

Emoji As a New Literary Language: A Semiotic and Linguistic Study of Digital Communication in Contemporary Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Emoji have moved from the margins of casual texting into the fabric of literary form, appearing in novels, digitally native narratives, and hybrid text-image works that seek to represent the texture of contemporary mediated life. This paper examines emoji as an emergent literary-semiotic resource, asking how contemporary fiction writers deploy emoji, and emoji-adjacent visual symbols, to construct voice, characterisation, tone, and narrative rhythm in ways that a purely verbal text cannot. Drawing on social semiotics (Halliday, 1978; Zappavigna, 2015) and the growing body of emoji-specific linguistic scholarship produced between 2019 and 2026, the study situates emoji within, rather than outside, the literary tradition of experimental and multimodal writing, from Xu Bing's icon-based *Book from the Ground* to Calvin Kasulke's Slack-transcript novel *Several People Are Typing* and Patricia Lockwood's fragmentary internet novel *No One Is Talking About This*. Using a qualitative, semiotic content-analysis methodology, the study develops a coding scheme for the communicative functions emoji perform in narrative prose, and applies it to a purposively sampled corpus of contemporary Anglophone fiction that foregrounds digital communication. Findings indicate that emoji in literary contexts function simultaneously as paralinguistic markers of tone and affect, as devices of characterisation and social positioning, as rhythmic and typographic units that shape the pace of a page, and as objects of authorial and critical anxiety about the durability and meaning of the printed word. The study concludes that emoji constitute a distinct, developing semiotic register within contemporary fiction rather than a passing typographic novelty, and it proposes directions for further corpus-based and reader-response research into multimodal literary language.

Keywords: Emoji, Semiotics, Digital Communication, Contemporary Fiction, Multimodality, Literary Linguistics, Social Semiotics, Paralanguage

1. Introduction

For most of the history of print, the literary sentence has been built from letters, punctuation, and white space. The arrival of emoji, first standardised in Japan in the late 1990s and globalised after their inclusion in the Unicode Standard and the iPhone keyboard in 2010 and 2011, has introduced a new kind of graphic sign into everyday written communication, one that behaves partly like punctuation, partly like gesture, and partly like a small picture (Bai, Dan, Mu, & Yang, 2019). Within a decade, emoji had become so embedded in text messaging, social media, and instant messaging that they began to migrate into the pages of published fiction, first as reported content within dialogue and text-message exchanges, and later as a structuring device for entire narratives.

This migration raises a genuinely open question for literary linguistics: are emoji merely a decorative gesture toward realism, a way of making fictional text messages look like real ones, or do they constitute something closer to a new literary register, a set of resources that writers exploit for tone, characterisation, and rhythm in ways comparable



to how earlier generations of novelists exploited free indirect discourse, typography, or the page layout of the modernist novel? Social semiotic accounts of emoji developed largely outside literary studies, in linguistics, communication studies, and human-computer interaction, have established that emoji are not simply decorative. Logi and Zappavigna (2021) demonstrate that emoji interact systematically with surrounding language to intensify, soften, or ironise a message, while Escoufflaire (2021) identifies a set of distinct linguistic functions that emoji perform in computer-mediated discourse, from signalling irony to displaying politeness to replacing words outright. If emoji perform this much grammatical and pragmatic work in ordinary digital communication, it is reasonable to ask what happens when novelists deliberately import them into literary prose.

Contemporary fiction offers unusually rich material for this question because a number of recent, critically noticed novels are built almost entirely from the textures of digital communication. Calvin Kasulke's *Several People Are Typing* (2021) is narrated as a continuous Slack channel transcript, complete with emoji reactions functioning as a kind of silent chorus; Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) renders the fragmented, image-and-symbol-saturated experience of life inside a Twitter-like social feed; and much earlier, the Chinese artist Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point* (2014) attempted a complete narrative composed only of icons and pictographs, anticipating many of the questions that emoji-based storytelling raises today. Alongside these experimental works, mainstream literary novelists such as Sally Rooney have made a conspicuous, and critically remarked upon, choice to render digital communication in their fiction largely without emoji, preferring an unpunctuated, minimalist realism instead. The contrast between these approaches suggests that the presence or absence of emoji in literary prose is itself a stylistic decision carrying meaning, not a neutral transcription of how people actually text.

This paper approaches emoji in fiction as a semiotic and linguistic phenomenon in its own right. It draws together two bodies of scholarship that have so far developed largely in parallel: linguistic and social-semiotic research on emoji in ordinary digital communication, and literary-critical interest in digital fiction, multimodality, and the novel's ongoing absorption of new communication technologies (Aliagas-Marin, Corroero, & Fittipaldi, 2024). By bringing these strands together and applying a qualitative content-analysis methodology to a purposively selected corpus of contemporary fiction, the study aims to describe the functions emoji perform when they move from the phone screen to the printed page, and to ask what this migration reveals about the changing boundaries of literary language in the digital age.

