Flirting and winking in Tinder chats

Emoji, ambiguity, and sequential actions

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Existing research across the diverse field(s) of 'discourse studies' has started to explore the communicative orders and sequential practices surrounding emoji use (Skovholt, Grønning and Kankaanranta 2014; Herring and Dainas 2017; Gibson, Huang and Yu 2018; Sampietro 2019). However, researchers have not yet systematically analysed one of the demonstrable phenomena of emoji, which is their ambiguity as meaning-making devices (Miller et al. 2016; Jaeger et al. 2017). This study draws on Conversation Analysis to explore the issue of ambiguity in the use of one particular type of emoji, the wink (e.g., 😉, 😊, 😛). Drawing on a data corpus of text conversations in Danish and in Spanish by users of the dating app 'Tinder', the analysis explores the phenomena of ambiguity in relation to the practice of flirting. The paper highlights four possible sources of ambiguity: idiosyncratic use, semiotic references, sequential placement, and relationship to ambiguous textual actions. The paper ends with reflections on possible future areas of research in the study of emoji and communication.

Keywords: emoji, Conversation Analysis, Tinder, flirting, ambiguity

1. Introduction

1.1 Emoji and communicative action

Alongside devices such as photos, voice notes, and stickers, emoji are now a principal feature of communication in many chat applications. Since their creation by a Japanese telecommunication company, the Unicode Consortium has helped to regulate coding practices for a set of emoji characters that can operate across a variety of technologies. In 1995 there were only 75 emoji, while in 2023 there are now 3,500 emoji with, some claim, close to 10 billion emoji sent every day (Grosz et al. 2023).

A common area of research in emoji communication concerns the relationship between factors such as gender, age, and cultural background on how people interpret emoji (Baron 2004; Markman and Oshima 2007; Lo 2008; Alshenqeeti 2016; Sampietro 2016a). Such studies help to illustrate that reading emoji involves employing a culturally specific 'vernacular' (Lu and Blommaert 2020) in order to discern both the 'object' of signification, which may be a thing, emotion, action, event etc., and the implications for the textual conversation at hand. From the perspective of this paper, emoji should be understood as situated within cultures of practice, and their meaning seen as emerging from socially situated *uses*. Some research has looked at how cultures of emoji use emerge. For example, Parkwell (2019) analysed the toilet emoji in a tweet by the celebrity Cher to Donald Trump, showing how it took on specific meanings for the community of Cher followers and beyond. Emoji have also been shown to have meanings associated with broader cultural practices. Gibson, Huang and Yu (2018) showed that the 'laughing out loud with hand over mouth' emoji can have a particular set of readings in China where it might indicate something like 'demure action', associations that may be quite different to generic anglophone meanings. However, the meaning of emoji and the conventions around their use are contextually specific matters (Aull 2019), so generalised ideas about 'what an emoji means' can be problematic when interpreting specific examples of communication.

A body of work is emerging that draws on Conversation Analysis (König 2019) and discursive approaches, particularly speech act theory (Skovholt, Grønning and Kankaanranta 2014; Sampietro 2016c, 2019; Herring and Dainas 2017), to move away from an interest in the 'cultural use' of emoji and towards an examination of the localised sequential practices of their application. Studies have illustrated how emoji may be used for the purposes of creating 'alignment' (e.g., 👍🤝😊🥳) and 'disalignment' (e.g., ⚔️🚫❌😡) between turns (Gestadnyk 2021), or, in other terminology, a positive or negative 'valance' (Grosz et al. 2023), and have shown that users often treat the meaning of different emoji as interchangeable, so that 👌 and 👍 might mean the same thing (just as a gestural 'ok' sign or a 'thumbs up' might). The sequential placement of emoji can help users to see the specific types of interactional work that they achieve. An emoji at the start of a turn often indexes the preceding utterance, while an emoji at the end often references the text within the turn itself (König 2019). A common focus for analysis is the use of smiley emoji (Grosz et al. 2023) and their role in constructing humour and a 'play frame' (Sampietro 2021). For example, scholars have shown how smiley emoji used in second turn position perform the second-part pair of a joke (Petitjean and Morel 2017; König 2019). König (2019) examined the use of emoji as laughter particles and their role in the management of 'laughable actions',

demonstrating how they are sequentially organised to produce laughter 'modalities' and stances.

Emoji have been shown to have a broad range of uses in sequence organisation. Li and Yang's (2018) study showed that emoji can have a role in the management of topic transition, such as when a thumbs up emoji is employed to close a topic before moving on to new ones (see also Sampietro 2016b). Other sequence actions where emoji are used include 'advancing the conversation', 'making a collaborative decision' (Sampietro 2016a; Li & Yang 2018), 'greetings' (Komrsková 2015), openings and closings (Pojanapunya and Jaroenkitboworn 2011; Sampietro 2019), and 'repairing' text (Ge and Herring 2018). A small amount of research has looked at the cultural variations in the sequential ordering of emoji use. Gawne and McCulloch (2019) pointed to existing research that suggests certain cultural preferences for how emoji may be combined as a sequence, such as a heart emoji before a pizza emoji indicating "I love pizza" (Ge and Herring 2018). Schnoebelen (2012) suggested a preference in English for placing a smiley emoji (as an index of 'stance') prior to, say, an emoji of an object.

