to explore a certain phenomenon of interest and to formulate hypotheses for further in-depth research on it. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) can – *still* – be considered as such an emerging field: Even though CMC technologies have been a popular and important part of everyday and professional communication for more than 20 years and the linguistic analysis on CMC-related phenomena has been acknowledged as an innovative area of linguistic research for roughly the same time span, CMC – as *technology*-based communication – is an object of continuous change and development, with emerging technologies, genres, and linguistic practices.

Emojis as a relatively new phenomenon have emerged as one of the most salient features of CMC in recent years. Emojis are iconic or symbolic, invariant graphic units which the users of social media applications and platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram or Facebook can select from a menu and embed into their written utterances. Especially in (but not limited to) private and informal CMC interactions use these units have become highly popular as they obviously add to the linguistic "toolkit" as handy devices for contextualising verbal utterances and for the social and interactional organization of communication. Therefore it is no wonder that the use and distribution of emojis use has recently become one of the "hot topics" of CMC research (Kelly and Watts 2015, Ljubešić and Fišer 2016, Danesi 2017, Herring and Dainas 2017, Dürscheid and Siever 2017, Pappert 2017,

***Corresponding author: Michael Beißwenger,** Universität Duisburg-Essen, Fakultät für Geisteswissenschaften, Institut für Germanistik, Essen, Germany, E-Mail: michael.beisswenger@uni-due.de
Dr. Steffen Pappert, Universität Duisburg-Essen, Fakultät für Geisteswissenschaften, Institut für Germanistik, Essen, Germany, E-Mail: steffen.pappert@uni-due.de

Beißwenger and Pappert 2018, Ge and Herring 2018, Hougaard and Rathje 2018, Li and Yang 2018, Siebenhaar 2018).

In our article we present a case study on one particular type of emoji use in which emojis function as *modalisers* within politeness strategies. The study is based on data from a game-based learning environment in which students were asked to provide peer feedback on other students' work on the talk pages of a wiki. To support the students in performing the feedback task they were provided a set of emojis. The use of emojis was voluntary.

The results of the study show that emojis – in the given learning scenario – are systematically used to perform redressive action – either as softeners of face-threatening acts or by boosting the addressees' face as a compensation for critique. The explorative study illustrates the strong interdependence of the pragmatic function of a given emoji instance with the linguistic and situational context in which it is embedded.

Even though it is a small-scale study with "only" 280 emoji instances distributed over 211 posts the results can contribute to the elaboration of a general classification scheme for emojis in CMC data. The decision to study face work practices with emojis based on data from a learning environment is motivated by the controlled setting in which interaction in a learning context typically takes place: Different from data collected from the private sphere (as is the case, e.g., with the corpora created in the projects *Whats Up, Switzerland?*[1] or *MocCoDa 2*[2]) the production of the CMC posts analysed in this article is based on a clear, written task in a clearly delimited social context and under motivational circumstances that can be considered similar for all of the authors. In this respect the CMC data under observation can be considered as more homogeneous than data produced in the private sphere by individuals in different instances of interaction with different social backgrounds in different social settings and based on a vast range of motivations. Data from a learning context with well-documented context information therefore provide a promising basis to gain first empirical insights into the pragmatic "mechanisms" of emojis under simplified conditions.

The article is structured as followed. We first give a brief overview of the current state of linguistic research on emoticons and emojis (Sect. 2) and outline the theoretical framework (politeness theory) on which our study is based on (Sect. 3). In Sect. 4 we describe the nature of the data for our study and our analytic approach to it, and present the findings of a qualitative analysis of how emojis support politeness strategies when performing peer feedback in the learning scenario

1 https://www.whatsup-switzerland.ch/

2 https://db.mocoda2.de/

under observation. The article concludes with a discussion of the results and an outlook on further research and on the creation of a general classification scheme for emojis which could be used for the annotation of emoji instances in CMC corpora (Sect. 5).

2 Linguistic Approaches for the Research of Emoticons and Emojis in Web-based Communication

Emojis and their keyboard-generated predecessors, *emoticons*, have been reflected in previous linguistic literature on CMC on different perspectives. In this section we present a overview of suggestions how these units which support the organization of written CMC interactions in a diverse manner could be analysed and classified from a linguistic point of view.

2.1 Emoticons

Emoticons or 'smileys' are combinations of punctuation, special characters and letters which are generated with the keyboard and which are read as typed replicas of facial expressions which are typically used to contextualize a written utterance (e.g., as ironic) or to evaluate an utterance performed by an interlocutor (e.g. as something he or she appreciates or is grateful for) (Beißwenger 2015: 38–40). To some extent, emoticons and other grapho-stylistic devices can depict para- and non-verbal means of expression. A conceptualization of emoticons simply as iconic signs, however, has to be considered as too abridged because they are not just used for illustration but fulfill a range of additional functions. Several authors have worked out a variety of functions of emoticons for a range of CMC genres. Those relevant for the research focus of this article are summarized below.

From a speech act theoretical point of view, Dresner and Herring (2010: 250) argue "that in many typical cases, emoticons indicate the illocutionary force of the text to which they are attached, contributing to its pragmatic meaning, and are thus part and parcel of the linguistic communication channel". They identify three main functions of emoticons:

> (a) as emotion indicators, mapped directly onto facial expression; (b) as indicators of non-emotional meanings, mapped conventionally onto facial expressions; and (c) as illocutionary

> force indicators that do not map conventionally onto a facial expression. (Dresner and Herring 2010: 250)

Skovholt et al. (2014: 780) show "that emoticons function as contextualization cues, which serve to organize interpersonal relations in written interaction". Using *speech act theory* and *politeness theory*, they discover three function types of emoticons in workplace E-Mails from Nordic companies (for Japanese and English blogs cf. Kavanagh 2016):

> First, when following signatures, emoticons function as markers of a positive attitude. Second, when following utterances that are intended to be interpreted as humorous, they are joke/irony markers. Third, they are hedges: when following expressive speech acts (such as thanks, greetings, etc.) they function as strengtheners and when following directives (such as requests, corrections, etc.) they function as softeners. (Skovholt et al. 2014: 780)

Another function is described by Spina (2018) who, based on a corpus of Italian Twitter interactions, investigates their use "as structural markers". Her study shows how emoticons – either as standalone elements or in combination with punctuation marks – are used to mark structural boundaries and convey emotional, pragmatic and social components of meaning at the same time.