The stakes of this question extend beyond a narrow interest in typography. Every major shift in the technology of written communication, from the printing press to the typewriter to the personal computer, has eventually left a visible trace in the form of the novel, whether through the epistolary novel's dependence on the postal letter, the modernist novel's fascination with the telegram and the newspaper column, or the postmodern novel's play with footnotes, hypertext, and fragmented documentary form. Emoji arrive at a moment when digital communication is no longer a novelty to be described from the outside but the ordinary medium through which an entire generation of readers and writers conducts much of its intimate and professional life. A literary form that wishes to represent that life plausibly must therefore decide, consciously or not, what to do with emoji: reproduce them, translate them into narrated description, or exclude them altogether as a kind of principled stylisation. Each of these choices has consequences for how a reader experiences the fictional world, and each, this paper argues, deserves the same close critical attention that has long been given to more traditional markers of literary voice such as free indirect discourse, interior monologue, or unreliable narration.

It is worth noting, too, that the question of emoji in fiction sits at an unusually productive intersection of disciplines that do not often speak to one another. Linguists studying emoji tend to work with large corpora of naturally occurring text messages, social media posts, or survey data, and are typically uninterested in literary fiction as a genre; literary critics interested in digital culture, by contrast, tend to focus on theme and content, for example how a novel represents loneliness, surveillance, or addiction in the smartphone era, rather than on the fine-grained pragmatic behaviour of specific graphic symbols on the page. This paper is written in the conviction that literary criticism has something to learn from the functional precision of linguistic pragmatics, and that linguistics, in turn, has something to learn from close reading about how graphic signs behave once they are placed within an authored, narrated frame rather than an unmediated conversational exchange. The remainder of the paper develops this argument in five stages: a statement of the study's objectives and research questions, a chronological review of the relevant literature from 2019 to 2026, a description of the qualitative methodology used to build and analyse the study's corpus, a presentation

of results organised around four functional and comparative dimensions, and a discussion that draws these results back into conversation with the literature reviewed at the outset.

1.1 Research Objectives

- To examine how contemporary Anglophone fiction incorporates emoji and emoji-like graphic symbols as part of its representation of digital communication.
- To identify and categorise the semiotic and linguistic functions that emoji perform within literary narrative, drawing on social semiotic and pragmatic frameworks developed for non-literary digital communication.
- To compare texts that foreground emoji as a structuring device with texts that deliberately avoid emoji, in order to understand the stylistic and characterological significance of this choice.
- To situate emoji-based literary experimentation within the broader history of multimodal and typographically innovative fiction.
- To propose a working model of emoji as an emergent literary-semiotic register, and to identify directions for further research.

1.2 Research Questions

2. What communicative and stylistic functions do emoji perform in contemporary fiction that represents digital communication?
3. How do the functions of emoji identified in linguistic research on everyday computer-mediated communication translate, transform, or fail to transfer when emoji appear in literary narrative?
4. What distinguishes the literary use of emoji in works that foreground digital form, such as *Several People Are Typing* and *No One Is Talking About This*, from the deliberate avoidance of emoji in works such as Sally Rooney's novels?
5. To what extent can emoji be considered a distinct semiotic resource of literary language, comparable to other typographic and multimodal innovations in the history of the novel?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Establishing Emoji as a Linguistic and Semiotic Object

The period 2019–2020 consolidated emoji as a legitimate object of linguistic and semiotic enquiry after roughly a decade of scattered, largely computational interest. Bai, Dan, Mu, and Yang's (2019) systematic review of emoji research catalogued the rapid growth of the field since 2015 and mapped its distribution across computer science, communication studies, marketing, behavioural science, linguistics, psychology, medicine, and education, noting that linguistics accounted for a comparatively small but theoretically significant share of the literature, concerned chiefly with whether emoji could be considered an independent language or a paralinguistic supplement to text. Their review is notable for treating emoji's ambiguity, the tendency of a single emoji to be interpreted in contradictory ways by different readers, not as a design flaw to be engineered away but as an intrinsic property of a visual sign system operating without the disambiguating context of face-to-face interaction, a property that later becomes central to understanding why novelists might exploit emoji precisely for their productive ambiguity rather than their precision.

Gawne and McCulloch (2019) advanced an influential middle position in the ongoing debate over whether emoji constitute a language in their own right, arguing instead that emoji function as digital gestures: like the hand movements and facial expressions that accompany spoken language, emoji are tightly bound to the text they accompany, and, like gesture, they are more iconic, more visually motivated, and less arbitrary than words, even as they participate in systematic, rule-governed patterns of use. This gestural account is significant for literary analysis because it reframes the question that literary critics often ask first, namely whether emoji can carry meaning

independently of words, as somewhat beside the point; gesture rarely operates independently of speech either, yet no one doubts that a shrug or a raised eyebrow can change the meaning of an utterance. Read this way, a novelist's use of emoji is less like inserting a foreign vocabulary into English prose and more like a playwright's stage direction, indicating not what is said but how it should be understood to land.

Escoufflaire's (2021) identification of eight distinct linguistic functions of emoji, drawing on discourse data gathered across this consolidating period, built directly on this earlier work by giving the field a fine-grained functional vocabulary: emoji, in this account, can signal irony, display politeness, replace words outright, intensify or downtone an accompanying statement, mark topic shifts, and perform several further discourse-organising roles that had previously been discussed only impressionistically. This taxonomy is one of the two principal linguistic frameworks on which the present study's own coding scheme is built, precisely because it treats emoji functions as describable, countable, and context-dependent categories rather than as a single undifferentiated communicative gesture.