A frequent claim in the literature on emoji is that they function in a comparable way to bodily gestures (Alshenqeeti 2016; Danesi 2016; Gawne and McCulloch 2019). Gawne and McCulloch draw on McNeil's categorisations of gestures, showing that emoji may be used for pointing (e.g., 👉 or ↘) in order to highlight particular features of textual actions or other types of instructions (also see Ge and Herring 2018). They suggest that there is a similarity in the use of 'beat gestures' (such as tapping a hand on a table to emphasise words) and the repeated use of an emoji '😋😋😜'or thematically repetitive emoji, such as '😍🥰😘' which are often used to produce 'amplification' (Ge and Herring 2018). Like gestures, emoji might be used to represent 'concrete objects' (👠⛄🍉🥥🍊🥎🚙💻🍊⏰) and they can be used as labels 'for' things, or 'metaphorically' as indications of, say, 👠 for dancing, 🕴 for a 'cold' personality.

The research summarised so far is beginning to establish the communicative practices surrounding emoji use. However, there is a substantial body of work that points to the ambiguity of emoji as communicative devices, with great variations in how people interpret them (Miller et al. 2016; Jaeger et al. 2017). Miller et al. (2016) conducted a survey of emoji users in the USA and found only a 25% level of agreement as to what a particular emoji might mean. My interest here is in using Conversation Analysis to explore the issue of ambiguity in emoji communication.

As I noted earlier, understanding the context of communication is critical to making sense of the meaning of emoji. This paper examines the practice of flirting in Tinder as a way of focussing on one particular type of communicative action. The interest in flirting emerged emically through our analysis process. In order to provide an even clearer focus for the analysis the paper concentrates on the use

of three types of wink emoji within the data set. These are emoji that, in our corpus, were particularly prevalent in flirting actions. Before describing the analysis and the data itself I discuss the context of Tinder interaction and outline some of the basic interactional practices associated with flirtation in both face-to-face and textual communication.

1.2   Tinder

Tinder is a global dating app where users can search for potential dates that match their own interests and tastes within specified geographical locations. Tinder uses the metrics of users' specified search criteria to find date matches that are shown to users as a profile with a picture and other descriptions like age, professional interests and so on. Users can only chat with people that they have been 'matched' with (i.e., who have indicated that they 'like' each other with a swipe gesture on the screen). Once they have been matched, users can chat with each other through the Tinder chat facility. At the time of study, the Tinder chat interface enabled users to send text messages but not video, audio or photos. The emoji available were the standard palette available on most chat applications. Time stamps were only produced by the app when there had been a time delay in response of more than 15 minutes.

The characteristics of Tinder as a participation framework are that users interact with people they do not know, and on the basis of quite scant information provided in the user's profile. The user profiles often act as conversational 'contexts' that can inform the production of topics. As we shall see in the analysis, users often treat profiles as a source of information that, in turn, have implications for how they frame their conversational openings. One of the main interactional priorities in these settings is, broadly, to 'become acquainted' with someone. Research is emerging that explores some of the characteristics of these opening conversations, analysing the structures through which participants organise the accrual and production of information, as well as the practice of organising dates (Licoppe 2020; Roca-Cuberes, Gibson and Mora-Rodriguez 2023). In this paper, I concentrate particularly on the practice of flirting as a distinctive practice within these initial conversations.

1.3   Flirting

Research has shown that users do not just use the Tinder app to organise dates, but might just chat for fun, treating it as a kind of 'game' (Berkowitz et al. 2021). Nonetheless, the practice of 'dating' is what we might consider in conversation analytic terms an 'omnirelevant practice' (Fitzgerald, Housley and Butler 2009;

Rintel 2015) – something that has a generic relevance to the conversations at hand, whether or not a user has an intention of actually going on a date. Early on in the analysis of our data it became very clear that another omnirelevant practice is flirting.

Flirting is sometimes thought of as a 'sexual speech act' (Motschenbacher 2020) that is designed to perform an act of 'sexualisation' or 'sexuality'. According to Hopper (2002: 40, quoted in Speer 2017: 129), flirting involves creating "an unusual situation and turn(ing) the situation toward the playful pursuit of sexual innuendo." Practices that can be used to achieve this include "flattery, insults, playful banter, sexual improprieties or innuendo, and teasing" (Speer 2017: 129), compliments (Stokoe 2010), or 'improprieties' (Korobov and Laplante 2013). Many of these practices involve the creation of some kind of 'interactional troubles', which are often a part of the process of creating intimacy. Korobov and Laplante (2013) have suggested that in the social media age it may be fashionable to be 'candid' or disrespectful of 'conventional propriety'.

Flirting is often said to be constructed as 'elusive' (Radley 2003) or 'designably ambiguous' (Speer 2017) action so that it can be deniable, "relying for its effect on the existence of multiple possible interpretations of the same action" (Speer 2017: 129). While this makes the practices of flirting analytically slippery, Speer claims that, for participants, flirting is often demonstrably evident in how the person doing the flirting claims "epistemic rights to greater familiarity or intimacy with the flirt recipient than the interactional context, or the status of the speakers, might otherwise make procedurally relevant" (Speer 2017: 132). Flirt actions are epistemically presumptions or incongruous, and 'designably so' – they "playfully push the boundaries of intimacy" (Speer 2017: 133), which is why people often react in a way that implies shock.

