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# Do you kiss when you text? Cross-cultural differences in the use of the kissing emojis in three WhatsApp corpora

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**Abstract:** Emojis are pictographs added to messages on social media and websites. Researchers have observed that emojis representing kissing faces are often used to close instant messaging conversations. This has been interpreted as an imitation of cheek kissing, a common behavior in some cultural contexts. We analyze the use of seven types of kissing emojis in three corpora of WhatsApp chats, one from Spain (where cheek kisses in face-to-face interaction are commonplace in many situations), the other from Germany (where kisses are occasionally given), and the third from the German-speaking part of Switzerland (where cheek kisses are a common greeting between relatives and friends). To do so, we systematically categorize and compare the use of a sample of these emojis on WhatsApp. The analysis suggests that there are differences between the three corpora in the use of the kissing emojis. The emoji “face throwing a kiss” is often included in closing messages in the Spanish and Swiss-German data, while in the Federal German corpus kisses do not appear at the end of a conversation; using these emojis in openings is uncommon in all three corpora. This suggests that these emojis can exhibit cultural variation, but they do not clearly mirror face-to-face behavior.

**Keywords:** computer-mediated communication; cultural differences; emoji; non-verbal cues; WhatsApp

## 1 Introduction

Our communicative routines are increasingly mediated by digital devices, especially smartphones. Globally, the most downloaded applications are social networks and messaging platforms (Soko Media 2019). WhatsApp is one of the

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most popular social and communication applications in many countries, such as India, Russia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, and the UK (Soko Media 2019; Statista 2020). This application allows users to send text and audio messages, pictures, videos, GPS coordinates, and other attachments, as well as to make phone and video calls. WhatsApp is increasingly used to mediate interpersonal communication, for example, among acquaintances, either replacing or complementing SMS, phone calls, and face-to-face encounters (Yus 2021). Communication scholars have differently assessed the extent to which the communicative design of the platforms can determine interaction (rather cautious: Hutchby 2001; somewhat favorable: Imo 2019). Users develop practices and conventions using the affordances available on the platform to meet their communicative needs (Herring 2013). Among the varied affordances of WhatsApp, the use of emojis is especially significant. These are little pictographs accessible from the smartphone's keyboard that can be added to messages on WhatsApp and other applications. One of the functions attributed to emojis (see Section 2 for a detailed literature review) is to represent a variety of non-verbal cues in computer-mediated communication (CMC) (see, for example, Aldunate and González-Ibáñez 2017; Gawne and McCulloch 2019; Hu et al. 2017). This paper focuses on the use of one type of emojis referring to non-verbal behavior: kisses. Besides the romantic sexual kiss, in several cultural contexts, a casual kiss when people meet is normal practice (Firth 1972). Therefore, this study analyzes whether kissing emojis reproduce formalized cultural behavior in situations of greeting and parting in three corpora of WhatsApp chats, the first retrieved in Spain (written in Spanish), the second in Germany (mainly written in informal Federal German),<sup>1</sup> and the third in German-speaking Switzerland (mainly written in Swiss-German dialects). In these countries, WhatsApp was the most popular messaging application at the time of compilation of the corpora (GSMA 2015: 7). The comparison of these three corpora allows us to study different behavior in situations of greeting and parting in CMC, which may in part be based on cultural differences in the “non-digital” world.

The paper is structured as follows. The theoretical framework first reviews the literature on emojis in CMC. Secondly, the research questions of this paper are formulated. Section 3 explains the compilation of the three corpora and the analytical procedure. Subsequently, the results are presented. The discussion of the results and the conclusions end the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> We use ‘Federal (instead of ‘Standard’) German’ to name the German corpus and highlight its difference from the Swiss dataset. Indeed, the language of WhatsApp messages retrieved in Germany differs in many points from codified standard German. These deviations are seldom dialectal features but rather speech-oriented variations or interaction-oriented writing without any regional markers (Siebenhaar 2020). At the same time, we implicitly indicate that people also use standard German in Switzerland in conceptual written language.

## 2 Theoretical framework

Emojis are colorful pictographs (such as 😊, 😌, ❤️, 🍷) mainly used in electronic messages in different digital settings such as instant messaging applications, websites, social media, e-mails, etc. They were first designed in the early 90s in Japan (Burge 2019), and they spread worldwide when they were encoded by Unicode and later integrated into Apple and Android devices in 2010 (McCulloch 2019). Emojis are a common feature of social media. In 2017, around 5 million emojis were sent daily on Facebook Messenger alone (Burge 2017). Nowadays, almost all captions of Instagram posts contain emojis (Siever and Siever 2020). They are also used widely on Twitter (Barbieri et al. 2016; Ljubešić and Fišer 2016), where they have replaced ASCII emoticons (Pavalanathan and Eisenstein 2016), which are sequences of punctuation marks that schematically reproduce facial expressions, such as :-).

Given the proliferation of emojis in CMC, it comes as no surprise that academics also developed an interest in them. Emojis have been studied in multiple disciplines, such as social psychology (Riordan 2017), natural language processing (Barbieri et al. 2016), marketing (Casado-Molina et al. 2019), consumer research (Jaeger et al. 2018), semiotics (Danesi, 2017), and linguistics. Drawing on real corpora retrieved from different digital platforms, linguists have linked emojis to text structuring (Dürscheid and Siever 2017; König 2015) and phatic communion (Aull 2019; Danesi 2017; Graham 2019); emojis can also substitute gestures (Gawne and McCulloch 2019; McCulloch 2019) or even words, phrases, and entire speech acts or action sequences in CMC (Sampietro 2019a; Siebenhaar 2018; Yus 2021). Moreover, they have other pragmatic functions, such as strengthening or mitigating speech acts (Beißwenger and Pappert 2019; Herring and Dainas 2017), indexing interactions as informal (Pappert 2017), managing rapport (Sampietro 2019b), and forming communities of practice (Graham 2019; Pérez-Sabater 2019).