Among others, the works by Beißwenger et al. (2012), Imo (2015) and Thaler (2012) provide differentiated analyses of emoticon functions for German CMC data. Beißwenger's et al. (2012) approach emoticons from a syntactic perspective and classify them as *interaction signs* building on the category of 'interactive units' from the system of German word classes described by Zifonun et al. (1997). Under a functional perspective the authors describe emoticons as units that are "often used to portray facial expressions, and [that] typically serve as emotion, illocution, or irony markers" (Beißwenger et al. 2012: 18). They assume that emoticons have a *systemic function* (independent from the given context of use) and a *context function* (determined by the context of use). Imo (2015) presents a qualitative analysis of the emoticon *:-)* in German SMS interactions and identifies following functions:

(i) Expression of enthusiasm about an event or occurrence
(ii) Phatic communication (small talk)
(iii) Contextualization of facetious interactions
(iv) Face work in face-threatening activities
(v) Structuring of statements or comments (Imo 2015: 144–154)

Thaler (2012)'s work on politeness in chats deals with the question which functions emoticons can fulfill besides expressing emotions such as joy, amazement, anger, etc., and expressing approval and affection (cf. Thaler 2012: 166). Based on

the assumption that a smile can mitigate face-threatening acts in face-to-face interactions and using data from German and French chats, Thaler (2012: 166–171) shows that the smiling emoticon *:-)* and the laughing emoticon *:D* (as well as corresponding variants) are used to soften the effect of a face-threatening act. They are most frequently used when somebody is criticized, disagreed with, or urged to change their behavior. The form *:-)* and its graphic variants also serve to mitigate other face-threatening acts such as apologies, justifications or excuses, rejections, requests, suggestions or pieces of advice, invitations, compliments, and teasing (Thaler 2012: 171), so that there seem to be specific practices that have evolved through repeated use in CMC.

2.2 Emojis

Emojis are colourful images or pictorial symbols that are listed in the Unicode character set. Unlike combinations of ASCII characters (as is the case with emoticons), the form of emojis cannot be changed arbitrarily by the author of the post in which they are embedded (cf. Dürscheid and Siever 2017: 260). Research that has focused on emojis from a pragmatic perspective are Kelly and Watts (2015), Danesi (2017), Herring and Dainas (2017), Pappert (2017), Beißwenger and Pappert (2018), Hougaard and Rathje (2018), Ge and Herring (2018) and Li and Yang (2018). In the following, the most important distinctions and results of these works will be examined at least cursorily, since a more detailed appraisal would go beyond the scope of this article.

Based on data from interviews, Kelly and Watts (2015) assign emojis the following functions: Emoji are used to (1) "become a low-cost means of maintaining a connection through the 'pinging' or poking of another individual" (2015: 5), (2) "to engage in playful interaction with one's partner" (2015: 5) which shows that the interactants have a close relationship, and (3) "to build forms of meaning that are uniquely interpretable within a particular relationship" (2015: 5). Herring and Dainas (2017) present a study in which they analyze the frequency and pragmatic functions of emojis, which they call *graphicons*, in a corpus of Facebook comments. The authors postulate the following functions:

- *mention (vs.* use*)*: "simple *mentions* of graphicons";
- *reaction*: "a graphicon use that depicts an emotional response to content that was posted earlier in the thread";
- *riff*: "a humorous elaboration on, play on, or parody of a previous graphicon or text comment";
- *tone modification*: "[t]he graphicon functions as a nonverbal, paraverbal, or paralinguistic cue as to how the text should be interpreted. This includes the

use of graphicons to clarify intent and hedge the illocutionary force of an utterance";
- *action*:"a graphicon used to portray a (typically) physical action";
- *narrative sequence*: "a series of consecutive graphicons that tells a story of sorts".

Danesi's (2017: 95–116) qualitative study also deals with pragmatic functions and identifies two main categories (Danesi 2017: 95–97):

(1) *adding tone*, a category that corresponds to the function of 'tone modification' from Herring and Dainas' (2017) approach ("When something awkward or offensive may arise, the emoji step in to add inflection that can weaken the potentially conflictual interpretation", Danesi 2017: 96) This function also includes, among other, the use of emojis as modalisers for face-threatening acts as examined in this paper (cf. Sect. 4).
(2) *injecting a positive mood*: "Overall, the emoji forms are ‚mood enhancers', generally imparting, maintaining, or reinforcing a sense of togetherness among interlocutors"; this category adds on the one hand to the functions described by the aforementioned authors as it emphasizes the function of emojis as devices for "visualization of the mood or sentiment expressed by the writer" (Danesi 2017: 96) and on the other hand includes all cases in which emojis are used for *framing* in terms of Goffman (1974) (Danesi 2017: 56–58).

Also for Hougaard and Rathje (2018) who analyzed the emoji use of young Danes the clarification of intentions (*"modality aspect"*) of posts is one of three main functions of emojis besides the use of emojis (2) "to express feelings, and as fun and embellishment" and (3) as devices to facilitate "interactional navigation", i.e. for "closing interactions and switching topics" (Hougaard and Rathje 2018: 803). With respect to use of emojis on Sina Weibo, Ge and Herring (2018) show that "emoji sequences can function pragmatically like verbal utterances and form relations with textual propositions, although their usage differs from textual utterances in several respects". In a corpus-based study of Chinese WeChats, Li and Yang (2018) classify seven pragmatic functions: "attitude/emotion signal, attitude/emotion intensity enhancer, illocutionary force modifier, humor, irony, turn taking/giving, and backchannel device". Dürscheid and Frick (2016) use selected German-speaking examples to show that the "commentary function" is the "most widespread and best-known function". In addition, it is claimed that Emojis "serve to illustrate the utterance" or are used to realize the "so-called representational function" (Dürscheid and Frick 2016: 105).