Gestures, facial expressions and other bodily actions are central to the interactional work of flirting (Radley 2003; Whitty 2003). Besides physical actions like 'tossing hair', 'exposing the neck', tone of voice, body posture, touching, and visual glances have all been shown to work as features of flirtation (Whitty 2003). Winking is another part of this repertoire (Attardo et al. 2003), but it is an unsubtle one with 'deniable' actions generally being more common features of co-presence flirtation (Radley 2003). However, as Whitty (2003: 345) puts it, "[d]emure glances and eyebrow flashes are not easily replicated online," so "[w]e can use facial expressions such as smiley faces, winks and kisses as a substitute for body language."

Research in online communication has found that winking emoji (Komrsková 2015) and emoticon (Dresner and Herring 2010) are often markers of sarcasm, joking and of flirtation (Mortensen 2017; Whitty 2003). In this paper I examine how three different emoji that enact a gestural 'wink' (😉 🥹 😛) are

used in the context of Tinder chats, paying attention to their communicative function in the process of flirting.

2.   The study

2.1   Design of the study

This study is part of a cross-European study of chat conversations in Tinder. Volunteers of over 18 years old were recruited in Spain, France, Denmark and the Netherlands (10 volunteers per country, but only 9 participated in Denmark). This study draws on the data from Spain and Denmark which was collected over a two-week period between May and September of 2021. For the broader project, the aim was to create a cross-language data set that could facilitate the comparison of dating talk across different cultures/languages. For the purposes of this paper, the data sets are too small to undertake a meaningful cross-culture/language comparison of emoji. Instead, then, I treat the data set as a collection of emoji use that is pooled from two different country contexts.

Volunteers aged between 18 and 57 with a more or less equal gender split (Spain: 6 men and 4 women; Denmark: 5 men and 4 women). Interviews were conducted with each of the study participant (not their interlocutors) to explore their uses of Tinder. The interviews did not explicitly cover the topic of emoji use, but they did inform our understanding of some of the emerging conventions amongst Tinder users. The analytic focus for this study emerged through our collaborative data sessions, with flirtation and the ambiguous use of emoji becoming evident phenomena across the data corpus.

Each volunteer was asked to take screen shots of their chats in Tinder within a two-week period and to share them with the research team. Data was transcribed verbatim by writing the text from the screenshots into a word processing format in the original language, which was subsequently translated for analysis by the research team. When translating, there were occasionally dilemmas about how to represent punctuation such as the use of commas. For example, Extract 2, Line 1 below includes a comma in the English translation in order to help give a sense of the meaning of the original Spanish phrase. In the transcripts, the participants and their interlocutors are referred to with combinations of letters and numbers in place of names. The transcripts presented in the analysis include original language as well as English translations.

Despite the standardisation of coding practices, different software applications can present emoji in slightly different ways, with small variation in things

like colour or the size/positioning of certain features. In theory, this may lead to differences in emoji interpretation, an issue we return to in our conclusion.

Tables 1 and 2 show the number of emoji used across the two data sets as well as the number of wink emoji. There was substantial variation among participants in how often they used emoji, varying from 1 (P6 Spanish data) to 344 (P3 Spanish data). Wink emoji counted for 6% of all emoji used in the Spanish data and a little over 12% for the Danish data. By far the most common emoji used was 😉.

Table 1. Emoji and wink emoji use in the Spanish data set

Participant	Number of conversations	Total emoji by (I*)	Total emoji by (P**)	Total wink emoji (I)	Total Wink Emoji (P)	😉 I	😉 P	😜 I	😜 P	😋 I	😋 P
1	24	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	40	135	34	15	0	7	0	8	0	0	0
3	12	167	344	21	0	15	0	5	0	0	1
4	12	12	16	2	1	2	1	0	0	0	0
5	7	12	13	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
6	5	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	8	71	201	18	15	18	14	0	1	0	0
8	33	51	6	9	0	9	0	0	0	0	0
9	9	57	166	6	0	6	0	0	0	0	0
10	3	10	4	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	153	518	791	74	16	60	15	13	1		1
		1309		90		75		14		1	

I* = The interlocuter that the study participant is chatting with
P** = The participant who volunteered for the study

The study presented substantial ethical challenges. Participants were fully informed of the aims and purposes of the study before any data was collected. They were told that they did not have to change the nature of their normal Tinder usage and that they did not have to go on dates. Informing participants prior to the study means that they may have changed their ordinary behaviour as a result of the study and that they may have been selective in choosing the data to share with us. This is a limitation of this study, as it is in many forms of internet observation research (Hewson, Vogel and Laurent 2015). Participants were told that they could tell the people they interacted with that they were involved in a study if they wished to, but this was not a requirement. No information about the participants'