The interactional use has only been tangentially approached by researchers studying online conversation. Like ASCII emoticons (see Albert 2015; Beißwenger 2013), emojis are sometimes utilized to give the floor to the interlocutor (König 2015) or to open and close conversations, alone or with text (Danesi, 2017; Sampietro, 2019b; Siever and Siever 2020; Yus 2021). For instance, Cantamutto (2019) observed on WhatsApp that the “waving hand” emoji (👋) was used in openings, Al Rashdi (2018) attributed the same function to the “person raising hand” emoji (🙋), and Danesi (2017) to the smiley. The use of the “face throwing a kiss” (😘) emoji is especially interesting, as different authors found that it is used, alone or with text, to close conversations (Al Rashdi 2018; Aull 2019; Cantamutto 2019; Danesi 2017). In particular, in her study of emojis on WhatsApp among Omanis, Al Rashdi (2018:

123) remarked: “physical kissing among the same sex, is a widespread act of greeting and parting in face-to-face interaction in most Arab cultures. The use of kissing emojis here thus may be considered an attempt to imitate face-to-face interaction.” What is more, every single informant (Spanish and Argentinean) interviewed by Cantamutto and Vela Delfa (2019b: 38) considered this emoji a “goodbye kiss.” The present study is particularly interested in this use of the kissing emojis as a reproduction of common nonverbal action in face-to-face encounters, i.e., cheek kissing when people meet and leave. Since this behavior presents cultural variation (Scott 2017), we wonder if these differences are also evident in the use of the kissing emojis. Research suggests that emojis do exhibit cultural differences. For example, many emojis (anthropomorphic or not) that are imbued with references to Japanese culture (Abel 2019) may be interpreted differently or even not be understood in other countries. Moreover, emojis reproducing non-verbal behavior can be used and interpreted in various ways depending on the culture. For instance, hand emojis can take the same semantic properties of the corresponding emblem gestures (Gawne and McCulloch 2019), assuming, on some occasions, even unwanted nuances (Danesi 2017: 31). This paper focuses on the use of several types of kissing emojis in three corpora of WhatsApp chats retrieved around the same time in different European regions: Spain, Germany, and the German-speaking part of Switzerland. For this research, these contexts were particularly apt for comparison: in these regions, WhatsApp is the most popular messaging application (GSMA 2015; Statista 2020) and the behavioral norms in these countries are slightly different. Indeed, Spain is a Mediterranean culture whose customs imply a high degree of informality, solidarity, and openness in interaction (Bravo 2008; Hickey 2005). By contrast, Germany and Switzerland, like other Western and North-European cultures, value privacy, autonomy, and individualism (House 2010; Hopkinson 2021; Manno 2005). Switzerland is a culturally complex and diverse country, with four different languages recognized by the constitution (German, French, Italian, and Romansh). Yet, according to Manno (2005: 112), a specific “Swiss ethos” exists, with features akin to Northern-European social norms. Löffler (2011) considers nationality more important than sharing a language and found differences between German-speaking Switzerland and Germany. For example, Germans use fewer conversational routines and phatic moves, with a clear preference for content-oriented strategies (House 2010). The selected countries are also different when it comes to common non-verbal behavior when opening and closing a face-to-face conversation. In informal encounters, Spaniards and Swiss usually cheek kiss when they meet and part, usually twice in Spain and three times in Switzerland (Evason 2018;

Rash 2004).<sup>2</sup> However, there are differences between these two regions. In Spain, kisses are universally given to friends, family, co-workers, and even when meeting a person for the first time. The only exception is between males, who rarely kiss each other, or in very formal situations. In Switzerland, cheek kissing is common among friends, family members, and close acquaintances (Rash 2004). In Germany, people usually greet each other with a handshake and cheek kisses may occur only among close relatives or young people (Evason 2017).

### 3 Research questions

The present paper studies the use of kissing emojis in instant messaging conversations, drawing on three corpora of WhatsApp chats, retrieved in Spain, Germany, and the German-speaking area of Switzerland. Thus, the first research question is as follows:

**RQ1.** How are kissing emojis used on WhatsApp in Spain, Germany, and German-speaking Switzerland?

The main aim of this paper is to analyze whether emojis are used to reproduce the equivalent face-to-face behavior, i.e., kissing when people meet or leave, as suggested by some researchers (Al Rashdi 2018; Cantamutto 2019; Danesi 2017). As previously noted, Spain, Germany, and the German-Speaking area of Switzerland were chosen because face-to-face behavior in personal informal encounters is rather different in these regions. If the use of kissing emojis reflects the customs of face-to-face interaction, then the WhatsApp chats retrieved in these three regions might also exhibit some level of variation. Thus, the second and third research questions are:

**RQ2.** Are kissing emojis used to open and close WhatsApp conversations in Spain, Germany, and the German-speaking region of Switzerland?

**RQ3.** Does the use of kissing emojis reflect the customs of these regions in face-to-face encounters?

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<sup>2</sup> The data analyzed in this paper were collected in 2014 and 2015. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, health organizations worldwide have advised the population to avoid physical contact, for example when greeting. This study refers to the cultural practices in force at the time of the compilation of the corpora.

## 4 Data and methods

### 4.1 Corpora

#### 4.1.1 The Spanish corpus

The Spanish corpus was retrieved by the first author between November 2014 and April 2015. Potential informants were chosen among students, colleagues, and acquaintances, who were asked to send the log of some of their personal WhatsApp chats via e-mail, using a specific feature of the application.<sup>3</sup> Participants gave their consent for the data to be used for research purposes. 120 informants participated (78 identified as women and 42 as men). Most of them were between 18 and 25 years old, but all age ranges (from teens to over-65) were represented. Some informants sent more than one chat for analysis. Messages were written in peninsular Spanish, with occasional code-switching to English, French, Italian, and Catalan.

Chats were received in plain text (media files were excluded). Personal details of the participants were deleted. As differences in device capabilities and application versions may affect the availability of emojis, some of them were lost with this data collection method but it also ensured that when an emoji was properly displayed in the transcript, it was indeed viewed by both users. Messages without emojis were excluded. In total, the corpus includes 45 dyadic WhatsApp chats, adding up to around 22,000 tokens. It shows examples of everyday casual conversations, as participants were usually friends, colleagues, or family members.

