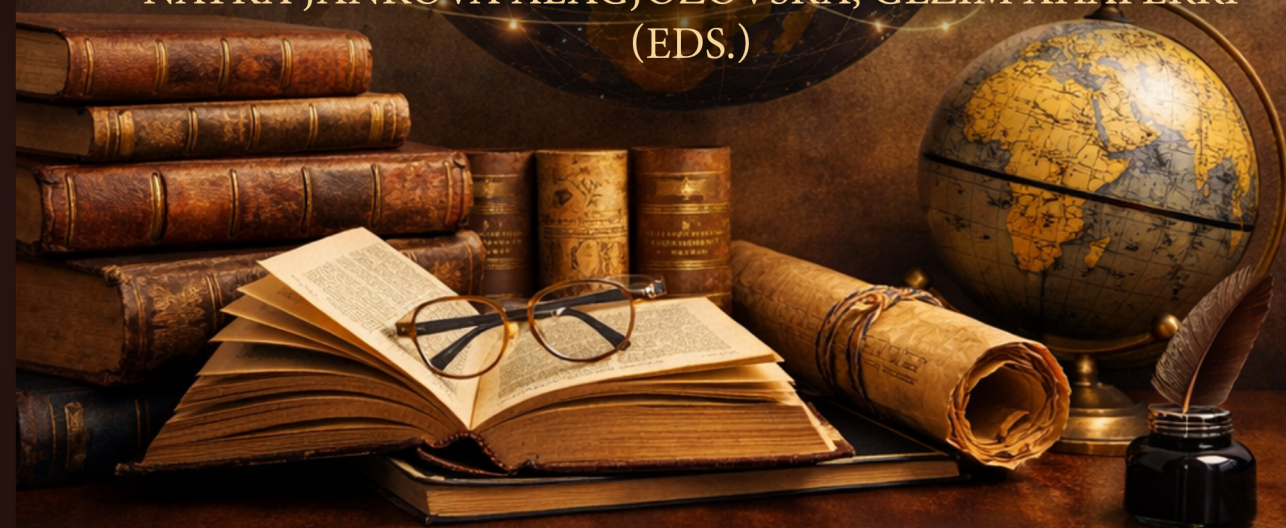


Contemporary Approaches to Intercultural Pragmatics Research and its Application in Language Teaching

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From Scientific Concepts to Practical Implementation

This publication presents the results of the project *Contemporary Approaches to Intercultural Pragmatics Research and Its Application in Language Teaching – From Scientific Concepts to Practical Implementation*. The project brings together researchers, academic staff and students from the Faculty of Philology at Goce Delcev University in Stip and the South East European University in Tetovo, reflecting the multicultural and multilingual context of North Macedonia. The volume explores contemporary theoretical perspectives in intercultural pragmatics and illustrates how these insights can be applied in language teaching practice. By connecting scientific research with practical classroom implementation, the book aims to contribute in enhancing intercultural communicative competence and foster innovative approaches in modern language education.

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PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF EMOJIS AND EMOTICONS IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital communication has transformed how meaning is constructed and interpreted, with emojis and emoticons emerging as key pragmatic resources. This literature review examines the pragmatic functions of emojis and emoticons in computer-mediated communication (CMC), focusing on how they contribute to meaning-making beyond lexical content. Drawing on existing studies, the review explores how emojis function as markers of emotion, stance, politeness, and interpersonal alignment, as well as tools for managing face and mitigating ambiguity in text-based interaction. The review also considers debates on whether emojis should be viewed as paralinguistic features, pragmatic markers, or semiotic elements with independent communicative value. By synthesizing research across social media platforms, instant messaging, and online discourse, this study highlights the role of emojis in compensating for the absence of non-verbal cues and shaping pragmatic interpretation in digital contexts. The findings underscore the importance of emojis and emoticons in contemporary pragmatic theory and point to directions for future research in digital discourse analysis.

Keywords: *Pragmatics, emojis, emoticons, digital communication, politeness and face-work*

1. Introduction

The expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally reshaped the ways in which individuals construct, negotiate, and interpret meaning. With the rise of computer-mediated communication (CMC) across social media platforms, instant messaging applications, and online forums, written interaction has become one of the dominant modes of everyday communication. Unlike face-to-face interaction, however, CMC often lacks the prosodic, gestural, and facial cues that traditionally support pragmatic interpretation. In response to this limitation, users have developed and adopted new semiotic resources to convey nuance, emotion, and interpersonal intent. Among the most prominent of these resources are emojis and emoticons. Emojis in their modern form originated in Japan in the late 1990s created by Shigetaka Kurita. It is important to distinguish emojis from emoticons, which appeared earlier in digital communication

in 1982. While emojis consist of graphic, cartoon-like images representing facial expressions, objects, and ideas, emoticons are formed using keyboard characters and punctuation marks, such as :-).