Table 2. Emoji and wink emoji use in the Danish data

Participant	Number of conversations	Total emoji interlocutor	Total emoji by participant	Total wink emoji by interlocutor	Total Wink Emoji by participant	😉 I	😉 P	😜 I	😜 P	😉 I	😉 P
1	5	7	12	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
2	13	43	51	10	5	10	5	0	0	0	0
3	18	37	67	6	8	6	8	0	0	0	0
4	13	58	36	10	13	10	13	0	0	0	0
5	14	142	56	20	13	19	11	0	2	1	0
6	9	0	8@	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	7	48	50	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
8	39	92	127	5	13	0	13	0	0	0	0
9	40	94	116	6	21	0	21	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	158	521	523	59	74	47	72	0	2	1	0
		1045		133		119		2		1	

interlocutors was available to us as all the data was anonymised by the participants before it was shared with the research team, with all images, usernames, proper names and other potentially identifying features being obscured. It is unlikely that the content was modified by the participants in other ways because the data were in the form of screenshots, which make it hard to manipulate the text other than by obscuring it. The study was given ethical approval by the lead institution, *Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain*.

2.2   Analytic process and framework

The analysis presented here is situated within the body of work that applies and develops Conversation Analysis' concepts to the study of online communication (see Paulus et al. 2016; Meredith et al. 2021). One of the central issues within this growing area has been with analysing the distinctive sequential orders that unfold in mediated communication. In face-to-face contexts, Conversation Analysis has shown the importance of 'turn-construction units' for the organisation of turn talking, illustrating how users inspect the unfolding talk to manage issues such as speaker nomination, topic transition and the production of actions like questions and answers, complaints, conversation endings and so on. In online contexts, including Tinder chats, conversational contributions are most frequently delivered as completed units of text. These units can be sent at any time, without the need to negotiate a 'turn at talk'. This simple fact has implications for many aspects of the 'talk', including, for example, the production of 'adjacency pair' (like ques-

tions and answers) which are often not positioned consecutively; the nomination of speakers (which is in many cases irrelevant as people can send messages at any time); and the transition of topics (which, again, often occur in sequentially 'unusual' positions – indeed, it is common for multiple topics to be discussed at the same time (Jones and Schieffelin 2009; Giles et al. 2015; Paulus, Warren and Lester 2016; Petitjean and Morel 2017)). For all these reasons, there are difficulties in equating messages with conversational 'turns' in spoken talk. However, it is common for researchers in this area to use the word 'turn' as a way of referring to individual messages and I will follow this convention.

My analysis adopted the criteria outlined earlier to identify moments in the data that could be defined as flirtatious. I then looked at this subset of data for instances that employed the wink emoji, and tried to construct an analysis of each that accounted for the role of the emoji within the unfolding action.

It is important to note that one of the dominant analytic perspectives applied to the study of emoji is Social Activity Theory (Skovholt, Grønning and Kankaanranta 2014; Yus 2014; Herring and Dainas 2017). Conceptually, there are important differences between Social Activity Theory and Conversation Analysis as the former treats meaning as originating in the speaker and aims to map speech practices to this 'inner meaning'. In relation to emoji, the concept of 'illocutionary force' has been commonly employed to describe the meaning intentions of speakers. In contrast, Conversation Analysis treats meaning as observable within conversation and is agnostic about the relation of this meaning to interactants' 'inner' mental realms (Rosaldo 1982). While I make some reference to Social Activity Theory literature, I do so in order to help the reader situate my analysis in relation to a broader body of work, but the differences between the perspectives should be taken into account.

3.   Analysis

My analysis is concerned with the ways in which meaning can be established between wink emoji and other textual actions, particularly flirting. Focussing on flirting actions helps to narrow down potential emoji meanings. One of the points that is evident through the analysis is that ambiguity is not something that participants typically pay attention to. To help make this point, the analysis begins with a deviant case from our data set where ambiguity is made accountable by a user. This example helps us see some of the ways in which analysts (and ordinary users) attempt to establish the interactional implications of emoji, and it illustrates one of the key sources of ambiguity in emoji, which is *idiosyncratic use*. Section 3.2 comprises the bulk of the analysis, turning attention to the use of 'wink' emoji in

the practice of flirting. Through this analysis, we will see three further sources of ambiguity: *semiotic references, sequential placemen*t, and *relationship to ambiguous textual actions.*

3.1   Idiosyncrasy, repair and accountability

In the data set it was very unusual for emoji meaning to be made accountable. Even where the meaning was very unclear, interlocutors almost never responded to an emoji by asking what it meant or asking others to elaborate their meaning. An extremely unusual counter example is found in Extract 1.

Extract 1.   *Emoji and ambiguity (Danish data set)*
         4 C1 Forstår jeg godt ☀️ jeg nyder min ferie, hvad laver du? 🥳
              I understand ☀️ I enjoy my holiday, what are you doing? 🥳
         5 Ch Dejligt, jeg har også lige fået ferie fra arbejde. Er du bare en tur
              forbi oder was
              Nice, I also just got vacation from work. Are you just a walk past or
              what
         6 C1 Nåår hvor skønt ☀️ og ja, det er det 🥳 du bor her?
              Well how wonderful ☀️ and yes, it is 🥳 you live here?
         7 Ch Nåå, er du til fest? :) Har boet her siden 2016.
              Well, are you at a party? :) Have lived here since 2016

Following an opening exchange about plants, Ch replies to a question about what they are doing in the city with 'I enjoy my holiday, what are you doing? 🥳'. We have seen that turn-final position emoji typically relate to the preceding text (König 2019), but there is nonetheless ambiguity about what semiotic work the emoji is doing. If it is read as a kind of index of 'party', then it may be seen as tied to the question 'what are you doing' and to elaborate the question to something like '…are you having fun'. Such 'meaning elaboration' has been shown to be a key communicative function of emoji (Gawne and McCulloch 2019).