#### 4.1.2 The Swiss corpus

In summer 2014, the Swiss population was encouraged to donate their WhatsApp chats for linguistic research with a media campaign with the slogan “What’s up, Switzerland?” (see Ueberwasser and Stark 2017 for a detailed description of the whole corpus). Participants, who signed written consent, could send in WhatsApp chats via a specific website. Media files were not included. In addition to age, gender, and educational or occupational status, participants were asked to indicate

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<sup>3</sup> In this study, we follow the technical terminology used in the application as much as possible. Consequently, the term “message” is used to indicate each new contribution that appears on the screen when users press the “submit” key. Similarly, “chat” is used to denote the complete thread corresponding to all WhatsApp messages exchanged between two users (multi-user chats were not considered in this study). Messages contained in a chat belonged to different days, hours, and situations. We call these message groupings “conversations”.

where they lived and worked and place of residence at the time of completion of primary school.

In all, 945 participants consented to use their 763,650 messages consisting of 5,543,692 tokens. 275 chats with 506,984 messages and 3,611,033 tokens are primarily written in Swiss-German dialects. We only considered these Swiss-German parts of the corpus for this paper.

### 4.1.3 The German corpus

The German corpus was collected and processed the same way as the Swiss corpus between December 2014 and January 2015. 861 participants consented to use their 376k messages consisting of 3.8 million tokens. All chats are written in German, with code switches to some other languages (mainly English). There are no entirely dialectal chats, but some of them—mainly from southern Germany—show increasing use of dialectal features. As the differences of the informal writing to the codified standard German are considerable, we use the term Federal German for this style (see endnote 1).

## 4.2 Selection of data

As the German and Swiss corpora were much larger than the Spanish one, for this study, a limited number of chats and instances of emojis were selected for ease of comparison. A log of 42 dyadic chats (6 between males, 20 between females, and 16 mixed male-female) was selected from the Spanish corpus. Considering the gender of participants of the selected chats, 42 comparable chats were chosen from the German (17 between females and 25 mixed; there were no dyadic chats between males in the corpus) and 38 from the Swiss-German corpus (6 between males, 18 between female participants, and 13 mixed).

Furthermore, in order to include a similar number of messages for each corpus and minimize the effect of idiosyncratic patterns, which could skew the results, the analysis was limited to the first four messages in each chat that contained at least one kissing emoji. This number (four messages) was the upper limit established for this study to be able to compare the three corpora. Some chats had more than four messages with kissing emojis, others less, and some did not include any pictograph at all. The selected emojis were the following:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Although the visual details of pictographs can vary depending on the platform, at the time of data collection cross-platform differences in the representation of kissing emojis were minimal. Therefore, we agree with Yus (2021) in considering that differences in the emojis' depictions, in this case, would not lead to major misunderstandings.

- Face throwing a kiss 🥰
- Kissing face 😘
- Kissing face with smiling eyes 😘
- Kissing face with closed eyes 😘
- Kissing cat face with closed eyes 🐱
- Kiss mark 💋
- Couple kissing 🧑🏻💋

These emojis were the seven types of kisses available when the corpora were retrieved. Currently, there is a wider variety of them, as non-heterosexual couples, diverse family models, and varied skin tones have been made available. As the three corpora were compiled around the same time, the informants used similar versions of the application, so that the range of kissing emojis available to informants was the same. Overall, the sample consisted of 327 WhatsApp messages with at least one of the emojis displayed above; in total, we analyzed the use of 473 kissing emojis across the three corpora. In the Spanish corpus, a set of 92 messages contained at least one of the considered emojis; in total, we found 194 kissing emojis in this corpus, as sometimes more than one pictograph representing kisses was used in a message. The German data had 104 messages with 132 kissing emojis in total. As for the Swiss corpus, 131 messages contained 147 kissing emojis. Even though the focus of the analysis were the messages containing emojis, the conversational context was also considered while coding, as detailed in the following section (Section 4.3).

### 4.3 Procedures, variables, and coding scheme

A coding manual was developed by the researchers to systematically classify the data and facilitate the comparison between the three corpora. General details (the type of kissing emoji, position of the emoji in the message, and the number of repetitions) were gathered to get an overview of the use of kissing emojis. Then, to analyze their use in openings and closing, we also considered contextual factors, i.e., the position of the message containing the emoji in the conversation, its verbal content, and the position of the emoji in the message. Since exchanges on WhatsApp can be asynchronous, that is, a user can reply to a message several hours or even days later, we did not rely exclusively on chronological cues (time and date of the message) to separate the conversations, but also on thematic coherence. Messages linked to the same topic and occurring around the same time were considered as belonging to the same conversation. In other cases, exchanges had clear opening sequences, such as greetings or vocatives, and closings, such as



verbal farewells. As we shall see below, these expressions also helped to separate different conversations in a chat and assess the position of the kisses in the verbal exchange.

#### 4.3.1 Position in the conversation

Indeed, the variable “position in the conversation” considered if the emoji was included in the opening, closing, or other sections of the conversation. WhatsApp conversations do not necessarily have to be explicitly opened or closed, as the interactants are perceived to be “always-on” (Baron 2010). Nevertheless, proper greeting and farewell formulas are a possible way to open and close a WhatsApp conversation (Alcántara Plá 2014; Cantamutto 2019; König 2015; Morel 2017). As a consequence, drawing on literature on the structural organization of CMC conversations, openings and closings were identified by the occurrence of specific formulas: for the former, the use of greetings, phatic talk, and vocatives (Bou-Franch 2011; Rintel et al. 2001) and for the latter farewells, expressions of thanks, good wishes, the closing of the last topic, or references to future contacts (Bou-Franch 2011; Spilioti 2011). Additionally, a significant time gap was considered as a clue to systematically “separate” different conversational sequences within one chat. For this research, we set a time limit of 4 h during the daytime.