Originally emerging as simple typographic representations of facial expressions, emoticons have evolved alongside the development of standardized emoji systems into complex visual symbols embedded in digital keyboards and platforms. Today, emojis and emoticons function far beyond decorative additions to text; they operate as integral components of meaning-making in digital discourse. Their use reflects users' efforts to manage tone, express affect, signal stance, and negotiate interpersonal relationships in environments where ambiguity can easily arise.

From a pragmatic perspective, emojis and emoticons contribute to communication in ways that extend beyond literal word meanings. They can function as markers of emotion, indicators of speaker attitude, cues for politeness strategies, and mechanisms for face-work in the sense of managing social harmony and interpersonal alignment. By softening criticism, reinforcing humor, intensifying affect, or clarifying ironic intent, these visual symbols help interlocutors interpret messages more accurately and maintain relational balance. At the same time, scholarly debate continues regarding their theoretical status: whether they should be conceptualized as paralinguistic features compensating for missing non-verbal cues, as pragmatic markers shaping discourse interpretation, or as independent semiotic elements with their own communicative value.

Given their pervasive presence in contemporary digital interaction, emojis and emoticons demand systematic attention within pragmatic theory and digital discourse studies. This literature review therefore, examines existing research on their pragmatic functions in CMC, synthesizing findings across diverse digital platforms and communicative contexts. By exploring how these visual signs shape meaning, mitigate ambiguity, and structure interpersonal interaction, the study highlights their significance in contemporary communication and identifies directions for future research in digital pragmatics.

2. Literature Review

The rise of emojis and emoticons in computer-mediated communication (CMC) has attracted growing scholarly attention within pragmatics, discourse analysis, and digital communication studies. Researchers have examined their historical development, communicative functions, and theoretical status, particularly in relation to emotion expression, politeness, stance-taking, and face-work.

Figure (1) provides an overview of emojis commonly used in computer-mediated communication. The chart visually displays recognition rates for selected emojis, typically expressed as percentages or frequency counts. This allows comparison across different symbols and illustrating their varying degrees of interpretive clarity among users.

Early research on emoticons focused on their role in compensating for the absence of non-verbal cues in text-based communication. In one of the earliest discussions,

Fahlman (1982) proposed the use of typographic symbols such as :-) to signal humor and reduce misinterpretation in online bulletin boards. Later, Herring (2007) argued that users of CMC creatively adapt written language to approximate spoken interaction by incorporating paralinguistic devices that convey tone and emotional nuance. Similarly, Baron (2008) observed that digital writing increasingly blends features of speech and writing, with emotive markers contributing significantly to this hybrid communicative style.



Figure 1: Meaning of emojis

The introduction of standardized emojis in the late 1990s further expanded visual expression in digital communication. Kurita (1999) developed the first widely recognized emoji set in Japan which enabled visual symbols to become embedded in digital platforms globally. Scholars subsequently began to conceptualize emojis as semiotic resources rather than decorative additions to text. From a multimodal perspective, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) emphasize that meaning is constructed through the interaction of linguistic and visual modes. Within this framework, emojis can be understood as part of a multimodal communicative repertoire that shapes interpretation in digital discourse.

A substantial body of research highlights the emotional and affective functions of emojis. Evans (2017) argues that emojis represent a developing visual communication system that enriches digital interaction by adding emotional nuance and contextual meaning. However, empirical studies suggest that emojis serve pragmatic functions beyond emotion. Dresner and Herring (2010) demonstrate that emoticons operate as pragmatic markers that modify the illocutionary force of utterances. For instance, a smiling emoticon may transform a potentially critical comment into playful teasing, thereby influencing speech act interpretation rather than simply expressing internal emotional states.

From a politeness and face-work perspective, emojis have been examined as tools for managing interpersonal relationships. Drawing on Goffman (1967) and Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness theory, scholars argue that emojis help mitigate face-

threatening acts. For example, adding a laughing emoji after a directive can soften its force and signal friendliness. Research in workplace communication further supports this view, showing that emojis can reduce perceived harshness and enhance relational warmth (Lo, 2008; Riordan, 2017). These findings indicate that emojis function strategically within politeness frameworks to maintain interpersonal harmony.

Another important research focus concerns ambiguity and stance-taking. Seargeant (2019) notes that emojis help clarify ironic or sarcastic intent in text-based communication where prosodic cues are absent. Similarly, Collister (2018) argues that emojis index stance and community norms, contributing to identity construction in online discourse. Studies across digital platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook reveal that emoji interpretation is highly context-dependent and culturally variable, reinforcing the idea that emojis are embedded in specific discourse communities (Danesi, 2016; Pavalanathan & Eisenstein, 2016).