Building on a review of suggestions from previous literature available in 2017 Pappert (2017), based on a qualitative analysis of examples from German

WhatsApp chats and adopting the *interactional stylistics* approach (Selting 1997), describes eight pragmatic functions of emojis which, in some respect, are more fine-grained than in previous apporoaches but largely can be mapped to categories that had been suggested before:

Function (Pappert 2017)	*Examples of corresponding functions in other approaches (cum grano salis):*
(1) Framing function (Rahmen)	'injecting a positive mood' (Danesi 2017)
(2) Relationship building/management function (Beziehungsgestaltung)	'injecting a positive mood' (Danesi 2017)
(3) Economizing function (Ökonomisieren)	"low-cost means of maintaining a connection" (Kelly and Watts 2015)
(4) Modalising function (Modalisieren)	'tone modification', Herring and Dainas (2017), 'adding tone', Danesi (2017)
(5) Commentary/evaluative function (Kommentieren/Evaluieren)	'commentary function' (Dürscheid and Frick 2016)
(6) Structuring function (Strukturieren)	Cf. Spina (2018) for emoticons
(7) Representation function (Darstellen)	"so-called representational function" (Dürscheid and Frick 2016)
(8) Ludic function (Ludische Funktion)	"engage in playful interaction" (Kelly and Watts 2015), "use of emojis as fun" (Hougaard and Rathje 2018)
(9) Ornament function (Ausschmückung)	"embellishment" (Hougaard and Rathje 2018)

Beißwenger and Pappert (2018: 455) consider the framing function a *basic function* that is typically inherent in any kind of emoji use so that the decision of an author to use an emoji is always a signal that he or she wants to establish a certain degree of informality and intimacy.

For the analysis in this article we assume that emojis generally situate written interactions within an informal context. The basic function mentioned above is crucial for the contextualization of linguistic acts that could be perceived as face-threatening: By including emojis in a post, the author assures his or her counterpart that he considers the interactional situation as a situation at eye level – even when the counterpart is criticized. Aside from the basic function, emojis can additionally fulfill further and more specific functions (regarding the data analyzed in this paper especially the *modalising* function). Before we describe the data and present our analyses in sections 4, section 3 will introduce a theoretical approach for describing politeness in social interaction which our study is based on.

3 Linguistic approaches for describing politeness in social interaction (*face work*)

Erving Goffman's concept of *face*, which has been developed since the mid-1950s, is considered fundamental for any form of social interaction since conversations do not only serve the purpose of exchanging information but also involve the development, maintenance, and reinforcement of identities. In other words: social interactions are about saving or losing face:

> The term *face* may be defined as the positive value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share. (Goffman 1967: 5)

Brown and Levinson (1987) expanded on Goffman's approach and developed a model of linguistic 'politeness'. Despite various criticisms and remodellings (cf. i.a. Fraser 2001; Locher 2004; Watts 2003, 2010), the model is still considered the most prominent framework for the analysis of linguistic politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) assume that

> In general, people cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face. That is, normally everyone's face depends on everyone else's being maintained, and since people can be expected to defend their faces if threatened, and in defending their own to threaten others' faces, it is in general in every participant's best interest to maintain each others' face, that is to act in ways that assure the other participants that the agent is heedful of the assumptions concerning face [...]. (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61)

An individual's *face,* or *public self-image*, includes two aspects:

- The *positive face* refers to a person's desire (*face-want*) for appreciation: "his perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/aquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thougt of as desirable" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 101).
- The *negative face* concerns the desire (*face-want*) for "freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). To put it in other words, nobody wants to be told what to do or not to do.

Both negative and positive face depend on other people's faces. In general, *face-wants* are revealed in various social situations. In interactions, an individual's as well as its counterpart's face can be threatened. Brown and Levinson assume that there are speech acts that are inherently face-threatening (*face-theatening act*s [FTA]):

> It is intuitively the case that certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face, namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker. (Brown and Levinson 1987: 65)

The easiest way to avoid a face-threat is refraining from the face-threatening act entirely ("Don't do the FTA"). Brown and Levinson (1987: 2) furthermore define "three main strategies of politeness":

1) *Off-record* politeness

The *off-record* politeness strategy can be explained as follows:

> A communicative act is done off record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. In other words, the actor leaves himself an ‚out' by providing himself with a number of defensible interpretations; he cannot be held to have committed himself to just one particular interpretation of his act. Thus if a speaker wants to do an FTA, but wants to avoid the responsibility for doing it, he can do it off record and leave it up to the addresse to decide how to interpret it. Such off-record utterances are essentially indirect uses of language [...]. (Brown and Levinson 1987: 211)

Linguistic devices can be metaphors, the use of irony, rhetorical questions, tautologies and vague and indirect utterances that are ambiguous enough to enable speakers to distance themselves from statements.

2) *On-record* politeness

2.1) *bald-on record*

Brown and Levinson (1987: 68–69) distinguish between *bald-on-record* ("Do the FTA without redressive action") and *positive* and *negative politeness* ("Do the FTA with redressive action"). In both cases communicative intentions become apparent.

Acting "baldly, without redress" means that no mitigating actions are taken. Thus, the Gricean principle ("speaking in conformity with Grice's Maxims", Brown and Levinson 1987: 94) for the sake of "maximally efficient communication" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 95) is complied with.

2.2) *on-record-with redressive action*

In this strategy the face-threatening act is performed, but softened by *redressive action*, which compensates for the FTA. Additions to and modifications of utterances help to ensure the addressee "that no such face threat is intended or desired, and that S in general recognizes H' face wants and himself wants them to he achieved" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 70). Here Brown and Levinson distinguish between two types of politeness: *negative* and *positive politeness*:

- *Negative politeness* "is essentially avoidance-based" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 69), which means that a speaker "recognizes and respects the addressee's negative-face wants and will not (or will only minimally) interfere with the addressee's freedom of action" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 69). Practices of assurance and apologies as well as verbal and non-verbal modalisers, hedges and other linguistic devices function as "contextualization cues" (Gumperz 1982, 1992) and can mitigate (potentially) face-threatening acts.
- *Positive politeness* is directed at the addressee's positive face and "'anoints' the face of the addressee by indicating that in some respects, S wants H's wants" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 70). Brown and Levinson add that "positive politeness techniques are usable not only for FTA redress, but in general as a kind of social accelerator, where S, in using them, indicates that he wants to ‚come closer' to H" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 103).