#### 4.3.2 Verbal content

The verbal content of the message containing the analyzed emojis was coded as a separate variable. We looked at what was written in the message in which the emojis was used or, if the message consisted of emojis only, at the content of an immediately preceding message sent by the same person. In developing the categories, we favored a bottom-up approach based on the observation of the data and the groups of categories that emerged as the corpus was explored. A variety of common verbal expressions were considered. The reference domains selected for annotation were the use of specific greeting formulas (such as *hallo*, ‘hello’ in German); farewells (such as *hasta luego* or *adiós* in Spanish, meaning ‘goodbye’); and expressions of thanks (such as *danke* in German). Moreover, given that emojis could have strengthening or mitigating purposes (Herring and Dainas 2017), we distinguished between messages whose content leans towards the negative spectrum of politeness (Watts 2003), such as orders, requests, rejections, corrections, and complaints (for example, *denk daran*, which means ‘don’t forget’ in German) and messages whose content tend to be on the positive spectrum of politeness (Watts 2003), such as compliments, encouragements, invitations, greetings (such as *felicidades*, that is ‘congratulations’ or ‘happy

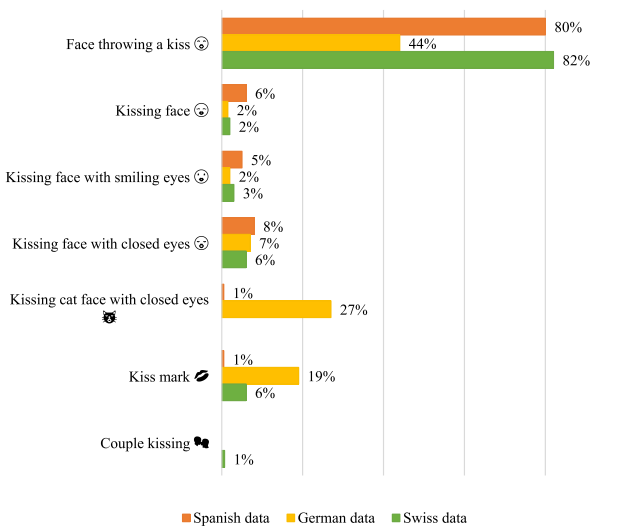
birthday, in Spanish). The category “other” included verbal content that did not perfectly fit into the groupings listed above, especially when we lacked enough contextual information to correctly infer the intentions of the speaker (for example, if we could not tell if a user was joking) or how the conversation evolved.

The coding scheme was jointly tested by the three researchers on a sample of 73 messages in Federal German (all authors were able to understand this language) until we reached an agreement on the definition of all variables. The selected data was then manually coded by the first (who coded the Spanish data) and the second author (who coded the Swiss and German data). Doubtful cases were jointly coded afterwards.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Use of the kissing emojis in the three corpora

In all three corpora, the most used kissing emoji was “face throwing a kiss” (Figure 1). It accounted for 82% (120 instances) of the kissing emojis in the Swiss corpus and 80% (155 emojis) in the Spanish data. While in the former dataset the use of other kissing emojis was rare, in the Spanish one the “kissing face with



**Figure 1:** Type of kissing emojis in the three corpora (percentage over the total number of kissing emojis in each dataset).

closed eyes” emojis accounted for 80% of the instances (other kissing emojis were seldom used). By contrast, in the German data the use of kissing emojis varied. Although “face throwing a kiss” 🥰 was again the most used kissing emoji (58 instances, 44%), other pictographs were also repeatedly used: 35 “kissing cat face with closed eyes” 🐱 emojis (27%) and 25 “kiss marks” 💋 (19%). Notably, the cat face emoji, which is almost non-existent in the other two corpora, is the second most used kiss in the German one. Although our data selection may have influenced the presence of this emoji, in the whole corpus, 64 out of 861 German informants (7%) used it (see Section 5.3 for additional analysis on the use of this emoji).

It is worth noting that in the Spanish corpus users tended to use multiple kissing emojis in a row. In 39 messages from the Spanish corpus composed of stand-alone emojis, we found 110 kissing emojis (2.8 per message on average); when placed in the final position, 48 messages included 77 emojis (1.6 per message). In the German and Swiss-German data, emojis in some cases were also repeated when stand-alone or in the final position. However, these repetitions did not reach the value of the Spanish data by far: in the German data, on average, stand-alone kissing emojis were repeated 1.5 times (58 emojis in 40 messages) and 1.1 times per message when the message enclosed emojis in the final position (73 emojis in 65 messages). In the Swiss-German data, 40 stand-alone kissing emojis were contained within 33 messages (1.2 per message) and 97 kissing emojis placed in the final position were included in 89 messages (1.1 per message on average).

## 5.2 Kissing emojis and their position within the conversation

As described in Section 4, we tested whether the kissing emojis were embedded in the opening (identified by greetings, phatic talk, vocatives, etc.) and closing sections (recognized by farewells, good wishes, references to future contacts, etc.) of the analyzed conversations. Figure 2 shows the prevalent position of the considered emojis in the conversations in all three datasets.

In the Spanish corpus, messages containing kissing emojis tended to be placed in the closing section of the conversation (59%), while 36% of these messages appeared in its body. In the German and the Swiss corpus, kissing emojis were found mainly in sections of the conversation other than openings or closings (71% of the messages with kissing emojis in the German data and 58% in the Swiss data); to a lesser extent, kissing emojis were placed in the closing section (23% of the messages in the German and 38% in the Swiss corpus). That is, the Swiss-German data has an intermediate position between the Spanish and German data. In all datasets, kissing emojis were seldom used in opening sequences.