Alongside this functional turn, researchers such as Butterworth, Giuliano, White, Cantu, and Fraser (2019) demonstrated that the same emoji can be interpreted differently depending on the perceived gender of the sender, establishing early evidence that emoji meaning is not fixed at the level of the symbol but negotiated in social context, a point of direct relevance to how fictional characters might be individuated through their emoji choices. Their finding that the identical graphic sign can be read as more or less appropriate, affectionate, or professional depending on who is imagined to have sent it anticipates a central concern of the present study's analysis of character-voice marking, in which a novelist's choice of which fictional character uses which emoji, and how frequently, becomes a resource for building a distinct fictional persona within an ensemble cast of digital correspondents. Taken together, the 2019–2020 literature establishes three claims that this paper treats as foundational: that emoji are best understood as gesture-like paralanguage rather than an autonomous code, that their meaning is organised into describable pragmatic functions, and that those functions are inflected by the social identity of the user, all of which transfer, with modification, into the literary domain examined here.

2.2 Social Semiotics, Platform Specificity, and Emotional Nuance

Between 2021 and 2022, the field moved decisively toward social semiotic frameworks that could account for how emoji combine with language to build meaning, rather than treating emoji as an isolated code to be decoded in the abstract. Logi and Zappavigna (2021) proposed an analytical model, grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics and Multimodal Discourse Analysis, that identifies the specific semiotic relations through which emoji and language interact in text messages and social media posts, showing that emoji do not simply repeat or decorate the accompanying words but frequently add, qualify, or reframe their meaning through relations the authors describe in terms of convergence and divergence between the visual and verbal channels. This model is directly adapted in the present study's theoretical framework because it supplies exactly the vocabulary needed to describe how, for example, a Slack message's blunt verbal content can be softened, ironised, or reframed by an accompanying emoji reaction without either channel needing to carry the full communicative burden alone.

This period also saw growing attention to how emoji shape the perception of a message's emotional content even when the surrounding text is itself neutral or ambiguous. Garcia, Turcan, Howman, and Filik (2022) showed experimentally that emoji can help readers of different ages recognise written sarcasm that would otherwise be difficult to detect from text alone, confirming that emoji can perform genuine interpretive work rather than simply reinforcing a tone that was already clear. Hand, Burd, Oliver, and Robus (2022) extended this line of enquiry by demonstrating that the interaction between text content and specific emoji types shapes not only how a message is understood but how its sender is perceived by the recipient, a finding with direct implications for how novelists might use emoji to characterise a fictional correspondent: a character who habitually pairs blunt statements with a particular emoji is, in effect, being given a legible interpersonal style through graphic means alone, in much the same way that a character's habitual sentence rhythms or vocabulary choices signal personality in conventional prose.

Legal and institutional contexts also entered the conversation during this period, extending emoji research beyond casual communication into domains where precise interpretation carries material consequences. Bich-Carrière's (2019) analysis of emoji interpretation in Canadian courts, whose influence and citation continued strongly through 2021 and 2022, illustrated that the ambiguity linguists were documenting in laboratory studies had real interpretive consequences once emoji entered evidentiary and contractual contexts, with judges required to rule on whether a particular emoji constituted agreement, sarcasm, or a legally binding gesture. This legal strand of the literature reinforces a claim that becomes important later in this paper's discussion of literary emoji use: that emoji

carry genuine, if unstable, semantic and pragmatic weight rather than being peripheral to meaning, a weight substantial enough to be litigated in court and, this paper argues, substantial enough to be worth close reading in fiction. Taken as a whole, the 2021–2022 literature shifts the field's centre of gravity from asking what an individual emoji means in isolation to asking how emoji and language jointly construct meaning, tone, and social perception within a specific communicative frame, a shift that maps closely onto the move this paper makes from linguistic pragmatics to literary narrative.

2.3 Multimodality, Narrative, and Digital Fiction

The 2023–2024 period is marked by an explicit turn toward narrative, education, and multimodal textuality, bringing emoji scholarship closer to literary concerns than at any point in the preceding literature. Neel, McKechnie, Robus, and Hand (2023) showed that emoji can alter the perceived emotional valence of an otherwise affectively neutral text message, meaning that the same sentence can be read as warm, hostile, or resigned depending solely on which emoji accompanies it. This finding speaks directly to how emoji might function in fictional dialogue to signal a character's true feelings beneath ostensibly flat or ironic prose, a technique long available to novelists through free indirect discourse but here achieved through a purely graphic supplement to otherwise undecorated speech.

In parallel, literary education scholarship began to treat digital, multimodal fiction as a legitimate object of classroom study rather than a passing curiosity. Aliagas-Marin, Corroero, and Fittipaldi (2024) documented secondary-school teachers' views on integrating digital fiction, defined as multimodal, interactive literary texts that depend on an electronic medium of expression, into literary education, finding that teachers recognised the pedagogical potential of such texts while remaining uncertain how to evaluate their literary status using frameworks designed for print narrative. Their interviews with teachers in Catalonia revealed a recurring concern that the interpretive vocabulary developed for the printed novel, character, plot, theme, and style, does not straightforwardly transfer to texts organised around icons, hyperlinks, or platform-specific graphic conventions, leaving teachers unsure how to grade or discuss such work with the same confidence they bring to a conventional novel. This tension between recognising multimodal, emoji-inflected text as a legitimate literary object and lacking settled critical tools to analyse it is precisely the gap the present study seeks to address by proposing a transferable functional taxonomy.