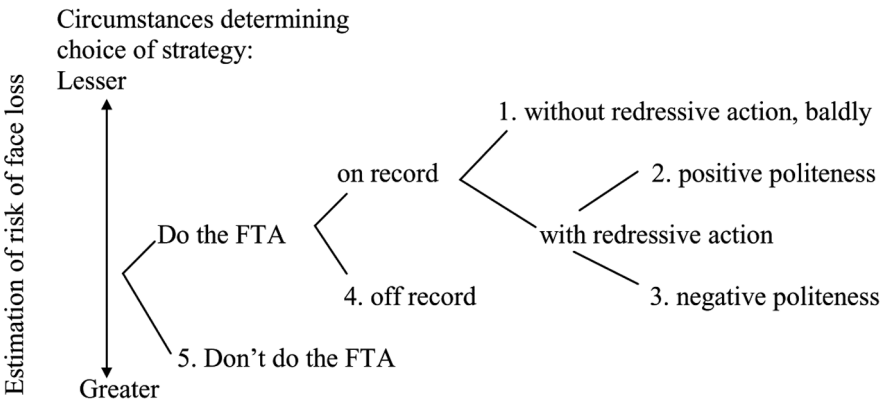

Figure 1: Politenesse strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987; cf. Locher 2008: 516).

The underlying pessimism of the FTA-model ignores benevolent or *face*-encouraging actions such as expressions of appreciation, gratitude, or compliments, which can serve to deepen relationships. The existence of those kinds of actions

is beyond doubt, though, and we will therefore suppose they exist. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2005) suggest the term *face-flattering act*:

> It is, therefore, of utmost importance to highlight, in this theoretical model, the role of these acts, which are like the positive side of the FTAs, acts that reinforce the other's face and which I suggest we call FFA (Face-Flattering Act). (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2005: 30–31)

Research on politeness in CMC is still a relatively new area of research (Bedjis et al. 2014; Locher et al. 2015; Graham 2017 give an informative overview of previous work on this issue). An important question in this context is "in what ways forms of computer-mediated communication differ from face-to-face interaction with respect to the *restrictions* that the medium imposes on relational work/face work and the consequences of these restrictions on linguistic choices" (Locher 2010: 3–4). Besides verbal signs, other semiotic devices or rather "the multimodal capabilities of digital media" (Graham 2017: 459) are of great interest. These also include emojis as "they are [...] an important part of digital interaction and one that is critical to the interpretation of (im)politeness because, no matter how imperfect, they help interactants clarify their intentions" (Graham 2017: 462).

4 *Face work* with emojis in students peer feedback comments

4.1 Nature of the data: written comments from a cooperative learning game on German orthography

In the following sections we analyze the use of emojis in written evaluative feedback provided by teacher students who attended university classes on German orthography in the summer term 2017 at University of Duisburg-Essen. The peer feedback task was part of a game-based learning scenario in which the students had to deal with the German spelling rules and their grammatical foundations in a self-directed, cooperative and peer-based way (Beißwenger and Meyer 2018, 2019[3]). The main goal of the learning game – named *Ortho & Graf* – was to make orthography (which teacher students and also pupils at school typically perceive as a "dry" topic) tangible for the learners through training their competence in detecting and solving "cases of doubt" regarding the spelling of German words

3 The Ortho & Graf learning game environment is available as a showcase version and for free download via https://udue.de/orthoundgraf.

and phrases. The game was played in a blended-learning mode combining face-to-face classroom activity with online activities which were organized in wiki platform. The "cases of doubt" were snippets from diverse types of written text for which the students were not sure whether they were spelled correctly or not. The main task in the game was to solve these cases referring to the official set of rules of German Orthography and to discuss the plausibility of the solutions amongst each other. All activities were framed by a game scenario structured into several *game phases* in which the students had to take different roles related to the work of a fictitious investigation company named *Ortho & Graf* which according to the basic narrative of the game was offering services in solving orthography-related problems:

- In the *first phase* of the game the students took the roles of *customers* of the company and submitted *investigation requests* to Ortho & Graf's stack of incoming orders. To find cases of doubt, the students were encouraged to go through the world with open eyes and look for spellings (in newspapers, on posters and leaflets, on product labels, and in their own term papers from previous semesters) which they thought were or could be incorrect. The submission of investigation requests was done in the online environment (= the website of *Ortho & Graf*) using a certain template.
- In the *second phase*, the students took the role of *spelling-investigators* who are working in investigating teams. The investigating teams could freely select investigation requests from the stack of incoming orders and solve them referring to the official set of orthographic rules for German. For each case they were dealing with they created a wiki page with a *case file* in which they described and gave a rationale for their solution of the case.
- In the *third phase* the students were appointed to take the role of *agents of the internal audit of the company* which are requested to critically review case files created by other investigators, check them for plausibility and provide feedback and suggestions to the investigators how the solution and rationale given for the case under observation could be improved. The feedback had to be provided on the talk page connected with the case file under review. Students were provided a selection of emojis which they could embed into their feedback comments using a wiki template. The use of the emojis was voluntary, not mandatory.

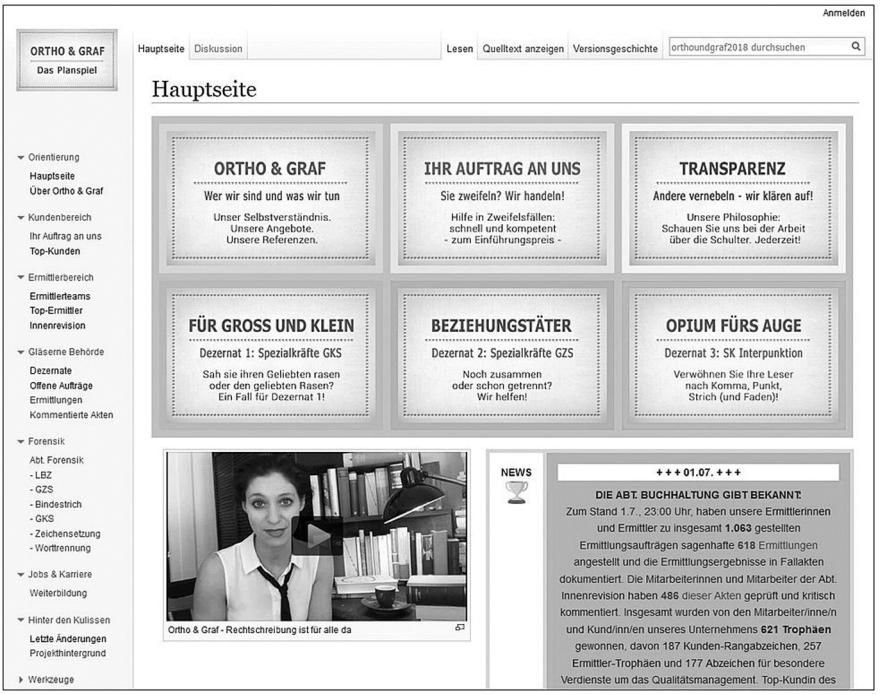

Figure 2: Main page of the *Ortho & Graf* learning game environment (Beißwenger and Meyer 2018, 2019).