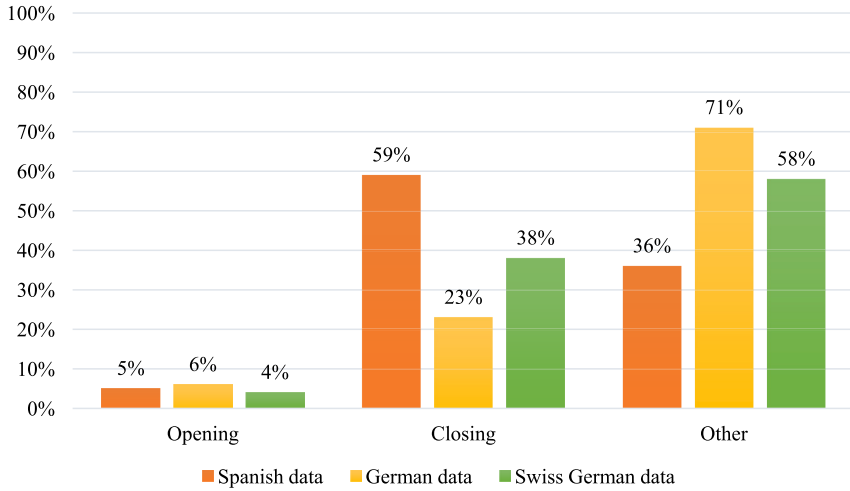


Figure 2: Position of the kissing emojis in the conversation (% of messages).

As for the verbal content accompanying these emojis, Figure 3 shows the number and percentage of emojis used with the different categories of verbal content considered in the analysis across languages. In general, kissing emojis were mostly placed in messages whose content leans towards the positive

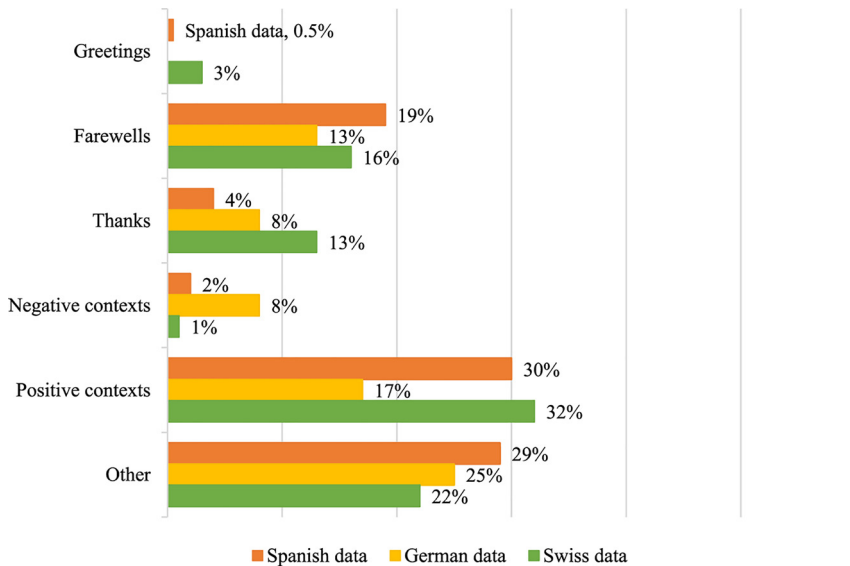


Figure 3: Verbal content accompanying kissing emojis (percentage over the total of kissing emojis in each language).

spectrum of politeness (Watts 2003), such as wishes, compliments, invitations, or expressions of praise. To a lesser extent, they were used with farewells. Greetings, as well as formulations that could be interpreted as rude in some contexts (like orders, rejections, corrections, etc.), were seldom accompanied by emojis.

As shown in Figure 3, the most common verbal content accompanying emojis in the Spanish and Swiss-German data are the expressions we have labelled as “positive” (30 and 32% of the considered emojis, respectively), while in the German data kisses are most often used with other content (25%). Kissing emojis were also used slightly more to bid farewell in the Spanish (19%) and the Swiss-German data (16%), compared to the German corpus (13%).

### 5.3 Prototypical use of the kissing emojis

In the Spanish dataset, kisses were often used in the closing sequence of the conversation, but they did not usually accompany farewells. Example (1)<sup>5</sup> illustrates a typical use of “face throwing a kiss” 🥰 in the final section of a short conversation in which two women postpone a meeting. As we can note below, emojis are used to replace farewells: the conversation ends when the last topic is finished, and the kiss is used to mark the closing.

(1)	Message No.	Date, timestamp	Participant	Message (and translation)
	1312.	13.11.14, 9:59	P7A:	<i>Cariño, mejor nos vemos el sabado que hoy voy muy liadilla</i> Honey, we better see each other on Saturday, I'm very busy today
	1313.	13.11.14, 10:10	P7F:	<i>Ok!pekeña!sin agobios!!</i> 🥰🥰🥰 Ok!sweetheart!no stress!!
	1314.	13.11.14, 10:18	P7A:	🥰🥰🥰🥰

After accepting the rescheduling, P7F recommends the interlocutor not to worry and adds three “face throwing a kiss” 🥰 emojis. Kisses are repeated by P7A in the next message (1,314), which ends the conversation. Face-to-face or on the phone

<sup>5</sup> The examples show excerpts of the chats included in the corpora. Besides general data (number of the message in the corpus, user, timestamps, etc.), we included a transcription of the original message (either in Spanish, Federal German or Swiss-German) and a line-by-line translation into English for the reader's convenience.

ending a conversation without a farewell infringes an important interactional rule, i.e., interactions must be framed by initial greetings and final farewells (Firth 1972; Goffman 1981; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). This example shows that, instead of writing a verbal farewell, one of the affordances that WhatsApp chatters use to mark the end of the exchange (or at least the intention of ending it) is including emojis, such as kisses, which perform a speech act on their own. This example (1) also illustrates the repetition of “face throwing a kiss”, common in the Spanish data, which can be interpreted as a digital reproduction of the effusiveness that characterizes interpersonal relations in Spain (Hickey 2005: 129).

In the German and Swiss-German corpora, emojis are also often placed in sections of the conversation other than openings and closings and accompany positive formulations. Example (2) from the German corpus is a typical use of a kissing emoji within a conversation with an evaluative function.