In the next turn, the interlocutor does not reply to the question or make the emoji accountable. Instead, Ch's reply aligns with 'I enjoy my holiday' through an evaluative 'nice', reporting that they, too, are on vacation. Ch then asks about C1's location 'are you just a walk past [or what]' ('or what' is written in German). C1's reply 'Well how wonderful ☀️ and yes, it is 🥳 you live here?' is complicated because of the combination of emoji and punctuation. The first part of this 'Well how wonderful ☀️' is readable as an evaluation of Ch's report of being on holiday. The sunshine emoji here could have a category relation to 'holiday', and its smile

form re-produces the positive evaluation that was textually produced with 'wonderful'.

In terms of the remainder of the turn, we can read the emoji and the comma as syntactic marks that separate the text into different topic relevancies. In this reading, the 'and yes' can be seen as a response to whether they are 'just a walk past or what' and the text following the comma is a discreet topic turn. The grammar after the comma is incomplete and we need to interpret the emoji in order to construct a meaningful text. One way to solve this ambiguity is to treat the emoji as a stand-in for a word, and to search for words that have a thematic relevance to the emoji that might help repair the reading. The most obvious relevancies are things such as 'fun', 'party', 'cool', and 'happy'.

Ch's reply 'Well, are you at a party? :) Have lived here since 2016.' makes accountable the meaning of the emoji, treating its usage as requiring some further explanation. The smiley emoticon following 'party?' downgrades this as a possible complaint, and, given the association of smileys with sarcastic actions, could be read as indexing this as a laughable action rather than an enquiry. Nonetheless, the use of the emoji is treated as 'troublesome'. CI does not reply to this message and the interaction ends here.

The types of ambiguity we find here are not at all uncommon in the data set and yet there are no further examples of people questioning the use of an emoji. This shows a strong preference amongst our participants to disattend to these ambiguities and to treat emoji meaning as if they were interactionally obvious.

In Extract 1 the ambiguity results from a lack of clarity between the associative meanings of the emoji and the conversational actions within which they are situated. Emoji carry great potential for ambiguity because their complex semiotic nature means that they may have meanings for producers and their interlocutors that are not shared and that therefore carry unintended significance. We can think of the interactional work of interpreting emoji as trying to make a 'good fit' between any possible associative meanings and the context. Both analysts and ordinary users face the same problem of attempting to build an understanding of how the context may furnish a possible reading of emoji, and vice versa.

The remainder of the analysis concentrates on the use of one type of emoji (the wink) and their relationship to potential actions of flirting. This focus enables us to maintain analytic attention towards a specific semiotic device in relation to a particular interactional practice. Nonetheless, as we shall see, ambiguity emerges in the action in a range of ways.

3.2   Ambiguity in 'flirting' and 'winking'

Extract 2 shows the very start of a first exchange between P and M. P's first turn seems to draw on information from M's profile to formulate a topic-initial question, inviting an expansion in next turn on the subject of M's preferred adventures. It is followed by a very infrequently used emoji from the data set, which is a particular kind of wink (🥴) comprising what could be a mouth or a moustache and red cheeks. In Social Activity Theory, 'smiley' emoji in this turn position are often described as modifiers of 'illocutionary force', which in this case, might be something like 'light-heartedness' (Dresner and Herring 2010) or, as in Sampietro's (2021) terms, a 'play frame'. This emoji has 'smiley-like' characteristics, but its specific semiotic character raises a question for users – 'why *this* emoji?'. I suggest that we can use Conversation Analysis to think about this question.

Extract 2.   *Wink emoji in opening turn (Spanish data set)*

    1 P Venga va dime de que clase de aventuras 🥴
      Come on, tell me what kind of adventures 🥴

    2 M No prefieres descubrirlo?
      Wouldn't you prefer to discover them?

    3 P Hombre esta bien poner intriga a las cosas, pero nunca va mal
      saber por donde van los tiros 😏
      Well, it is fine to make things intriguing, but it is never bad to know
      the way the wind blows 😏

    4 M jajaja así que eres de los que necesita tenerlo todo controlado
      Hahaha so you are one of those who needs to control everything

First, it is notable that the question in Turn 1 comes in first position in the only interaction between these participants. As such, the encounter does not begin with the ordinary interactional practices of 'greetings' prior to information seeking questions (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). In interviews, younger users frequently expressed a preference that conversation initiations are not 'conventional', and P's turn is an example of something that could be seen to breach ordinary conversational norms. Turn 1 demonstrates a phenomenon found across our data where conversational openings draw on information from the users' profile. The reference to 'adventures' mirrors the reference M makes in their profile to liking adventures. The formulation involves enacting an interactional right to ask a direct question and, as such, it performs a certain 'intimacy' of relations consistent with flirtation (Speer 2017). There is a possible 'playful sexualisation' in the question too, which implicates potentially illicit adventures. These actions are practices that we can treat as particularly relevant to the context of 'dating' (and

a 'dating app') and they inform our reading of the possible actions implicated by the emoji, i.e., as part of an action associated with flirtation.