Figure 3: Excerpt from the inventory of emojis that students could use in their feedback comments. The left column shows the emoji form, the right column gives the code snippet which had to be inserted into the comment text to create an instance of the emoji.

Emoji	Template	Emoji	Template
👍	{{Daumen}}	🤔	{{Grübel}}
💪	{{Stark}}	🤓	{{Besserwisser}}
😵	{{Verwirrt}}	🙂	{{Lächeln}}
👏	{{Klatsch}}	👌	{{Klasse}}

Figure 3: (continued)

Emoji	Template	Emoji	Template
	{{Vorsicht}}		{{Argh}}
	{{Schock}}		{{Kürbis}}
	{{Lol}}		{{Zwinker}}
	{{Lehrerin}}		{{Lehrer}}
	{{Tipp}}		{{Auweia}}

4.2 Providing peer feedback as a challenging task: face threats and politeness strategies

The task for the third game phase was to provide evaluative feedback on other students' case files. The task description was as follows:

> "Please check the selected case files for *plausibility*: Is the investigators' result comprehensible? Does the assignment of the result to an article of the set of rules seem trace-able and have the investigators justified their decision comprehensibly? Has the file been completed accurately?Please provide *short written feedback* to the investigators. Highlight what you consider the strengths of their analysis, but please also address aspects that are in need of improvement. Try to formulate proposals and suggestions as constructively and concisely as possible. Please keep in mind that the investigators whose cases you evaluate are your peers!"

Under a face work perspective performing this task implies face-threats in several respect:

(1) with respect to the negative face of the addressees critique and/or suggestions for revisions imply that the addressees' should do additional work to optimise their case files and thus can be seen as a face-threat;
(2) at the same time critique and/or suggestions for revisions evaluate the addressees' work as something that could benefit from optimisations and thus also threaten the addressees' positive face;

(3) while the evaluators through threatening the addressees negative and positive face also threaten their own positive face since face-threats amongst peers – even when they are encouraged through the task description – are something that is widely dispreferred.

Given the risk to threaten the others' and one's own face in multiple ways (1–3) it can be assumed that learners may apply avoidance strategies as a form of handling the risk of face-threats. Avoidance strategies could result in

(i) avoiding to do the task at all;
(ii) doing the task but only dealing with cases that are perfect and therefore do not require to do an FTA;
(iii) doing the task but dealing with cases of any kind without doing any FTA.

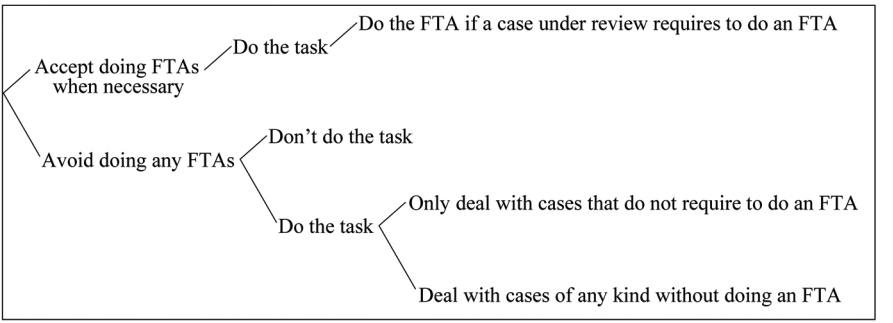

Figure 4: Acceptance vs. avoidance strategies with respect to the peer feedback task

In the case of Ortho & Graf the students necessarily had to perform the task in order to successfully complete the seminar. Since selected results from the peer feedback round were discussed in the classroom, we assume that avoidance strategies of type (ii) and (iii) are rather the exception since applying one of these strategies implies a threat for one's own positive face if the teachers take notice of it. We therefore assume that most of the students tried to solve the task of providing evaluative feedback in a socially acceptable way. A first screening of the feedback comments led us to the hypothesis that the students adopted emojis as a device for softening potential face-threats and for being polite when performing critique and/or suggestions for revisions.

4.3 How emojis contribute to face work: an example analysis

Example 1 shows a feedback post which comments on a case file written by an investigating team named *Orthoduo*. Five out of the five instances of emojis contained in the post contribute to face work: The first instance – the thumbs up icon – supports the intended effect of the utterance "Orthoduo's case file is great!" and thus can be considered a booster for a face-flattering act. The same holds for the second instance, the clapping hands icon, which illustrates and intensifies the face-flattering act which is performed with the utterance "They based their evaluation of the case on the basis of the official set of rules in a very detailed manner." The third instance, the finger pointing to the right, can one the one hand be considered as a structuring device which marks the boundaries between the utterances 2 and three and visualises both the connective function and the adversative meaning of the conjunction *aber* ('but') which introduces the following utterance. On the other hand it can also be considered an iconic marker which visually highlights the issue which is pointed out with utterance 3 – the face that the investigating time team has missed to fill in one of the obligatory positions of the case file template (the allocation of the case to one of the "departments" of the Ortho & Graf investigation company). We consider this second function of the pointing hand in this given post as a booster which – by putting a visual focus on the following utterance – supports and thus intensifies the face-threating act which arises from pointing to the incompleteness of the file linguistically.