(2)	Message No.	Date, timestamp	Participant	Message (and translation)
	47385	27.05.2013, 13:09	P59	<i>Wir kochen am Donnerstag und sind etwas verwirrt ob nun Nudeln oder Reis. Bekommen widersprüchliche Infos...</i> We are cooking on Thursday and are a little confused as to whether pasta or rice. Getting conflicting info...
	47386	27.05.2013, 13:11	P60	<i>Definitiv nudeltag</i> Definitely pasta day
	47387	27.05.2013, 13:11	P60	<i>Reis gibt es morgen</i> Rice will be tomorrow
	47388	27.05.2013, 13:11	P59	<i>ich wusste auf Dich ist verlass</i> 🐱 I knew I could rely on you 🐱
	47389	27.05.2013, 13:14	P60	😊

P59 reports to P60 that she is unsure whether she will have to cook pasta or rice on Thursday (message 47,385). P60 confirms that it is pasta/noodle day (message 47,386), and the following day will be rice day (47,387). P59 thanks her by emphasizing P60’s reliability (message 47,388) and ends the message with a “kissing cat face with closed eyes” 🐱 emoji. P60 responds with a “smirking face” 😊 emoji (message 47,389). The conversation goes on afterwards. The example shows that the kissing emoji is to be understood as a second speech act or a hedge:

it can express a thank you (a speech act on its own) or enhance the compliment (thus intensifying the illocutionary force of the accompanying speech act expressed verbally). In face-to-face situations in Germany, and Switzerland, a thank you for a statement would hardly ever be expressed with a kiss. In real life, the kiss as an expression of gratitude is almost only common as thanks for a gift, for example, a birthday present; a kiss for a statement would be an exception. The use of kissing emojis in this chat thus does not represent the equivalent behavior in face-to-face situations. That is, in the German and Swiss-German data kissing emojis are often used instead of a “thank you” or as a hedge. This use of emojis as a “booster” of an already positive speech act was also observed by Beißwenger and Pappert (2019), albeit in a non-naturalistic setting. This example (2) also includes a “kissing cat face emoji”, the second most used kissing emoji in the German data (see Section 5.1). Besides enhancing playfulness, the use of a non-anthropomorphic element can be viewed as a way to distance oneself from the actual act of kissing, reproduced perhaps more accurately by the yellow face pictographs. Participants could also resort to a cat face instead of a smiley to express affection more cautiously, a preference that could be consistent with the politeness norms of the country (House 2010).

Example 3, also from the German corpus, is another typical use of a kissing emoji within a conversation. In this example, which is part of a longer teasing sequence, the emoji has a mitigating function.

(3)	Message No.	Date, timestamp	Participant	Message (and translation)
	482858	19.04.2014, 14:44	P530	<i>Wenigstens kann ich Fahrrad fahren und an Bahnhöfen umsteigen</i> 😘 At least I can ride a bike and change trains at stations 😘
	482859	19.04.2014, 15:12	P529	<i>Ein wahrer Charmeur, wie immer.</i> A true charmer, as always.

In message 482,858, participant P530 alludes to a situation in which a humiliating incident happened to the chat partner. The post suggests that P529 fell over with his bike and could not change trains at stations. The message ends with a “kissing face with closed eyes” 😘 emoji. Its function can be twofold: on the one hand, it can soften the potential offence expressed by the sarcastic comment; on the other, the kissing emoji can be considered a way to explicitly mark the illocutionary force of the utterance, that is, it is not to be interpreted literally. Signaling the presence of irony, sarcasm or other nonliteral meanings is a key function of emojis

(Al Rashdi 2018; Herring and Dainas 2017; Yus 2021), even if other pictographs are usually chosen to index irony, such as winking smileys, emojis with the tongue sticking out and laughing faces, among others (Al Rashdi 2018; Dynel 2020; König 2019; Sampietro 2021). In the reply (message 482,859), P529 ironically characterizes the chat partner as a “true charmer”. This suggests that P529 acknowledges the play frame set by the interlocutor by responding ironically. By signaling and accepting the humorous tone, and mitigating potential offences, interactants maintain their relational bonds with each other (Sampietro 2021).

Examples (2) and (3) characterize typical uses of kiss emojis that are not at the end of a conversation. In addition to their frequent use as a “thank you” (like in Example 2) or as a booster of already positive formulations, kissing emojis within interactions can be used to soften potentially offensive messages. This function is not restricted to teasing sequences but was also found in serious contexts. Interestingly, this use of kissing emojis within a conversation is much less common in the Spanish data, where they are hardly ever used as a speech act on their own to express gratitude or to mitigate a message. Sociopragmatic studies have pointed out that friends and family members in Spain do not usually give thanks in many situations or do not thank explicitly without being considered rude (Bravo 2008; Hickey 2005). Since many of our informants were also close acquaintances, this may explain the differences between the datasets in the use of kissing emojis as expressions of thanks or mitigators.

As shown in Figure 2, overall, kissing emojis are rarely used in the opening section of a conversation. This is also reflected in the content, as these pictographs are seldom included in messages containing greetings or other formulaic openings. These results are in contrast with current customs in Spain and Switzerland, where kisses are given both when people meet and when they leave. The following discussion will further explore the differences observed between the corpora.

## 6 Discussion

This study investigated the use of seven different kissing emojis in three corpora of WhatsApp chats, one compiled in Spain, the other in Germany, and the third in the German-speaking parts of Switzerland. One of the main aims of this research was to compare if the use of these emojis reflected face-to-face customs in situations of greeting and parting. Culturally, in Spain, cheek kissing when people meet is common, even when people are introduced (Evason 2018). Germany and Switzerland have politeness norms similar to average Northern-European standards (Manno 2005), although they differ in greeting behavior and directness. Cheek kissing when people meet privately is common in Switzerland (although not when people meet for



the first time, like in Spain), but not in Germany. Germans also use fewer conversational routines and phatic moves in their interpersonal contacts than their Helvetic counterparts (House 2010). The main aim of the paper was to consider if these differences in nonverbal behavior are also reflected in WhatsApp chats, with a focus on the use of the kissing emojis.