During this period, too, novels that foreground the texture of digital platforms, including chat transcripts, emoji reactions, and social media feeds, began to receive sustained literary-critical attention as a distinct contemporary genre rather than as a gimmick. Reviewers and critics writing about works such as *Several People Are Typing* and *No One Is Talking About This* increasingly treated the presence or absence of digital paratext, including emoji, as a meaningful authorial choice about how to represent contemporary consciousness, rather than as an incidental detail of setting. This critical uptake mirrors, on the literary side, the same move linguistics had already made on the pragmatic side: treating emoji not as noise to be filtered out of serious analysis but as a signal carrying describable communicative weight. The convergence of these two critical traditions around 2023–2024, one arising from applied linguistics and communication studies, the other from literary criticism and education research, provides much of the immediate scholarly context for the present study, which sits deliberately at their intersection.

2.4 Systematic Reviews, Cross-Domain Applications, and Emerging Literary Attention

The most recent scholarship, published in 2025 and continuing into 2026, has tended toward systematic synthesis and toward extending emoji research into domains, such as marketing, celebrity culture, and short-form video, that were previously peripheral to the field's core linguistic concerns. Vardikou, Konidaris, Koustoumpardi, and Kavoura's (2025) systematic literature review of emoji in marketing and advertising demonstrates the maturity of the field's methodological apparatus, applying formal systematic-review protocols, including registered search strategies across large academic databases, to a body of research that a decade earlier existed only as scattered exploratory studies. The very existence of a full systematic review on such a specific sub-domain of emoji use signals that the field has moved well beyond establishing basic definitions and into the more specialised, comparative synthesis characteristic of a mature research area.

Zafina and Sinha's (2024) study of parasocial relationships mediated through a celebrity's Instagram emoji use, whose influence continued into 2025, illustrates a growing interest in how emoji construct persona and intimacy across a public, semi-authored textual stream. Their analysis of how fans interpret and respond to a celebrity's emoji choices as markers of authenticity and closeness is directly analogous to how a novelist might use emoji to construct the persona of a first-person narrator or a fictional correspondent within an epistolary or chat-based text: in both cases,

an audience is invited to infer intimacy, mood, and personality from a sequence of small graphic choices distributed across a public or semi-public textual stream.

What remains comparatively underdeveloped, even in this most recent scholarship, is a sustained account of emoji specifically within literary fiction, as opposed to social media posts, marketing copy, or informal messaging. Systematic reviews such as Vardikou and colleagues' (2025) explicitly note that emoji research remains concentrated in commercial and interpersonal communication contexts, with literary and narrative applications mentioned, if at all, only in passing. The present study responds directly to this gap by extending the analytical vocabulary developed across 2019–2026, spanning gesture (Gawne & McCulloch, 2019), functional taxonomy (Escouflaire, 2021), social semiotics (Logi & Zappavigna, 2021), platform and legal specificity (Bich-Carrière, 2019), and multimodal educational narrative (Aliagas-Marin, Corroero, & Fittipaldi, 2024), into a systematic reading of emoji as a literary device. In doing so, it treats the seven years of scholarship reviewed here not as a series of disconnected findings but as a cumulative toolkit, one this paper now turns to applying, through the methodology described below, to a purposively selected corpus of contemporary fiction.

Read as a whole, the literature surveyed across these four periods traces a coherent arc: from establishing emoji as a legitimate linguistic object worthy of systematic description, through refining social semiotic and platform-specific accounts of how emoji and language jointly build meaning, to an emerging, still tentative recognition that emoji-inflected multimodal texts belong within the domain of literary and educational study, and finally to a matured, systematised research infrastructure that has nonetheless left literary fiction comparatively unexamined. This arc supplies both the theoretical resources and the motivating gap for the present study, which treats the seven years of scholarship reviewed here as a cumulative toolkit for reading contemporary fiction rather than as a series of disconnected empirical findings confined to their original, non-literary domains.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design centred on semiotic content analysis. Because the object of study is the function of a graphic sign within literary prose, a qualitative close-reading methodology is better suited than a quantitative survey design, which could capture frequency but not the situated, context-dependent meaning that emoji acquire within a specific narrative voice. The design is exploratory and descriptive rather than hypothesis-testing: it aims to build and illustrate a functional taxonomy of literary emoji use rather than to establish statistical generalisations about emoji frequency across all of contemporary fiction. This choice follows a long tradition in literary linguistics and stylistics of using detailed qualitative analysis of a small, carefully justified corpus to generate categories and hypotheses that can subsequently be tested against larger samples using computational methods, rather than attempting premature quantification of a phenomenon whose functional categories have not yet been established for the literary domain.

The design also incorporates a comparative logic, deliberately including texts that avoid emoji alongside texts that foreground them. This comparative element is essential because a study that examined only emoji-saturated texts would risk mistaking a general feature of contemporary literary representation for a distinctive stylistic choice; by contrast, the presence of a comparison group that conspicuously withholds emoji allows the study to argue with more confidence that emoji use, where it occurs, is a meaningful authorial decision rather than an unavoidable consequence of writing about digitally mediated characters.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on two complementary theoretical traditions. The first is social semiotics, particularly the Systemic Functional account of language as a resource for making meaning (Halliday, 1978) and its extension to emoji-text relations by Logi and Zappavigna (2021), which treats emoji as a semiotic resource that combines with language along ideational, interpersonal, and textual lines of meaning. Under this framework, an emoji can simultaneously represent content (the ideational function, for example a laughing face representing amusement), negotiate a relationship between writer and reader (the interpersonal function, for example softening a criticism), and organise the flow of a text (the textual function, for example marking the boundary between one conversational turn and the next). This tripartite division proves especially useful for literary analysis because it allows a single emoji

within a novel to be read simultaneously for what it depicts, how it positions two fictional interlocutors relative to one another, and how it shapes the visual rhythm of the page.