The specific emoji employed is called 'woozy face' and while it comprises a gesture that is readable as a wink (one eye closed) its name, and the fact that it is semiotically different to the emoji labelled 'wink' (i.e., 😉), creates uncertainty regarding its thematic/interactional purpose. There is, in other words, ambiguity as to whether the emoji is functioning in a similar way to a gestural 'wink' and therefore a flirt action, as an action relating to 'wooziness' (which, of course, is itself ambiguous), or to some other action (like cheekiness, embarrassment, excitement).

M's reply undertakes actions that observably treat the opening as an action that initiates flirtation. In Turn 2, M says 'wouldn't you prefer to discover them', which does not answer the question posed by P, but produces a new question that makes accountable the appropriateness of P's initial inquiry. This suggests that M does not see the question as simply seeking information. Further, Turn 2 is itself readable as continuing a flirtatious act in that it projects moments of 'closeness' and 'mutual discovery'. In summary then, the wink/woozy face emoji sits within a conversational action that is readably flirtatious and the emoji has a potential relationship to this action. The semiotic ambiguity of the emoji does not seem to trouble the interaction, which proceeds in an ordered way that projects mutual understanding.

The next Example (Extract 3) comes at the start of a conversation, with a question from EM asking if P5 would like to borrow their duvet. The question could be related to the profile in some way, but, as it is in first position, and as it implicates a kind of intimacy in relation between two persons (see also Márquez Reiter and Frohlich 2020), it is also noticeably a flirting action.

Extract 3.   *Winks and the enforcement of flirt moves (Danish data set)*

      1 EM   Vil du låne en bluse af mig?
              Do you want to borrow a shirt from me?

      2 P5   Tror hellere jeg vil ligge under din dyne 😛
              Think I would rather lie under your duvet 😛

      3 EM   Nå, men dem har jeg kun en af, og bruger den for ofte til at låne
              ud
              Oh, but those I only have one of, and I use it too often to borrow/
              lend it

      4 P5   Og du deler den heller ikke?
              And you don't share it either?

P5's reply 'Think I would rather lie under your duvet' is also readably flirtatious, and more openly so with the text projecting a shared moment of physical intimacy. It has been shown that actions such as laughter often follow flirtations and are associated with downgrading the seriousness of the flirt (Speer 2017). In this instance, another type of wink emoji is used ('winking face with tongue'), which, again, could be seen to function as a generic smiley/laughter token following a flirt move, downgrading the seriousness of the flirtation. However, because the emoji is readable as a type of wink rather than 'just' a smiley, it could also be read as having a homological relation with the flirtation move which reinforces or clarifies the flirtation. This is perhaps a type of use that is similar to the way that emoji are sometimes used as pictorial repetitions of text (Danesi 2016), repeating the textual action in graphical form. Alternatively, the presence of the tongue might prompt us to read it differently, as a 'tease' perhaps (König 2019), or as sarcastic, or some other action. Again, then, the precise semiotic form of *this* emoji creates a question about the work it is undertaking.

On some occasions, rather than reinforcing a textual flirt move, an emoji might be interpreted as performing a flirtation on its own.

Extract 4.   *Winks in stand-alone turns (Spanish data set)*

    1 P Me en can ta el surf
       I love surfing
    2 I jajaja pues ya somos dos
       hahaha that makes two of us
    3 P jajaja que mas te gusta?
       Hahaha and what else do you like
    4 I 😉
    5   😂😂😂
    6   comer y mucho
       Eating, and a lot

In Extract 4, the conversation starts with a declarative statement in Turn 1 about P enjoying surfing, which operates as a topic initial. This observation probably comes from a noticing of I's own profile as he states that surfing is one of his hobbies. I's response in Turn 2 begins with a laughter token followed by 'that makes two of us'. The laughter token suggests that he treats the opening turn as doing more than just 'making a declaration' and perhaps as undertaking work related to 'noticing' his profile (or simply that it is quite a direct way to initiate a conversation). P's reply (Turn 3) is further evidence for the reading of her initial turn as a 'noticing', as her laughter token treats I's utterance as a 'laughable', suggesting that

I's statement is an ironic alignment because his 'liking surfing' is obvious given her original noticing of it.

P's turn continues with a question 'and what else do you like', with I's reply (Turn 4) consisting of a single winking emoji '😉' and the next turn of three 'laughing while crying' emoji. The sequence of turns in lines 4 and 5 are entirely pictorial and accomplish quite complicated interactional work. If we treat line 4 as sequentially related to line 3, then it can be read as transforming the action in Turn 3 into something that can be used to produce a flirtable action by projecting a potentially risqué response. The emoji itself is sufficient to accomplish this flirtation, without any further textual actions. In this reading, the subsequent laughter tokens may produce the same kind of 'downgrading' that we saw following a flirtation in Extract 3. Finally, Turn 6 moves away from the implied flirt with a topic shift 'eating, and a lot', which distances him further from the risqué implication.