Furthermore, scholarly debate continues regarding the theoretical classification of emojis. Some researchers describe them as paralinguistic features that compensate for missing non-verbal cues (Walther & D'Addario, 2001), while others suggest that emojis function as semiotic signs with emerging combinatory patterns (Evans, 2017). Danesi (2016) contends that emojis represent a new stage in the evolution of writing that blends pictographic and alphabetic systems. In contrast, Dresner and Herring (2010) caution against overstating emoji autonomy, emphasizing their contextual and pragmatic dependency.

Further research has explored the relational and stance-related functions of emojis. Riordan (2017) found that emojis can disambiguate sarcastic intent in digital messages, with participants more accurately identifying non-literal meanings when emojis accompanied ambiguous text. Similarly, Kaye, Wall, and Malone (2016) argue that emojis contribute to relational maintenance by softening directives, reinforcing humor, and signaling friendliness. From a psychological perspective, Kelly and Watts (2015) emphasize that emoji interpretation is socially negotiated and context-dependent, demonstrating that users interpret emojis as flexible communicative resources rather than fixed emotional symbols.

Research grounded in politeness theory further supports the interpersonal role of emojis. Darics (2013) argues that emoticons mitigate face-threatening acts in workplace emails by softening criticism and directives, thereby protecting both positive and negative face. Skovholt, Grønning, and Kankaanranta (2014) similarly found that emoticons in professional communication foster relational harmony, particularly in hierarchical workplace contexts.

From a multimodal discourse perspective, emojis function as semiotic resources integrated into digital texts. Herring and Dainas (2017) found that emoji sequences exhibit patterns resembling conventionalized discourse structures, although they caution against classifying emojis as a fully developed grammar. Evans (2017) likewise concludes that emojis operate primarily as pragmatic and paralinguistic enhancers rather than independent linguistic systems.

All in all, the literature converges on the view that emojis and emoticons are integral to meaning-making in CMC. They function as markers of emotion, stance, politeness, and interpersonal alignment, help mitigate ambiguity, and contribute to face-work and relational management. Nevertheless, theoretical debates persist regarding their classification as paralinguistic cues, pragmatic markers, or semiotic systems. Synthesizing insights from pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and multimodal discourse analysis, current scholarship highlights the importance of emojis in contemporary communication.

3. Recent Studies

Advances in digital technology have transformed the manner in which we communicate within our social environment. This change is particularly evident among adolescents and young people, who now spend more time engaging in digital interactions than in traditional face-to-face socialization and meetings. In face-to-face exchanges, nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and gestures play a fundamental communicative role. They provide contextual information that facilitates the processing and comprehension of verbal messages, as well as social information regarding others' emotional states and personalities.

Digital interactions, particularly those that are text-based, primarily consist of verbal exchanges with limited or no opportunity for the transmission of nonverbal signals. Although emoticons are often perceived as substitutes for nonverbal cues in digital communication, several elements distinguish these two forms of interaction. Emoticons represent more strategic and less spontaneous expressions of internal states. According to Boutet et al. (2021), many emoticons symbolize nonverbal cues commonly used during face-to-face communication; however, despite their widespread popularity, relatively few studies have examined the impact of emoticons on digital interactions.

This research gap has been addressed by measuring the effects of emoticons on emotion interpretation, social attributions, and information processing. Participants read messages typical of instant messaging exchanges, accompanied by emoticons that mimicked negative, positive, and neutral facial expressions. Sentence valence and emoticon valence were combined in a fully factorial design, such that verbal and nonverbal messages were either congruent or incongruent. The measurements included participants' perceptions of the sender's emotional state and warmth, reflecting underlying information-processing mechanisms.

Specifically, findings reported by Boutet et al. (2021) indicate that the inclusion of a positive emoji in messages significantly increased the perceived warmth of the sender. Furthermore, both the speed of processing and the comprehension of verbal messages were enhanced by the presence of appropriate emojis. These findings suggest that positive emojis can enhance communication, convey emotions, and foster a favorable impression in socially driven digital interactions.

Additionally, digital technology, through its continuous daily advancement, not only facilitates the activities of a large proportion of the world's population, but also evolves through numerous innovations that directly encourage users to engage in

ongoing exploration and understanding of developments in the contemporary world. The diverse models, forms, and tools for communication offered by digital technologies present a challenge for researchers across their respective fields of inquiry. In this context, particular interest within studies of digital communication has been directed toward the functionalities of emojis and emoticons. According to Djuric (2024), emojis are graphic symbols frequently used in contemporary communication on social networks. Their popularity may be understood as a consequence of the advantages they hold over traditional written communication, such as greater creativity, conciseness, speed of input, and the possibility of compensating for the nonverbal cues that are absent in digital forms of interaction. When participating in various modes of digital communication, users encounter emoticons—that is, graphic symbols representing a wide range of concepts, objects, facial expressions, activities, and many other entities. These pictograms are widely employed on social media and are extremely popular worldwide.