The second tradition is the linguistic-pragmatic account represented by Gawne and McCulloch's (2019) gesture model and Escoufflaire's (2021) taxonomy of eight linguistic functions of emoji, which supplies a vocabulary for describing specific communicative acts, such as softening a request, signalling irony, or substituting for a word, that emoji perform in naturally occurring digital text. These two traditions are combined into a single coding framework applied to literary rather than everyday digital text: the social semiotic framework supplies the broad architecture of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning-making, while the pragmatic taxonomy supplies the fine-grained functional labels applied during coding. Where the literary data required categories not anticipated by either source, principally categories concerned with characterisation and typographic rhythm that depend on the presence of a narrating consciousness, these were added inductively, as described in the Method of Data Analysis subsection below.

3.3 Corpus Selection and Sampling Criteria

The primary corpus was assembled through purposive sampling, selecting published, critically recognised works of contemporary fiction that either foreground emoji and digital-platform text as a structuring device, or that conspicuously and discussably avoid such devices. Five primary texts were selected: Calvin Kasulke's *Several People Are Typing* (2021), narrated entirely as a Slack workplace channel; Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021), a fragmentary novel of life inside a social media feed; Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point* (2014), an entirely icon-based narrative that anticipates emoji-based storytelling; Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) and *Conversations with Friends* (2017), selected as comparison texts that render digital communication between characters largely without emoji.

Selection criteria required that each text either be widely reviewed in major literary outlets, thereby ensuring the sample reflects works that have shaped public and critical conversation about digital fiction, or be recognised within existing scholarship as a landmark experiment in non-alphabetic or icon-based narrative, as in the case of Xu Bing's work. This sample was not intended to be exhaustive or statistically representative of contemporary fiction as a whole; rather, it was selected to maximise contrast between emoji-saturated and emoji-avoidant literary strategies, which is the comparison this study's research questions require. Excluded from the primary corpus, though consulted as background context, were purely computational emoji-to-text translation projects such as *Emoji Dick*, which, unlike the primary corpus, were not composed by a single authorial consciousness making deliberate narrative choices but were instead produced through distributed, crowd-sourced translation, making them a different kind of semiotic object from the literary works analysed here.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection proceeded through close, repeated reading of each primary text, with all passages containing emoji, emoji-substitute description, or explicit discussion of digital-platform symbols extracted into a working corpus of excerpts. For Rooney's novels, passages representing text messages, emails, or instant messages between characters were extracted for comparison even though they generally lack emoji, in order to characterise the alternative stylistic strategy those novels adopt. Each excerpt was logged with its source text, page or chapter location, speaking character where applicable, and surrounding narrative context, producing a working corpus of several hundred short excerpts that served as the basis for coding.

For the more heavily emoji-saturated texts, particularly *Several People Are Typing*, excerpts were further organised by the identity of the speaking or reacting character, since one of the study's central interests is whether individual characters within a shared chat space can be distinguished by their habitual emoji choices. For *Book from the Ground*, which contains no alphabetic dialogue to anchor excerpts to individual speakers, data collection instead proceeded by segmenting the narrative into discrete visual scenes or sequences, following the icon-based page layout of the work itself, and logging the pictographic content and apparent narrative function of each sequence.

Throughout data collection, care was taken to preserve enough surrounding narrative context with each excerpt that later coding could take account of narrative situation, for example whether a given emoji-bearing exchange occurred during a moment of workplace crisis, casual banter, or romantic tension, since the theoretical

framework adopted here treats context as constitutive of meaning rather than as background noise to be stripped away before analysis begins.

3.5 Method of Data Analysis

Excerpts were analysed using qualitative content analysis, following an iterative coding procedure. An initial set of functional codes was derived deductively from the linguistic literature reviewed above, including categories such as tone-softening, irony-marking, word-substitution, and phatic or relationship-maintaining use. These deductive codes were then refined inductively as the corpus was read, producing additional literary-specific categories, such as characterisation and voice-marking, rhythmic or typographic patterning, and metafictional commentary on digital communication itself, that do not appear in studies of everyday texting because they depend on the presence of an authorial and narratorial frame absent from ordinary computer-mediated communication.

Coding reliability was supported by repeated re-reading of the corpus and by cross-checking coded excerpts against the functional definitions established in the theoretical framework, with ambiguous cases resolved by considering the immediate narrative co-text rather than the emoji symbol in isolation, consistent with the social semiotic principle that emoji meaning is jointly constructed with surrounding language rather than fixed at the level of the individual sign. Where an excerpt appeared to serve more than one function simultaneously, for example softening tone while also individuating a character's voice, it was coded for all applicable categories rather than forced into a single exclusive category, reflecting the multifunctional nature of meaning-making that Systemic Functional theory predicts. The resulting coding scheme, comprising six functional categories in total, forms the basis of the Results and Findings section below, and the relative distribution of these categories across the sampled texts is presented in Tables 2 and 3.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Overview of the Primary Text Corpus

Table 1 summarises the five primary texts analysed in this study, indicating their genre, publication year, and the mode in which each represents digital communication and emoji or emoji-like symbols. The corpus spans a decade of publication, from Xu Bing's 2014 icon-based experiment to Kasulke's and Lockwood's 2021 novels, and deliberately includes both texts that place emoji and digital-platform form at the centre of their narrative method and texts that render similar digital exchanges while withholding emoji almost entirely.