However, all of this is contingent on reading line 4 as a reply to line 3. Given that online conversational actions don't necessarily relate in such neat sequential ways, it could be that the wink relates to Turn 1 or even to Turn 2. In either of these cases the emoji would then take on very different meaning and would be seen as undertaking distinctive work that may or may not relate to flirting.

In Extract 5 we have an example of an emoji in a stand-alone turn with a less ambiguous sequential relationship. In Turn 1, J uses a noticing of a photo of M's profile with the utterance 'I see you like apples!!'. I have not included the image here in order to protect the user's identity.

Extract 5.   *Lack of flirtation take up (Spanish data set)*

4 J   Veo que te gustan las manzanas!!

     I see you like apples!!

5   😉

6 M Es mi preferida

     It is my favourite

The emoji in the subsequent turn cannot relate to any turn other than this one (as it is the first turn), so we can treat the emoji in a similar way to our first reading of the wink in Extract 4, Turn 4 (i.e., as turning the previous turn into a 'flirtable' by implicating something risqué or with a double meaning). Treating the emoji in this way leads us as readers to inspect the previous turn for possible relevant meanings, and we can certainly infer potential candidate meanings relating to things like the sensuality of fruit or cultural symbolisms of apples. It could also be that the wink relates to making visible the practice of 'noticing' the profile, which is perhaps a type of intimacy itself, or it may relate to downgrading the implication of intimacy. M's reply, however, does not attend to J's turns as a flirtation, but

merely responds to these noticing with an affirmation that she does like apples. This action is similar to the way that Ch initially disattended to the ambiguous meaning of party emoji in Extract 1.

We have seen that emoji can be interpreted by exploring their sequential relationship to surrounding textual actions. However, the text itself can also often be ambiguous and that can create further problems for interactants.

Extract 6.   *Sequential placement and ambiguity in emoji (Spanish data set)*
> 25 I jajajajajaja cuanto tiempo!! Que tal!
>
>   *Hahahahaha it has been a while!! How are things!!*
>
> 26 Que tal fueron los exámenes? 😉
>
>   *How were the exams?* 😉
>
> 27 Intuyo que querrás quedar 😉 si quieres te puedo hacer in hueco
>
>   *I guess you'll want to meet up* 😉 *if you like I can make space for you*
>
> 28 para la semana que viene
>
>   *Next week*
>
> 28 P jajajaja me pareciera bien, pero si estas tan ocupado...
>
>   *Hahaha that sounds good, but if you are so busy...*

In Turn 25 of Extract 6, I's contribution '*Hahahahaha it has been a while*' follows a long pause in the conversation and makes that long silence accountable. In Turn 26, I continues by asking 'how were the exams' with the wink emoji in end position. Here the properties of flirtation that have been associated with the emoji in the other contexts are not clearly relevant to the question, and there are no actions in the previous conversation that might indicate that there is a relationship between a wink (as an indication of flirtation) and the question. The precise interactional work of the emoji is, then, somewhat unclear.

In Turn 27, I continues with 'I guess you'll want to meet up' followed by the same wink emoji. The text could be read as an invitation and, as such, the emoji could be treated as affiliated with the intimacy of meeting. Alternatively, the emoji could be related to the idea that the text projects 'wanting to meet' on the part of P and as implicating a reading of the text as performing something 'cheeky' or similar. There may be other readings too, but these interpretations construct clear and quite different possibilities of meaning, which, of course, could co-exist as *intentional* ambiguities. In continuation, the 'if you like I can make space for you next week' projects that I can accommodate P's projected desire to meet.

The repeated use of the same emoji might be an indication that there is an idiosyncratic form of use happening here, similar to that found in Extract 1. It may be that the emoji is simply used habitually, analogous to a physical gesture or a way of phrasing in spoken language, an entrained 'way of doing' rather than an

intended semiotic device. Of course, it is not possible to know whether this is the case, but idiosyncrasy of use is one resource to account for a possible ambiguity in meaning.

Moving to Turn 28, because laughter tokens in turn initial positions typically reference previous turns (König 2019), a question arises concerning which part of the previous turn (or turns) P's 'hahaha' refers to. The two readings of the second emoji that I proposed above ('the intimacy of meeting' or the 'cheekiness of projecting a desire on the part of P') are both structures that could warrant a laughter token response. In other words, we can see a relationship between the interactional work of the emoji in line 27 and the laughter token initial in line 28. In continuation, P's 'that sounds good …' aligns with the invitation and the 'but if you are so busy' orientates to the projected difficulty of meeting constructed by I.

In summary then, the wink emoji undertakes some interactional work but there are at least two ways of interpreting this work, which leads to questions about what in particular the emoji 'means'. The emoji functions differently depending on how we read the textual actions within which it sits, so its ambiguity arises from the lack of clarity regarding the broader textual actions and the 'homology' that the emoji possesses with these actions.

4.   Discussion

4.1   Ambiguity and emoji

While the ambiguity of emoji has been reported in the literature, this paper represents the first systematic study of emoji ambiguity as an interactional phenomenon. In order to have a clear focus of enquiry, the paper has examined the use of the wink emoji in the context of flirting in Tinder chats. Through the analysis I identified several distinctive forms of ambiguity that I discuss in this concluding section.