Example 1: feedback post with five emoji instances contributing to face work:[4]

Ex. 1)	Eine gute Ermittlungsakte von Orthoduo! 👍 Die Fallbeurteilung anhand des amtlichen Regelwerks ist sehr ausführlich. 👏👉	*Orthoduo's case file is great!* 👍 *They based their evaluation of the case on the basis of the official set of rules in a very detailed manner.* 👏👉

4 For all examples given here and on the following pages we present the original data (German) in the left column and have added an English translation in the right column to make the examples readible also for non-German-speaking readers.

Jedoch fehlt die Zuordnung zu einem Dezernat. Und ich habe einen Rechtschreibfehler entdeckt. 	*But the allocation to a department is missing. And I found a spelling mistake.* 
Unter Handlungsempfehlung muss es Infinitiv anstatt "Infiitiv" heißen. 	*It's „infinitive" and not „infiitive".* 
Katja Kling (Diskussion) 12:12, 4. Jul. 2017 (CEST)	Katja Kling *(Diskussion) 12:12, 4. Jul. 2017 (CEST)*

We consider the fourth instance – the face screaming in fear – as a display of emotion which, in the given context (= commenting on solutions for orthographic phenomena) can be describe as hyperbolic and thus a modaliser. In the given context it functions as a softener for the face-threatening act associated with the statement that the file contains a spelling mistake. The last instance, a female teacher in front of a blackboard, visually alludes to the game scenario in which in phase 3 the (teacher) students are encouraged to critically comment on results of their peers and thus are authorised to point to deficiencies found in their work like a teacher would do in the classroom. We consider this use of the emoji in the given context as a ludic variant of softening a face-threat. Since this emoji stands in the final position of the post (only followed by the user signature) it may additionally be seen as a device for marking the post and the contained critique as a whole as a result from *doing criticism* in a gaming (and thus not a real-world) context. Therefore it can also be considered as a modaliser (softener) for the post as a whole which, because it contains not only face-flattering acts but also face-threatening acts, has to be considered as face-threatening as a whole.

4.4 The data

The empirical basis of our analysis of face work practices with emojis is the total of 680 peer posts which the 65 student participants of the three seminars in the summer semester 2017 contributed to phase 3 of the Ortho & Graf learning game. To keep the data set for our analysis homogeneous, we first removed all posts which contained a reactive component, i. e. which did not only perform the feedback task but also replied to a previous post on the same wiki talk page. This step of intellectual filtering was done because the addressees of face work and the necessity to perform face work in interaction can be seen as different under conditions in which (a) the author of the posts only deals with the peer feedback task (with his own and the face-wants of the authors of the case file under observation

may potentially be threatened) and (b) in which the author besides dealing with the feedback task is also dealing with claims and feedback posted by other authors in previous posts of the respective thread (where parts of his posts thus may evaluate also parts of previous posts of authors other than the authors of the case file and where also face-wants of authors of other posts and not only of the authors of the case file may potentially be threatened).

In a second step we identified all utterances in the data which could be assigned a potential face-threat. We considered an utterance a *face-threating act* (*FTA*) when it contained explicit criticism of the case file or of parts of it, or suggestions on how the case file or parts of it (through revision) could be optimised. We considered a part of a post an *utterance* when it could be assigned a proposition and an illocution; utterances typically had sentence format but could also, given the dialogic and interactional nature of the data, be elliptic.[5]

In a third step we cleaned the data set resulting from step 2 from posts which did not contain at least one emoji or emoticon[6]. In a fourth step we also identified cases of *face-flattering acts* (*FFAs*) in the data and divided the data set into two subsets: (1) a subset with posts which contained only FTAs, (2) a subset with posts which contained both FTAs and FFAs. In a fifth and last step we removed those posts from the two subsets which only contained emojis or emoticons which did not contribute to performing face work. In these cases, emojis were used as *structural markers* or in a *referential function* only (on structuring with emoticons cf. Imo 2015, Spina 2018; on the use of emojis for topic change cf. Hougaard and Rathje 2018; on the use of emojis as markers for sentence boundaries cf. Cramer et al. 2016; on referential uses cf. Pappert 2017; Siebenhaar 2018).

The five steps of filtering the total of 680 posts led us to the creation of the following two data subsets with a total of 229 posts. These two subsets form the empirical basis for our analysis:

	(Remaining) number of posts
Total number of posts:	680
Step 1: Remove posts with a reactive component (–120):	560

5 Our concept of *utterance* builds on the concept of the *kommunikative Minimaleinheit* ('minimal communicative unit') defined by Zifonun et al. (1997: 85–92) as part of the „Grammatik der deutschen Sprache" ('IDS-Grammatik').

6 The data also contain few cases of emoticons. In our further analysis we do not make a distinction whether the students chose an emoji or an emoticon to perform face work.

Step 2: Remove posts which do not contain at least one FTA (= posts with FFAs only) (–216):	343
Step 3: Remove posts which do not contain at least one emoji/emoticon (–114):	229
Step 4: Create two subsets from the data set resulting from step 3:	
Subset 1: Posts which contain at least one emoji/emoticon and only FTAs:	62
Subset 2: Posts which contain at least one emoji/emoticon and both FTAs and FFAs:	167
Step 5: Remove posts which do not contain at least one emoji/emoticon that contributes to face work (–18):	211
Subset 1: Posts which contain at least one emoji/emoticon that contributes to face work and only FTAs:	**58**
Subset 2: Posts which contain at least one emoji/emoticon that contributes to face work and both FTAs and FFAs:	**153**

Subset 1 comprises 64 emoji instances. Subset 2 comprises 216 emoji instances.

4.5 Classification of emoji instances in the data

We analyzed all 280 emoji instances in the data with respect to the pragmatic function of the utterances they accompanied. Utterances in which the author either explicitly criticised the case file or made suggestions for revisions and optimisations were classified as carriers of a potential threat for the addressee's positive and negative face-wants and at the same time a threat for the author's own positive face (cf. Sect. 4.2), thus as face-threatening acts (FTAs). An emoji instance accompanying an FTA was classified as one of the following function types:

(0) Emoji does not contribute to face work but fulfills other functions, e.g. structuring function. Emoji instances of this type were no further taken into account in our study.
(1) Emoji contributes to face work as an *FTA booster* with the function to visually highlight and intensify the FTA.
(2) Emoji contributes to face work as an *FTA softener* with the function to modalise the effect of the FTA.