Concerning RQ1, the results show that despite the variety of kissing emojis available, “face throwing a kiss” 🥰 was the most used in the three corpora. In both the Spanish and the Swiss-German data, this was by far the most used kissing emoji, while in the German data a wider variety of pictographs were employed. Since WhatsApp arranges the most recently used emojis in a specific tab, the quickness and availability might have influenced the wider use of “face throwing a kiss” over other emojis. Nevertheless, studies carried out on different platforms and operating systems (WhatsApp: Al Rashdi 2018; Cantamutto and Vela Delfa 2019b; Twitter: Ljubešić and Fišer 2016; Android: Chen et al. 2018) consistently include this emoji among the most recurrent, so the specific affordances of WhatsApp are not likely to be the sole determinant of this frequent use.

An important difference between the three datasets is the number of repetitions of the kissing emojis. The Spanish data contain more kisses, as users showed a greater tendency to repeat the same emoji more than once in the same message—especially in emoji-only messages—compared to the other corpora. The Swiss-German and the German data do not substantially differ in the number of repetitions of emojis.

This duplication of emojis constitutes a further difference from face-to-face behavior, as in Switzerland people usually cheek kiss three times (Manno 2005), while Spaniards normally only kiss twice (Evason 2018). As already pointed out, rather than a reproduction of nonverbal customs, the repetition of kissing emojis in the Spanish data may be a way to electronically express the effusiveness of interpersonal relations common in the country (Hickey 2005: 129).

In response to RQ2, in the Spanish corpus, the most frequent position of kisses is in closing sections of the conversation, while in the other two corpora, positions other than openings and closings are the most common. Kissing emojis are rarely used in openings in all three corpora, which is in contrast with face-to-face behavior, given that in Spain and Switzerland people usually cheek kiss both in situations of greeting and parting.

Regarding the verbal content accompanying kissing emojis, in all three datasets, formulations usually considered polite (such as invitations, compliments, etc.) most frequently appear with kissing emojis, followed by verbal farewells.

Thus, in response to RQ3, the use of kissing emojis only partially reproduces face-to-face behavior in the selected countries. As one might expect based on customs in face-to-face interactions, kissing emojis are used more often and in

different ways in the Spanish and the Swiss data as opposed to the German data. However, they are repeated more often in the chats retrieved in Spain than in the Swiss data, while the face-to-face frequency is the opposite. Moreover, in all three datasets, kissing emojis are rarely used at the beginning of a conversation, but much more frequently toward its end. This marks a clear difference between face-to-face behavior and instant messaging because when people meet face-to-face, they are just as likely to exchange kisses at the beginning of an interaction. Several authors (Al Rashdi 2018; Cantamutto 2019) already observed that the “face throwing a kiss” 🥰 emoji is common in closing WhatsApp conversations, but they considered this trend a reflection of face-to-face behavior.

A further difference between the use of the analyzed emojis on WhatsApp and face-to-face kisses is the verbal content accompanying the emojis. Contrary to nonverbal behavior in face-to-face interaction, kissing emojis in most cases are not used in association with verbal greetings and farewell formulas. Instead, these emojis tend to appear toward the end of a conversation (as the prevalent position attests), usually associated with positive formulations (as affirmed by the most frequent verbal content accompanying these emojis). Kissing emojis, especially in Spanish and Swiss-German chats, may thus be considered a quick way to mark the end of a conversation or to signal unavailability for further chatting. This suggests that rather than reproducing formalized nonverbal behavior, kissing emojis can be used for interactional reasons, such as marking the end of a conversation, even without explicit farewell formulas. Similar to letter repetition and nonstandard spelling, the use of which should not automatically be considered an emulation of prosody (Siebenhaar 2020; Yus 2021), the use of emojis, including those reproducing common non-verbal behavior, is better understood based on their (pragmatic) function in the conversation. With regard to kissing emojis, this research has shown that they can carry out a wide range of functions, from closing a conversation to reinforcing positive verbal formulations and even expressing specific speech acts on their own rather than reproducing the action they depict.

It can be argued that kissing emojis strengthen positive expressions or can have a mitigating function in association with negative formulas, as confirmed by linguistic research on the pragmatics of emoticons and emojis (see Dresner and Herring 2010; Herring and Dainas 2017; Sampietro 2019b). In the Spanish dataset, kissing emojis most commonly appear in the final section of a conversation (i.e., in the last few messages), while interactional formulations such as compliments, invitations, expression of agreement, and praise are first-pair parts that require a response from the interlocutor (see Pomerantz 1984). For this reason, the most common position of emojis at the end of conversations suggests that the kissing emoji may not be intended to be used to reinforce positive formulations in the Spanish data. In the German and to a lesser extent in the Swiss-German data set,

the most common position of a kissing emoji is within a conversation. As illustrated by the examples, kisses are more frequently used to reinforce the positivity of a message or to mitigate the negativity. Moreover, they often replace an entire speech act, namely an expression of thanks.

These observations raise the question of why users resort to kissing emojis if they are not reproducing kissing in face-to-face behavior. A possible explanation for the Spanish data could be the influence of other genres, as the use of the farewell *beso* ('kiss') and variants (*muchos besos*, 'many kisses,' *besitos*, 'little kisses,' etc.) reflects a long-standing custom in informal writing. These formulas were common not only in SMS, e-mails, or other electronic genres (Cantamutto 2019) but also in analogic forms of informal writing, such as letters and personal notes (Briz 2003). In the case of Switzerland, Rash (2004) records that younger people use (*Big*) *Kiss*, *Küssli* (a kiss), or *Schmatz* (an onomatopoetic, but also lexicalized kiss) in informal e-mails and text messages. This is also reported for text messages, where the kiss is often typed not in German or Swiss-German but with a code switch to the English 'kiss,' French *bisous/bise*, or Spanish *besos* (Bucher 2016). In general, these formulas are seldom used in Federal German. A glance at the German corpus reveals only 10 "kisses," one *bisous*, and 3 *beso(s)*. This means that the switch to foreign languages is not that common, while the German word *Kuss* appears 113 times. Therefore, in general, this confirms the difference between the German, Swiss-German, and Spanish datasets. Accordingly, the use of kissing emojis in closings in the Spanish and Swiss data may be considered a way to visually reproduce this commonly written farewell formula in informal writing, rather than a replica of face-to-face behavior. Future studies could analyze the patterns of the use of kissing emojis in other languages in which it is common to close informal letters or SMS with the farewell "kiss, kisses" or similar, such as in French (*bisous*, *grosses bises*).

