

THE LINGUISTIC NATURE OF EMOJIS AND STICKERS: NEW UNITS OF COMMUNICATION IN DIGITAL DISCOURSE

Khusenoova Mehriniso Uktamovna

Teacher of English literary studies and translation, Bukhara State University,

m.u.xusenova@buxdu.uz

Salohiddinova Shahzoda

A student of Foreign languages faculty, Bukhara State University

Abstract. This article explores the linguistic status of emojis and stickers as emerging communicative units in modern digital interaction. With the rapid expansion of social media and instant messaging platforms, emojis and stickers have become integral elements of written communication. The study analyzes their semantic, pragmatic, and paralinguistic functions, arguing that emojis and stickers should be considered not merely decorative symbols but meaningful semiotic resources that shape discourse, convey emotions, and influence interpretation. Particular attention is given to their role in replacing or supplementing verbal language in online communication.

Keywords: emoji, stickers, digital communication, paralinguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis.

Introduction.

The digital age has significantly transformed the ways people communicate. Traditional written language, once characterized by grammatical completeness and lexical clarity, has evolved into a hybrid form that integrates visual and symbolic elements. Emojis and stickers have become indispensable tools in everyday digital interaction, especially on social networking sites and messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram.

In contemporary communication, emojis and stickers function not only as emotional markers but also as meaning-bearing elements that contribute to the structure and interpretation of messages. Their widespread use raises important questions for linguistics: Can emojis be considered linguistic units? What functions do they perform in discourse? How do they affect meaning-making in digital texts? These questions underline the relevance of studying emojis and stickers from a linguistic perspective.

Semantically, emojis and stickers function as visual signs that convey specific meanings. Many emojis have relatively stable interpretations. For example, typically represents happiness or friendliness, while expresses sadness or disappointment. These symbols can replace words or entire sentences, thereby increasing communicative efficiency.

In the digital age, patterns of communication have undergone significant changes, and emojis and stickers have become an integral part of written interaction. In everyday online communication, users increasingly express their thoughts not only through words but also through visual symbols. For instance, instead of writing a complete sentence such as "I am happy," a speaker may simply use the emoji to convey the same meaning. In this case, the emoji functions as a semantic unit that encapsulates the meaning of an entire utterance.

The meaning of emojis is often highly context-dependent. For example, the emoji may indicate humor or irony in one situation, while in another context it can suggest suspicion or a hidden implication. Similarly, the emoji can represent genuine laughter, but it may also be used sarcastically. This variability demonstrates the polysemous nature of emojis and shows that



their interpretation relies heavily on the surrounding textual and situational context.

From a pragmatic perspective, emojis play an important role in clarifying communicative intent. A sentence such as “*Send me the report*” may sound like a direct command; however, when followed by a smiling emoji , it is more likely to be interpreted as a polite request. Emojis are also frequently used to signal irony or sarcasm, as in the expression “*Great job* ,” which often conveys criticism rather than praise.

Because digital written communication lacks non-verbal cues such as intonation, facial expressions, and gestures, emojis and stickers function as paralinguistic devices that compensate for this absence. For example, the sentence “*I'm fine*” can convey different emotional states depending on whether it is accompanied by , , or . Stickers, which often include characters, actions, and culturally specific symbols, carry even richer semantic content and allow users to express complex emotions and social attitudes more effectively.

However, emoji meaning is often context-dependent. The same emoji may convey different meanings depending on the communicative situation, cultural background, or accompanying text. Stickers, in contrast, usually carry more complex semantic content, as they often include characters, gestures, or culturally specific symbols. This makes stickers particularly rich in meaning and suitable for expressing nuanced emotions or social attitudes.

From a pragmatic perspective, emojis and stickers play a crucial role in shaping the speaker's communicative intent. They help clarify illocutionary force, soften requests, express irony, or mitigate potential misunderstandings. For instance, a direct statement followed by a smiling emoji may be interpreted as friendly rather than authoritative.

In digital written communication, non-verbal cues such as intonation, facial expressions, and gestures are absent. Emojis and stickers compensate for this absence by functioning as paralinguistic markers. They guide the recipient's interpretation and help maintain interpersonal harmony in online interaction. Paralinguistics traditionally studies non-verbal elements accompanying speech, such as gestures and facial expressions. In digital environments, emojis and stickers fulfill a similar function. They visually represent emotions and attitudes that would otherwise be conveyed through speech or body language.

Thus, emojis and stickers can be regarded as digital paralinguistic units that coexist with verbal language. Their use reflects a shift toward multimodal communication, where meaning is constructed through the interaction of text and visual symbols. In multilingual contexts, emojis also serve as universal symbols that transcend linguistic boundaries. However, cultural differences in emoji interpretation may still lead to ambiguity, highlighting the need for further cross-cultural linguistic research.

Conclusion.

In conclusion, emojis and stickers represent a significant development in modern communication and deserve serious attention in linguistic research. They are not merely auxiliary symbols but functional units that contribute to meaning, emotion, and pragmatics in digital discourse. Studying their linguistic nature provides valuable insights into the evolution of language in the digital era and the changing relationship between verbal and visual modes of communication. Future research may focus on corpus-based analyses of emoji usage, cross-cultural interpretations, and their implications for language teaching and translation studies. Emojis and stickers in contemporary digital communication should be viewed not merely as decorative elements, but as meaningful linguistic and paralinguistic units. They contribute actively to meaning-making, support multimodal communication, and facilitate interaction across linguistic boundaries. At the same time, cultural differences in interpretation may lead to ambiguity, making emojis and stickers a relevant and valuable subject for further linguistic research.

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