In the data we could find three variants of softening FTAs:

(2a) *modalising by positioning:* the emoji is used to mitigate the claim of validity for an act of critique by indicating that the critique could be unjustified ("in my humble opinion", "if I am not mistaken");

(2b) *modalising by characterising an FTA as facetious*;

(2c) *modalising by characterising the FTA as an action within a ludic context:* In the case of *Ortho & Graf*, the ludic context is twofold: (i) the game scenario as a whole describes all learner activities as activities within a ludic context; (ii) the role of agents of the internal audit of the company (cf. Sect. 4.1) which the learners specifically take in game phase 3 when performing the peer feedback task encourages and authorises the learners to assess and evaluate other learners' work (similar as a teacher would be allowed to do in the classroom).

Utterances in which the author appreciated the work of the investigating team or the quality of the case file were classified as acts that reinforce the addressee's face and thus as face-flattering acts (FFAs). Emoji instances accompanying an FFA was classified as one of the following function types:

(0) Emoji does not contribute to face work but fulfills other functions, e.g. structuring function. Emoji instances of this type were no further taken into account in our study.

(3) Emoji contributes to face work as an *FFA booster* with the function to visually highlight and intensify the FFA.

Examples of emoji instances of type (2b), (2c) and (3) have already been given in example 1 (cf. Sect. 4.3). Further examples for the different types are given in examples 2–10 below.

Example 2: emoji used as FTA booster:

Ex. 2)	Dieser Fall sollte sich noch einmal genau angeschaut werden. Ihr habt einen Paragraphen heraus gesucht, damit wäre die Zuordnung zu [4] in der Klassifikation nicht korrekt. Desweiteren sollte hier überlegt werden ob "um" wirklich als Konjunktion verwendet wird. "Um" kann auch als eine Präposition oder ein Adverb verwendet werden, so	*This case needs to be reviewed. The assignment to [4] in the classification is incorrect.Furthermore, it should be considered if „um" really functions as a conjunction. „Um" can also be used as a preposition or adverb and in that case the sentence wouldn't require a comma. It should really be checked what kind of „um" this is.*

	würde der Satz nämlich kein Komma benötigen, dies sollte unbedingt überprüft werden um welches “um“ es sich handelt.	

Examples 3–4: emojis used FTA softeners (subtype *modalising by positioning*):

Ex. 3)	Muss bei der professionellen Fallbeurteilung nicht stehen, dass der Satz nicht korrekt ist, da ihr ja etwas verbessert habt?!? 🤔	*Since you‘ve corrected something, shouldn‘t the report say that the sentence is incorrect?!?* 🤔
Ex. 4)	🤔 Mhhh also bei Dusch- und Schaumbad handelt es sich nicht um einen Bindestrich, sondern um einen Ergänzungsstrich (§ 98).	🤔 *Mhhh well, in the case of „Dusch- und Schaumbad“, that is not a hyphen, but an „Ergänzungsstrich“ (§ 98).*

Examples 5–6: emojis used as FTA softeners (subtype *modalising by characterising the FTA as facetious*):

Ex. 5)	An sich ist die Erklärung verständlich, jedoch glaube ich kaum, dass hier wirklich mit Absicht eine Großschreibung vorgenommen wurde. 🎃	*The explanation is comprehensible, but I doubt that the capitalization here was actually done on purpose.* 🎃
Ex. 6)	😱 Im Bereich C solltet ihr noch den Arbeitsauftrag löschen.	😱 *The work order still needs to be deleted in section C of your case file.*

Example 7: emoji used as FTA softener (subtype: *characterising the FTA as an action within a ludic context*):

Ex. 7)	Die Handlungsempfehlung könnte stärker herausstellen, wie der Auftraggeber diesen Sachverhalt prüft und so selbst zu einer Lösung gelangt.	*You could present more clearly how you recommend to examine situations like these in order to find a solution.*

Examples 8–9: emojis used as FFA boosters:

Ex. 8)	Gute Arbeit!	*Great job!*
Ex. 9)	Ihr habt diesen schweren Fall meiner Meinung nach gut gelöst!	*I think you did a good job in solving this case!*

4.6 Patterns of being polite with emojis: distribution of function types in the data

All 280 emoji instances in the data subsets were assigned one of the function types described above. In addition we coded for each of the 211 posts which of the function types occured in it. These two steps were first done by the two authors independently from one another. The results of the individual analysis were then discussed with particular attention on cases for which the authors had come to different results. The discussion of these cases resulted in a refinement of the criteria used for classification so that finally all cases could be classified consistently.

The assignment of function types for all analyzed posts allowed us to determine the distribution of instances of the three main types of emoji functions with respect to face work – FTA boosters, FTA softeners and FFA boosters – for the two subsets. The distribution suggests that in the given learning context the students systematically used the available emojis as devices for dealing with the task of giving peer feedback in a socially acceptable manner.

For subset 1 which contained posts with only face-threating acts (FTAs) the results show that emojis are rather used as softeners than as boosters (Table 1). This result fits well with the observation from previous literature that *framing*, i.e. the contextualisation of one's interpetation of the ongoing interaction as informal and intimate, is one (or probably *the*) basic function of emojis (Pappert 2017; Beißwenger and Pappert 2018). Informality and intimacy are characteristics of social situations in which interlocutors typically pursue social harmony and treat each other in respectful and friendly manner. As informality and intimacy markers, emojis already fulfill a fundamental softening function as they frame the social encounter as one in which face-threats are typically something that individuals would avoid; if they can not be avoided – as in the case with the peer feedback task – emojis can be used more explicitly to soften individual instances of FTAs. It can be discussed whether even emoji instances which more or less clearly can be described as FTA boosters (see example 2), on a general level, function as markers of informality; in this case even an FTA booster can be considered as inherently toned down as long as it is presented using an emoji instead of a linguistic pattern.

Table 1: Distribution of emoji function types in subset 1:

Posts containing (1) only FTAs (no FFAs) and (2) at least one emoji or emoticon that contributes to face work:		**58**
davon:		
posts	with EMOs used as **FTA softeners**:	**49**
posts	with EMOs used as **FTA softeners** *only*:	**43**
posts	with EMOs used as **FTA boosters:**	**10**
posts	with EMOs used as **FTA boosters** *only*:	**7**

The analysis of subset 2 sheds light on politeness strategies which students adopt to perform the requested critique and in which not only the emoji functions but also the combination of emojis (with a certain function) and either FTAs or FFAs plays a role.