I began by showing that there were frequent ambiguities around the possible meaning of emoji in our corpus of data, but that these were nearly always disattended to by participants. Extract 1 represented a deviant case where ambiguity was signalled and made accountable. The infrequency of this phenomenon indicates a preference within our data of glossing ambiguity, which could reflect the fact that the participants do not know each other, are in the business of 'getting acquainted' and, therefore, orientate to a preference for interactional alignment rather than disalignment. This observation helps us to see a more general point, which is that the epistemic relation between participants (e.g., whether or not they know each other or *what* they know about each other), the action priorities

within a given context of discussion (in this case perhaps, 'getting acquainted'), and any associated 'omnirelevant' actions (flirting, for example) are all important parts of the context of emoji use: they inform how people orientate to each other's use of emoji, and, as I shall show, they are part of the common-sense practices through which emoji can be interpreted. One of the strengths of a digital Conversation Analysis approach is, I suggest, that it provides the tools for a close examination of *context in action*.

The first source of ambiguity that I highlighted emerged through potentially idiosyncratic forms of use. In Extract 1 and, later, Extract 6, we saw examples where users' repeated application of an emoji created uncertainty around their interactional purpose. To put the matter differently, one resource to account for an emoji that is used frequently and that is repeatedly ambiguous, is that its application is a habit for the user in question.

A second source of ambiguity related to the semiotic meanings associated with emoji. For example, the emoji 🥴 ('woozy face') and 😜 ('winking face with tongue') might indicate meanings associated with winking or with other types of actions related to their semiotic form or name. We saw that with each of these emoji (Extract 3 and 4) we can use their sequential placement as a resource to try to establish their meaning, interrogating how a given associative meaning may relate to a surrounding textual action such as flirting. While this can successfully bring up candidate meanings, these are not always (and perhaps not *ever*) completely secure or incontestable interpretations.

While sequential placement can be a resource to try to establish the meaning of an emoji (e.g., examining the textual actions that precede an emoji located in a turn-final position), a third source of ambiguity can emerge around this sequential relationship. This is particularly the case when emoji are sent on their own as a stand-alone turn. The presence of frequent sequential 'disruption' in textual interaction – with, for example, 'adjacency pairs' occurring in non-adjacent turns – can lead to difficulties in understanding which turn an emoji refers to. In Extract 4 we saw how treating an emoji as sequentially related to its preceding turn enabled us to read it as a quite unambiguous flirt move and as part of an unfolding action of flirting, downgrading the flirt, and topic shifting. However, if we treat the emoji as relating to an earlier turn, then the meaning of the emoji shifts, creating very different readings of their interactional purpose. We saw in Extract 5 that an emoji at the start of a conversation presented fewer candidate meanings because there were fewer preceding turns that it might relate to.

Finally, a fourth type of ambiguity related to the fact that text itself can be ambiguous, implicating distinctive actions and, as such, an emoji (such as the wink) can be seen to have very nebulous meanings that shift depending on how

one interprets the text itself. In Extract 6 we saw this in relation to the potentially flirtatious act of producing an invitation to meet.

4.2   Implications and further research

While it can't easily resolve the ambiguity that is extremely common in emoji use, digital Conversation Analysis can help us to make sense of it: its methods enable us to pay attention to the relationship between emoji and the surrounding textual actions, presenting candidate meanings that would not be obvious without a strong sense of the actions within which emoji sit (see also Grosz et al. 2023). The multiplicity of legitimate readings that can be established for a given emoji is one reason why they are ambiguous, and this is an important finding for our growing understanding of emoji as communicative phenomena. i.e., emoji are ambiguous because it is common for there to be more than one way to legitimately interpret their relationship to the ongoing action.

It is tempting to imagine that the only way to 'confirm' the meaning of emoji would be to interview participants about their choices regarding emoji use. While this is an interesting and important direction for research, I think that it remains problematic to treat users' own interpretations as indicative of 'the' meaning. Whatever a user's intention, the semiotic form of emoji and the sequential orders described in this paper may well make it hard for interlocutors to understand them. Instead, then, I suggest that we treat ambiguity as phenomena for analysis, which has been the aim of this paper.

While I have mapped out some of the sources of ambiguity, this is a very preliminary analysis and much larger data sets would enable a fuller exploration of the issues presented here. Similarly, cross-cultural analysis may reveal difference and similarity in emoji use across contexts that would be of interest in thinking about ambiguity. While this study contains examples from two country contexts, the data set is too small to constitute a robust analysis of cultural differences.

A further important research area relates to the role of technology in emoji use. Ditchfield (2020) used Conversation Analysis to analyse video recordings of people's writing practices in Facebook chats, exploring how they edited their text to construct particular identity relations with their interlocutors. A similar process may help us to understand the ways emoji are selected and accessed on the keyboard and how users sort through the options of available emoji. This could inform our understanding of how habits of emoji use emerge and impact on interaction, as well as aid an analysis of the affordances of technologies and the role that an interface might play in emoji use.

To conclude, in drawing attention to emoji ambiguity it is in no way my intention to pass judgement on their communicative value; rather, my intention has

been to describe one of their characteristics as an interactional resource. Indeed, it may well be, as others have argued, that their ambiguity is one of the reasons that emoji are so popular.

Funding

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