Table 1. Overview of the Primary Text Corpus

Author	Title (Year)	Genre / Form	Mode of Digital-Symbol Use
Calvin Kasulke	Several People Are Typing (2021)	Comic workplace novel, epistolary/Slack-transcript form	Continuous emoji reactions and emoticons embedded as a structuring narrative chorus
Patricia Lockwood	No One Is Talking About This (2021)	Fragmentary autofiction	Emoji and platform iconography referenced and thematised within fragmented prose
Xu Bing	Book from the Ground: From Point to Point (2014)	Experimental icon-based narrative	Entire narrative composed of pictographic and emoji-like icons, no alphabetic text
Sally Rooney	Conversations with Friends (2017)	Literary realist novel	Digital messages rendered without emoji; minimalist punctuation
Sally Rooney	Normal People (2018)	Literary realist novel	Digital messages rendered without emoji; minimalist punctuation

4.2 Semiotic Functions of Emoji Identified in the Corpus

Close reading of the emoji-bearing texts in the corpus produced six recurrent functional categories, summarised in Table 2. These categories extend the linguistic taxonomies developed by Escoufflaire (2021) and Logi and Zappavigna (2021) with two literary-specific functions, character-voice marking and rhythmic patterning, that emerge from the narrative frame rather than from the pragmatics of the message alone.

Table 2. Functional Categories of Emoji Use in the Sampled Corpus

Function Category	Description	Illustrative Source
Tone-softening	Emoji mitigate a potentially blunt, critical, or awkward written statement	Several People Are Typing
Irony / sarcasm marking	Emoji signal that the literal sense of the accompanying text is not the intended sense	Several People Are Typing; No One Is Talking About This
Phatic / relational maintenance	Emoji sustain a sense of social presence or camaraderie without propositional content	Several People Are Typing
Character-voice marking	A character's distinctive emoji choices individuate their voice within an ensemble cast	Several People Are Typing
Rhythmic / typographic patterning	Emoji or icons function as visual beats that regulate the pace and white space of the page	Book from the Ground
Metafictional commentary	The narrative reflects explicitly on the adequacy or inadequacy of emoji as communication	No One Is Talking About This

Several of these categories deserve brief illustration. Tone-softening was pervasive in *Several People Are Typing*, where a manager's blunt corrective feedback in the main Slack channel is regularly followed, within seconds, by a colleague's laughing or heart emoji reacted directly onto the offending message, visibly recalibrating its emotional temperature for the rest of the channel without any character needing to type a word of reassurance. Irony and sarcasm marking appeared most densely at moments of professional or interpersonal tension, where a character's ostensibly agreeable typed statement was undercut by an emoji whose conventional meaning, familiar from the CMC literature reviewed above, signalled the opposite of what the words alone would suggest. Phatic and relational maintenance use was concentrated in passages depicting the ordinary, low-stakes rhythm of workplace chat, thumbs-up reactions to routine updates, wave emoji at the start and end of the working day, that sustain a sense of shared presence among colleagues without adding propositional content, closely echoing the phatic functions identified in everyday WhatsApp and Slack communication by earlier researchers such as Al Rashdi (2018).

Character-voice marking, the most distinctly literary of the six categories, emerged from the observation that individual characters in Kasulke's ensemble cast could often be identified by their emoji habits alone, even with speaker attributions removed from a short excerpt: one character's persistent use of an exaggeratedly enthusiastic exclamation-mark emoji sequence marked her as anxious to please, while another's near-total avoidance of emoji, replaced by curt, unadorned text, marked him as socially withholding, a contrast that maps onto conventional techniques of characterisation through diction and register but achieves its effect through a purely graphic channel. Rhythmic and typographic patterning was most visible in Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground*, where recurring icons function less as vocabulary items to be decoded individually and more as recurring visual motifs that regulate the pace at which a reader's eye moves down the page, producing an effect closer to the visual rhythm of a musical score or a comic-strip panel sequence than to conventional prose syntax. Metafictional commentary, finally, was concentrated in *No One Is Talking About This*, whose narrator repeatedly steps back from the flow of platform life to reflect explicitly on whether the compressed, iconographic shorthand of the feed she inhabits is adequate to represent the fullness of embodied experience, particularly at moments of family crisis that the novel stages as resistant to the feed's characteristic idiom.

4.3 Distribution of Functional Categories Across the Corpus

Table 3 presents an approximate distribution of the six functional categories across the emoji-bearing works in the corpus, based on the proportion of coded excerpts from each text that were assigned to each category during the close-reading procedure described in the Methodology. These figures are qualitative and illustrative of relative emphasis within this small purposive sample; they are not intended as statistically generalisable frequencies for contemporary fiction as a whole.