77,1 % of all posts (118 cases) in the subset contain emojis in the function of FFA boosters whereas FTA softeners are the case in only 34,7 % of the cases (53). 57 % of all posts contain FFA-boosting emojis *only* (even though they also contain one or several FTAs). FTA boosters do occur in no more than 10,5 % of the posts (16 cases) (Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of emoji function types in subset 2:

Posts containing (1) both FFAs and FTAs and (2) at least one emoji or emoticon that contributes to face work:		**153**
posts	with EMOs used as **FFA boosters:**	**118**
posts	with EMOs used as **FFA boosters** *only:*	**87**
posts	with EMOs used as **FTA softeners**:	**53**
posts	with EMOs used as **FTA softeners** *only*:	**25**
posts	with EMOs used as **FTA boosters:**	**16**
posts	with EMOs used as **FTA boosters** *only*:	**6**

The results can be interpreted as follows: The boosting of FTAs plays, if at all, a minor role. The softening of FTAs plays a role but is obviously not the most prominent strategy to protect the others's and one's own face. FFAs are frequently supported by emoji boosters; in many cases these emoji instances do not only serve as intensifiers to reinforce the addressees' face but also – when FTAs in the same post are not accompanied by any emoji – *through* boosting the FFA as softeners for face-threats not on the utterance but on the post level. Since a post which contains at least one FTA (which is the case for all of the posts in subset 2) can be considered as face-threatening also as a whole, an FFA-boosting emoji, when being the only emoji in the post, marks the post *as a whole* as something positive for the addressees. Its FTA components are not uncovered until the addressees *read* the verbal parts of the post. Prior to having linguistically processed it they therefore must assume that the post contains only positive statements. In these cases FFA boosters – in our data emoji forms such as 👍, 👏, 👌 and 💪 – are used as devices within a politeness strategy which we term *'bird's eye view politeness'*. This strategy makes use of the holistic processing of iconic units and of the fact that icons immediately attract visual attention whereas linguistic utterances at first sight appear as sequences of letters and spaces which can be decoded not immediately but only through incremental processing.

Examples 10–12 show cases from subset 2 in which a post starts with an FFA which is supported by a boosting emoji and then proceeds with an FTA which is either not accompanied by an emoji (Examples 10–11) or by an FTA softener (Example 12). This structure is quite frequent for posts in subset 2. The underlying politeness strategy not only builds on the visual salience of emoji icons and the decision to rather equip FFAs than FTAs with emoji instances but also on the linear order of face-reinforcing and threatening acts. Performing the FFA before

the FTA means that prior to offending his or her addressees with an FTA the author of the post takes measures to set the addressees into good temper

Examples 10–12: 'bird's eye view politeness' and linear distribution of FFAs and FTAs:

Ex. 10)	Der § 57 ist richtig.  Ich würde es aber genauer schreiben. Der Paragraph enthält einige Fallbeispiele.	*§ 57 is correct.*  *However, you could phrase that (sentence/ explanation) more precisely. The paragraph contains some case studies.*
Ex. 11)	Gute Ermittlung  , nur scheint mir die Handlungsempfehlung nicht ausreichend. Hier sollten aus meiner Sicht Tipps stehen, wie man zum Beispiel Haupt- und Nebensätze voneinander unterscheiden kann (...).	*Good job*  *, but the advice you provide could be even more detailed. There should be tips on how to distinguish between main clauses and subordinate clauses (...).*
Ex. 12)	Gut ermittelt!  Eventuell könnte man als Hilfestellung noch ergänzen, welche Funktion der Relativsatz hat.  Liebe Grüße	*Good job!*  *Maybe it would be helpful if you explained what the function of the relative clause is.*  *Kind regards*

5 Conclusion and outlook

In this article we presented a qualitative, explorativy study of the use of emojis as part of politeness strategies (*face work*). Our analyses and findings were based on data from a learning environment where students had to post written peer feedback on other students' work. We examined 280 emoji instances in 211 posts, which was the total of posts from the learning environment which met the following criteria: (i) They contained at least one utterance that carried a potential threat for the face-wants of the addressees (a *face-threatening act*); (ii) they contained at least one emoji instance which contributed to face work. We showed that there is evidence that the students systematically made use of emojis as devices for performing re-dressive action – either as softeners for potential face-threatening acts or as boos-

ters that visually highlight acts that were meant to reinforce the other's face while verbal face-threats in the same posts were performed without any emoji.

Previous work on emojis has shown that emojis serve as informality markers and as devices to maintain social relations (Dürscheid and Siever 2017; Pappert 2017). Considering these functions as a basic potential of emojis, emojis appear as both handy and efficient devices for the social organization of interaction. This makes emojis useful resources for being polite which is a critical requirement of social organization especially in contexts where interlocutors – e.g. induced by an externally defined task as in the learning scenario under observation – cannot avoid to threaten their addressees' and their own face-wants.

Our analyses have also given evidence that the specific contribution of emoji instances to face work is determined by several factors: (i) their combination with certain types of linguistics acts (FTA or FFA); (ii) their specific semiotic potential (units which are culturally associated with positive or negative meaning, cf. the thumbs-up icon vs. the warning sign symbol); (iii) their salience as holistic visual units which are recognized even without processing their textual context; (iv) the decision of the author of the post of which linguistic acts to accompany by an emoji and which not. Emojis therefore operate on different levels of the organization of discourse to fulfil their functions: on the semiotic, on the pragmatic and on the structuring level. Each emoji has a particular semiotic quality, interacts with the pragmatic context of the post or thread in which it is embedded, and – as a visual "eye catcher" has the potential to directs the readers' visual attention to the position where it is placed.

The results and observations of the study can serve as a starting point for the development of a comprehensive, pragmatic approach for the analysis of emojis in CMC interactions and for the annotation of emoji functions in corpora. Further studies based on other data – especially data from private CMC interactions taken from the *MoCoDa 2* corpus (Beißwenger et al. 2018) – shall transfer the approach presented here to more heterogeneous data from less controllable contexts.

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