Emoji and the Future of Writing

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

Marcel Danesi

Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics, London-New York, 2017, pp. 197.

This book by Marcel Danesi is very well built.

Now, take the previous sentence and add an emoji at the end: «This work by Marcel Danesi is very well built 🙂»

Did the meaning change? I would say so. And how is it changed?

What has been added is a 'smiley.' Technically it is part of the emoji character set¹. Emoji are the evolution of emoticons :-) whose parents are, on one branch, the 'smiley', the famous highly stylised smiling face², and on the other the ASCII and typewriting arts³.

In my example, an iconic sign representing a smiling face is appended to the proposition. The human face is stylised, that is, the traits common to the sign and the object have been reduced in number and simplified to the essential. A graphic sign of this kind is a *pictogram*.

I guess most of the readers have immediately caught what the emoji means in this context, because they are already trained in emoticons and emoji reading. But if we take a step back and try to reconstruct the interpreting process as if we were emoji-illiterates, we see that the comprehension is not so obvious. If we simply add to the sentence the literal verbal transposition of the pictogram we obtain something like «This work by Marcel Danesi is very well built. A smiling face». Or «Somebody smiling». The questions are: "Whose is the face?" "Why does it smile?"

When a standard receiver interprets the sentence, it is usually tacit that the smiley must be attributed to the utterer (and not to the grammatical subjects) of the sentence, that the pictogram refers to the previous proposition which it comments by saying something like "I like it!", "I am pleased about that!" or "that makes me happy!" It is also implied that the verbal sentence and the emoji are connected by an 'and' logical operator. These are all suppositions we rely on because we are learned in the emoticon-emoji code.

If I change the emoji and write: «This work by Marcel Danesi is very well built ②» or «This work by Marcel Danesi is very well built ⑤», the whole meaning of the sentence will be different and the reader will be authorised to

^{&#}x27;I am not en emoji expert. The EmojiOneColor set I use here was found in the LibreOffice Writer 5.3.x.x special characters list.

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smiley https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emoticon ³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ASCII art



feel that I, the utterer, have some irony or some doubts about the opinion I just put forth.

This and much more is explained in Danesi's work, which analyses emoji according to the classical semiotic division into grammar, semantics and pragmatics, plus competence and uses. It is also interesting that the book is scientifically supported by a field survey. I think this is a methodological example for semiotic researchers. Taking advantage of data from interviews and other field information, and not only of 'desk' sources, as some traditions still recommend, is a good choice. Of course, any empirical source is necessarily transformed into a text, but field data allow us to strengthen the semantic side of our inquiries, collecting social evidence to provide and support the interpretations we advance.

Through field data and a vast range of references to classic in linguistics/semiotics as well as recent studies in social sciences and philosophy *The Semiotics of Emoji* builds a detailed presentation of these popular pictograms. But this is only one goal of the research. Danesi proposes two important reflections. The first is about the introduction of pictograms in written alphabetic languages: "If this trend grows, and evolves into a full-fledged, picture-phonetic hybrid language, one can argue that it is laying the foundations for a new civilization—a global one based on a common visual language or, more accurately, a hybrid (or blended) writing system." (p. 5).

₩ ?, I would say!

The second is just one step further: can emoji become a new universal language?

I am not reviewing a detective novel, but I don't want to spoil the end, thus I will not offer the answers. Suffice it to say that Marcel Danesi, in the last two chapters, brings the reader into a discussion dealing with a total change in human mind, the possibility of universal languages and the future of hybrid writing. In treating such high and difficult issues, I personally appreciated the Author's capacity of sticking to that good sense which is a mark of the mature philosopher, while at the same time depicting a mindenlarging scenario.

In short, I found the book well worth reading, both for academic people and readers interested in the evolution of contemporary communication. Since some criticism must always find room in a review, I think that if the beginning were a little more captivating, it would not be a false promise.

I dare end this review with a synthesis of the book written in emoji:

Professor Danesi will probably give me a low grade, but his book actually opens many possibilities to explore.