Emojis first appeared in Japan in the late 1990s and owing to their visual nature, they continue a long linguistic tradition of conveying meaning through pictorial symbols. Emoticons have become both a part of contemporary culture and a reflection of it. They appear on over twenty platforms, each with its own design of pictograms, sometimes slightly and sometimes considerably different. In online communication, they are often used of people. Their importance in modern life is further demonstrated by the fact that they are not reserved solely for informal interpersonal communication, but are also employed in addressing the broader public on social networks, including by large companies and political actors.

It is important to emphasize that in text-based digital communication, emojis replace the nonverbal cues otherwise present in face-to-face interaction, thereby enabling clearer expression, the revelation of attitudes and personal characteristics, more precise emphasis of meaning, and the regulation of relationships and interactions. Although misunderstanding may occur, this is true for all forms of communication. It can therefore be argued that emojis indeed represent a highly creative and efficient mode of communication adapted to the contemporary world.

Examining of the relationship between the use of emoticons and human experience, mood, relationships, and personality is important not only for users themselves but also for the development of psychology. The principal findings of psychological research (Djuric, 2024) on the use of emoticons concern their capacity to convey the sender's emotions, assist in the expression of attitudes and personal characteristics, ensure more accurate communication of intent in messaging, and regulate interactions and relationships between interlocutors.

Furthermore, the integration of new technologies and the emergence and rapid expansion of computer-mediated communication (CMC) over the past several decades have enabled new ways of expressing emotions. These include the use of traditional keyboard symbols as emoticons to indicate smiling, the use of asterisks as a way of expressing joy, the use of acronyms and typographic emphasis, as well as capitalization

and boldface. Other means of emotional expression involve visual representations through digital pictograms or graphic images, such as emojis, stickers, or GIFs.

With their increasing prevalence, a substantial body of literature has developed concerning the meaning and functions of emoticons. They are generally regarded as substitutes for facial expressions, gestures, and other nonverbal cues. Scholars frequently focus on the semantic properties or encoded meanings of emoticons, their paralinguistic role, and their pragmatic functions, such as conveying information about speech acts and contributing to visual rhetoric. Additional aspects that have attracted academic attention include their emotional and linguistic functions and attributes, as well as factors influencing user preferences, such as individual characteristics, cultural background, or system platform. Emoticons are often viewed as a means of filling the gap by providing nonverbal signals in computer-mediated communication, where more traditional nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions or gestures, are unavailable. Consequently, some scholars argue that emoticons play a supportive role and promote interpersonal communication.

Research conducted by Nisa (2026) examines the ways in which emoticons and GIFs function as pragmatic markers in conveying politeness within social media interactions. Nisa (2026) reports that the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) results highlight that emoticons and GIFs serve as powerful nonverbal indicators and significantly enhance the tone and intelligibility of digital discourse. Specifically, the findings of this study empirically support the thesis that emoticons and GIFs act as pragmatic markers that not only increase communicative efficiency but are also crucial in shaping perceptions of politeness in online interaction. At the same time, these results contribute to the emerging field of digital sociolinguistics and underscore the key role that multimodal semiotics plays in defining online communicative practices. As digital communication continues to evolve, these visual components will likely assume an even more important role in maintaining civility, managing relationships, and facilitating mutual understanding across virtual environments.

4. Conclusion

This paper examined the pragmatic functions of emojis and emoticons in digital communication, highlighting their role as important semiotic resources in computer-mediated interaction. The review shows that emojis and emoticons contribute to meaning construction by expressing emotion, managing stance, reducing ambiguity, and supporting interpersonal relations in text-based communication. Rather than functioning merely as decorative elements, these visual symbols operate as pragmatic and paralinguistic markers that help compensate for the absence of non-verbal cues in digital discourse. Although scholarly debate continues regarding their theoretical classification, existing research consistently demonstrates their communicative value across social media, messaging platforms, and professional online environments. Overall, emojis and emoticons represent an evolving component of contemporary digital pragmatics and multimodal communication.

4.1 Recommendations

Recommendations for teaching and practice:

- Digital literacy education should include awareness of pragmatic meaning in emoji use to support effective online communication.
- Language teaching programs may incorporate discussion of multimodal discourse, including the pragmatic interpretation of emojis in written communication.
- Learners should be guided to use emojis appropriately in formal and informal contexts to avoid pragmatic misinterpretation.
- Communication training should address cultural and contextual variability in emoji interpretation.
- Educators can use examples of digital discourse to illustrate politeness strategies, stance marking, and tone management.

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