As for the German data, the differences in the use of kissing emojis (use of the cat face, wider variety of kissing emojis, use in sections other than openings and closings) compared to the Spanish and, to a lesser extent, to the Swiss-German data suggest that WhatsApp chats in Germany may reflect in a certain degree the directness of interaction in this country, as perceived by foreigners (Menno 2005). In some cases, this directness is mitigated by kissing emojis. The wider variety of pictographs depicting kisses also suggests a possible hierarchy of kissing emojis, used in different contexts or with different interlocutors. For example, they could be a sign of the level of proximity or even romance between users. Future studies could further test these hypotheses, drawing on an in-depth analysis of longer excerpts or a survey. Accommodation between users (see Felder 2020) could also account for the wider use of the cat face emoji among Germans, a reasoning that also deserves further analysis.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the use of seven types of kissing emojis in three corpora of WhatsApp chats, one retrieved in Spain, the other in Germany, and the third in the German-speaking parts of Switzerland. Contrary to previous studies (see, for example, Al Rashdi 2018; Cantamutto 2019), the results demonstrate clearly that the use of kissing emojis does not reproduce face-to-face behavior in situations of greeting and parting in these countries. The emojis representing kisses —of which “face throwing a kiss” 🥰 is the most frequent— are mainly used in the closing section of a conversation, especially in exchanges containing verbal content on the positive spectrum of politeness. They are not used to open a conversation. The functions of kissing emojis in the Spanish and Swiss data, thus, can be considered interactional within the use of an informal written style. Indeed, it can hardly be linked to the reproduction of non-verbal behavior: kissing emojis are used to mark the closing of a conversation, even without an explicit leave-taking formula. Greetings and farewells interactionally are very relevant, and they are a compulsory part of face-to-face conversations (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). The lack of these formulas on WhatsApp does not imply that properly opening and closing a conversation is not important in instant messaging (Alcántara Plá 2014), but rather that interactional norms in this context can be expressed differently. The end of a digital conversation is still highly relevant and should be signaled. If a farewell is not used for this purpose, a kissing emoji may be a quick way to mark the closing.

By contrast, in Germany, people do not usually cheek kiss in face-to-face interaction. The distinctive use of kissing emojis in the German data suggests that there may be cultural differences in how emojis are used depending on the customs and interactional norms of the country, but it still does not mark a clear contrast justified by different nonverbal behavior.

This study has several limitations. First, the results show that despite the availability of seven different kisses, users usually resort to a limited number of them. In the data analyzed here, among the seven kissing emojis available, users almost exclusively use the emoji “face throwing a kiss” 🥰. With the information at hand, we could not know if this emoji is used more because of culture-specific customs, accommodation, or convenience. This possibility may be further investigated drawing on other methods, such as surveys or analysis of screenshots of the list of most recent emojis (see Cantamutto and Vela Delfa 2019a). This can have important implications in the design of emojis. Although new pictographs are added each year to the Unicode standard, users resort to a limited number of emojis in their day-to-day interactions. This means that perhaps Unicode may not need to introduce new kissing emojis.

Another limitation of this study is that gender differences in the use of kissing emojis were not considered, even though kissing when people meet is not common between males in the analyzed countries (Evarson 2018; Rash 2004) and Danesi (2017: 104) observed that kissing emojis as salutations were more common among female informants. We have excluded this variable from the analysis because the German data did not contain dyadic male-to-male chats, thus impeding real comparison with the other two corpora. Nevertheless, gender may be a relevant variable affecting closing behavior: females are usually more inclined to the social aspects of conversations (Holmes 1995), and studies on WhatsApp group chats have suggested that conversations between females are longer and more structured (Pérez-Sabater 2019). Thus, the study of gender differences in the use of kissing emojis may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

This research could also benefit from a deeper pragmatic analysis of the entire chat logs in different languages. Indeed, assessing the data from a qualitative, pragmatic standpoint could give a more complete picture of the intercultural practices in the use of emojis.

A natural follow-up for this study is the examination of a wider range of pictographs, such as smiling faces and gestures, which can also display cultural variation. Analyzing intercultural emoji communication using discourse analysis can be particularly fruitful, as qualitative approaches can complement the growing number of quantitative large-scale studies on geographical differences in the use of emojis (e.g., Barbieri et al. 2016; Ljubešić and Fišer 2016).

This paper has also suggested that the function of kissing emojis is interactional within informal writing rather than linked to nonverbal behavior. A natural follow-up to this notion will be an in-depth study of the interactional functions of kissing emojis, using qualitative approaches, such as digital conversation analysis (Giles et al. 2015).

All in all, this paper contributes to the handful of qualitative studies on cross-cultural differences in the use of emojis by considering three comparable corpora retrieved from different geographical regions. Moreover, it offers a much-welcomed comparison between face-to-face behavior and the use of emojis, which is often taken for granted by defining the latter as electronically mediated nonverbal cues.

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Beat Siebenhaar. Following his studies at the University of Zurich, Beat Siebenhaar obtained a doctorate in German linguistics with a dissertation on “Linguistic Variation, Language Change and Attitudes”. He worked as a research assistant in Zurich, Bern, and Lausanne in the fields of German studies, Computational Linguistics, General Linguistics, and Phonetics. Since 2008 he has been Professor of German Linguistics with a focus on variation research at the University of Leipzig, Germany.