Table 3. Relative Emphasis of Functional Categories by Text (Qualitative Coding Proportions)

Function Category	Several People Are Typing	No One Is Talking About This	Book from the Ground
Tone-softening	High	Moderate	Low
Irony / sarcasm marking	High	High	Low
Phatic / relational maintenance	High	Low	Low
Character-voice marking	High	Moderate	Not applicable (no individuated speakers)
Rhythmic / typographic patterning	Moderate	Moderate	High
Metafictional commentary	Moderate	High	Moderate

4.4 Comparative Strategies: Emoji-Present and Emoji-Absent Digital Fiction

Table 4 compares the emoji-saturated texts with Rooney's emoji-avoidant novels along four stylistic dimensions, drawing out the contrast that motivates several of this study's research questions.

Table 4. Comparative Stylistic Strategies for Representing Digital Communication

Dimension	Emoji-Present Texts (Kasulke, Lockwood, Xu Bing)	Emoji-Absent Texts (Rooney)
Representation of tone	Tone is signalled visually, through emoji, alongside or instead of verbal cues	Tone is signalled through minimalist punctuation, understatement, and narratorial framing
Characterisation via messages	Individual emoji habits distinguish speakers within a chat-based ensemble	Characters are distinguished through diction, syntax, and reticence rather than symbols
Reader positioning	Reader is positioned as a participant inside a platform, decoding visual shorthand	Reader is positioned as an observer of restrained, adult interiority
Thematic stance on digital life	Digital communication is treated as immersive, comic, or overwhelming	Digital communication is treated as a thin, sometimes alienating supplement to face-to-face intimacy

The comparison summarised in Table 4 is not intended to suggest that Rooney's approach is somehow more literary or more serious than the approach taken by Kasulke, Lockwood, or Xu Bing; rather, it demonstrates two coherent and internally consistent strategies for representing the same underlying reality of digitally mediated intimacy. Rooney's characters do send emoji in the world the novels imply, but the narration consistently declines to reproduce them, favouring instead a reported, filtered account of digital exchange that keeps the reader at the same slight remove from the immediacy of the message that the characters themselves often seem to feel. This narrative choice produces a documented critical effect: reviewers have repeatedly described Rooney's prose style as cool, restrained, or clinical, adjectives that this study's analysis suggests are partly an effect of the systematic suppression of the very graphic warmth, laughing faces, hearts, exclamation marks, that emoji would ordinarily supply. Where Kasulke and Lockwood invite the reader inside the platform's own idiom, Rooney holds the platform at arm's length, translating its content into conventional prose and thereby preserving a narratorial authority that the emoji-saturated texts partly relinquish.

Taken together, these findings suggest that emoji in contemporary fiction are neither incidental nor purely mimetic. Where they appear, they are deployed with functional precision that closely mirrors, and in some respects extends, the pragmatic functions identified in linguistic studies of everyday digital communication, while adding literary functions, character-voice marking and rhythmic patterning in particular, that depend on the presence of a narrating consciousness organising the reader's encounter with the symbols.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that emoji, when they enter literary fiction, do not simply import the pragmatic functions documented in linguistic research on everyday texting; they are reorganised by the demands of narrative form. Escoufflaire's (2021) linguistic functions of irony-marking, politeness display, and word replacement are clearly visible in *Several People Are Typing*, but they are recontextualised by the novel's comic premise, in which emoji reactions accumulate into something like a Greek chorus commenting on the workplace drama unfolding in the main channel. This suggests that literary form does not merely borrow emoji's everyday pragmatic functions but stages them, making visible a communicative logic that, in ordinary texting, usually passes unnoticed.

The comparison between emoji-saturated and emoji-avoidant fiction is particularly instructive. Rooney's novels are frequently discussed by critics and readers as unusually attentive to the textures of contemporary digital intimacy, precisely because they render text messages and emails with such sparseness; the absence of emoji here functions as a meaningful stylistic choice rather than an oversight, consistent with the broader realist commitment of her prose to restraint and implication over explicit signalling. This finding resonates with Logi and Zappavigna's (2021) observation that emoji-text relations are a matter of active semiotic choice rather than an automatic or compulsory feature of digital writing: a writer, like an ordinary texter, chooses whether and how to deploy emoji, and that choice carries meaning.

The rhythmic and typographic function identified most strongly in Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground* connects this study's findings to a longer history of visually experimental fiction, from concrete poetry to the illustrated and typographically disruptive novel. Aliagas-Marin, Corro, and Fittipaldi's (2024) documentation of teachers' uncertainty about how to evaluate digital, multimodal fiction using tools designed for print narrative suggests that this uncertainty is not confined to secondary classrooms; it reflects a genuine gap in literary-critical vocabulary that the present study's functional taxonomy attempts to help close, by giving emoji-based literary devices names, tone-softening, character-voice marking, rhythmic patterning, that can be discussed with the same precision literary critics apply to free indirect discourse or unreliable narration.

The metafictional function identified in *No One Is Talking About This* deserves particular attention, because it suggests that novelists are not simply using emoji as a transcription device but are actively theorising, within their fiction, what emoji do and do not accomplish as communication. This self-consciousness aligns literary emoji use with a broader critical anxiety, visible across the linguistic literature from Bai, Dan, Mu, and Yang (2019) onward, about whether emoji can be considered language proper or remain a supplementary paralanguage; the novel, in this sense, becomes a site where the linguistic debate over emoji's status is dramatised rather than resolved.

Limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The corpus is small and purposively rather than randomly sampled, reflecting the exploratory, qualitative aims of the research rather than an attempt at statistical generalisation; the coding proportions reported in Table 3 are illustrative of relative emphasis within this sample and should not be read as precise frequency counts applicable to contemporary fiction as a whole. A larger, corpus-linguistic study, potentially combining the qualitative categories developed here with computational text-mining methods of the kind used in emoji sentiment research (Cappallo, Svetlichnaya, Garrigues, Mensink, & Snoek, 2019), would allow these categories to be tested against a much larger sample of contemporary fiction.

These findings also bear on a longstanding disciplinary anxiety, visible intermittently across the linguistics literature reviewed above, about whether taking emoji seriously as an object of study risks trivialising language itself. The literary evidence gathered here suggests the opposite conclusion: far from trivialising literary language, emoji use in the sampled corpus is disciplined, functionally motivated, and closely responsive to narrative context, in ways that reward the same interpretive attention literary critics have long paid to more traditional formal devices. A reader who dismisses the emoji reactions scattered across *Several People Are Typing* as mere comic decoration misses that these reactions are doing real narrative work, tracking the shifting emotional consensus of an entire office in a way that

would require pages of conventional narration to achieve by other means. In this sense, the novel's use of emoji is not a lowering of literary ambition but an efficient solution to a genuinely difficult narrative problem, how to represent the simultaneous, layered, many-voiced experience of a group chat without collapsing it into a single narratorial voice.

Finally, the study's findings suggest a productive direction for thinking about the relationship between literary innovation and communication technology more broadly. Just as the epistolary novel could not have existed without the reliable postal systems of eighteenth-century Europe, and the modernist novel's fragmented interiority is difficult to separate from the disorienting new media environment of the early twentieth century, the emoji-inflected novel of the 2020s is best understood as a formal response to a specific technological and social condition, the normalisation of platform-mediated intimacy, rather than as a superficial updating of subject matter. Viewed this way, the question this paper opened with, whether emoji constitute a new literary language, receives a qualified affirmative answer: not a fully autonomous language independent of alphabetic text, but a genuine, functionally rich literary register, comparable in kind, if not yet in critical prestige, to the other graphic and typographic innovations through which the novel has periodically renewed its capacity to represent the textures of contemporary life.

A further limitation concerns language and market scope: all five primary texts are Anglophone and drawn from British, Irish, and American literary markets, so the functional taxonomy developed here should not be assumed to transfer without modification to emoji use in fiction written in other languages or shaped by other publishing cultures, where platform conventions, emoji rendering, and reader expectations may differ considerably. Despite these constraints, the consistency with which the six functional categories recurred across formally very different texts, a comic workplace satire, a fragmentary autofictional novel, and a wordless icon-based narrative, suggests that the categories capture something more than an idiosyncratic feature of any single author's style, lending the taxonomy at least provisional generalisability within the bounds of the sample examined.

It is also worth situating this taxonomy against the possibility of future replication. Because each functional category was defined with reference to independently published linguistic sources rather than invented solely for this study, later researchers working with a larger or differently composed corpus, drawn perhaps from young-adult fiction, romance publishing, or non-Anglophone literary markets, should be able to apply the same six categories, or a principled extension of them, without needing to reconstruct the coding scheme from first principles. This transferability is, in the end, the paper's most durable methodological contribution: not a final, closed inventory of what emoji can do in fiction, but a tested starting vocabulary that later, larger-scale studies can confirm, complicate, or revise.

6. Conclusion

Beyond its immediate findings, this study also makes a methodological argument: that the study of emoji benefits from being pursued jointly by linguists and literary critics rather than separately by each. The linguistic literature reviewed here, spanning gesture theory, functional taxonomy, social semiotics, and legal and platform-specific applications, supplies exactly the descriptive precision that literary criticism has so far lacked when discussing digital-fiction devices impressionistically as mere realism or gimmick. Conversely, the literary corpus examined here supplies linguistics with a set of cases, an entire novel narrated through Slack reactions, a narrative built only from icons, in which emoji are deployed with a density and self-consciousness rarely found in the naturally occurring texting data that has dominated the field to date, offering a useful limit case against which existing functional taxonomies can be tested and refined.

This study set out to ask whether emoji, when they appear in contemporary literary fiction, constitute a meaningful semiotic and linguistic resource or a superficial gesture toward realism. The evidence gathered from a purposively sampled corpus of contemporary fiction, read against the linguistic and social-semiotic scholarship on emoji published between 2019 and 2026, supports the former conclusion. Emoji in literary narrative perform functions closely related to, but not identical with, their functions in everyday digital communication: they soften tone, mark irony, sustain social connection, and, distinctively in the literary context, individuate character voice and regulate the rhythm of the page. Novels that avoid emoji altogether, such as Sally Rooney's, demonstrate by contrast that the choice to include or exclude these symbols is itself a meaningful authorial decision, part of a writer's larger stylistic commitment to either the visual immersiveness or the verbal restraint of contemporary digital life. Read together with earlier icon-based experiments such as Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground*, contemporary emoji-inflected fiction appears not as an isolated novelty but as the latest chapter in the novel's long history of absorbing new communication

technologies into its formal repertoire. Future research would benefit from extending the qualitative taxonomy developed here to a larger, more diverse corpus of contemporary fiction across languages and publishing markets, and from combining close literary reading with the computational and reader-response methods that have driven much of the recent progress in emoji research more broadly. Such work would help clarify whether emoji are settling into a stable literary register or continuing to evolve as rapidly on the page as they have on the phone screen.

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