

## A COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO EMOJI SEMANTICS

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**Abstract.** This article examines contemporary approaches to emoji semantics in digital communication. The study focuses on three major theoretical frameworks: cognitive, pragmatic, and semiotic approaches. Through a qualitative comparative analysis of recent linguistic research, the paper identifies the key principles, strengths, and limitations of each approach. The findings demonstrate that emoji function as multimodal meaning-making units that extend beyond traditional linguistic boundaries. It is argued that emoji semantics is inherently dynamic, context-dependent, and shaped by the interaction of visual and verbal elements. The study contributes to the development of modern linguistic theory by proposing an integrated perspective on emoji interpretation.

**Keywords:** emoji, semantics, pragmatics, semiotics, multimodality, digital communication.

**Annotatsiya.** Mazkur maqola raqamli muloqotda emoji semantikasining asosiy zamonaviy yondashuvlari tahliliga bag'ishlanadi. Tadqiqot uch nazariy yondashuvga asosiy e'tibor qaratilgan bo'lib, ular kognitiv, pragmatik va semiotik yondashuvlardir. Maqolada so'nggi lingvistik tadqiqotlarning qiyosiy tahlili asosida har bir yondashuvning asosiy tamoyillari, kuchli tomonlari va cheklovlari aniqlangan. Olingan natijalarga ko'ra emoji an'anaviy lingvistik chegaralardan tashqariga chiqadigan, multimodal ma'no hosil qiluvchi birliklar sifatida ishlaydi. Ta'kidlash joizki, emoji semantikasi o'z mohiyatiga ko'ra dinamik bo'lib, kontekstga bog'liq va vizual hamda verbal elementlarning o'zaro ta'siri natijasida shakllanadi. Maqolada olib borilgan tadqiqot natijalari zamonaviy lingvistik nazariyaning rivojlanishiga hissa qo'shishiga umid qilamiz, emoji talqiniga kompleks yondashuvni taklif etadi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** emoji, semantika, pragmatika, semiotika, multimodallik, raqamli muloqot.

**Аннотация.** В данной статье рассматриваются современные подходы к семантике эмодзи в цифровой коммуникации. Исследование сосредоточено на трех основных теоретических подходах: когнитивном, прагматическом и семиотическом. На основе качественного сравнительного анализа последних лингвистических исследований в статье определены ключевые принципы, сильные стороны и ограничения каждого подхода. Полученные результаты демонстрируют, что эмодзи функционируют как мультимодальные смыслообразующие единицы, которые выходят за рамки традиционных лингвистических границ. Утверждается, что семантика эмодзи по своей сути динамична, зависит от контекста и формируется в результате взаимодействия визуальных и вербальных элементов. Исследование вносит свой вклад в развитие современной лингвистической теории, предлагая комплексный взгляд на интерпретацию эмодзи.

**Ключевые слова:** эмодзи, семантика, прагматика, семиотика, мультимодальность, цифровая коммуникация.

**Introduction.** In the 21st century, the rapid development of digital communication has significantly transformed linguistic practices. Written discourse is no longer limited to verbal elements but increasingly incorporates visual and non-verbal components. Among these, emoji have emerged as one of the most prominent tools for expressing meaning in computer-mediated communication. Emoji plays a crucial role in conveying emotions, clarifying speaker intention, and enhancing interactional efficiency. Their widespread use has attracted growing attention in linguistic research, particularly in the fields of

semantics, pragmatics, and multimodal communication. Despite this interest, emoji semantics remains a complex and evolving area of study. Different theoretical approaches offer varying interpretations of how emoji convey meaning. Therefore, the aim of this article is to provide a comparative analysis of contemporary approaches to emoji semantics, focusing on cognitive, pragmatic, and semiotic frameworks.

**Lierature analysis.** Similarly, G. Kress (2010) highlights the importance of multimodality in contemporary communication. Although his work is not limited to emoji, it provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how visual and textual modes interact. Kress argues that meaning is increasingly constructed through the integration of multiple semiotic resources, which directly applies to emoji usage in digital discourse [2].

From a cognitive perspective, Vyvyan Evans (2017) proposes that emoji form part of an emerging visual language system grounded in human cognition. He suggests that emoji meanings are shaped by conceptual structures and shared mental representations, rather than fixed definitions. Evans argues that emoji operate through conceptual mappings, enabling users to express abstract meanings via concrete visual forms [3]. In a similar vein, Raymond Gibbs emphasizes the role of embodiment and metaphor in meaning construction[4]. Although his work does not focus specifically on emoji, it supports the idea that visual symbols can evoke complex conceptual meanings through embodied experience.

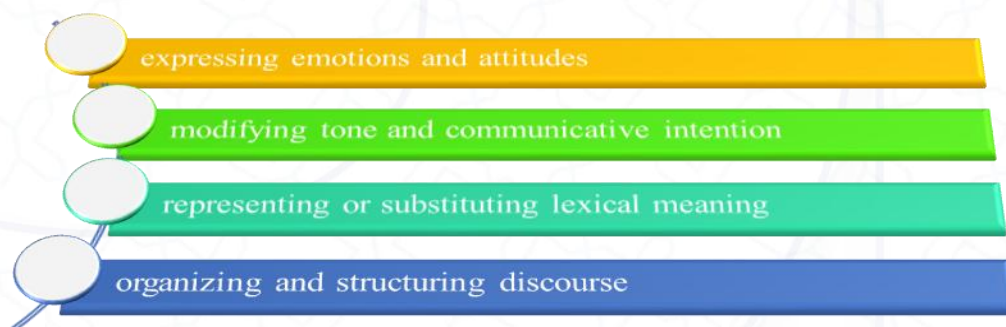
The pragmatic dimension of emoji has been extensively explored by Fransisco Yus, who argues that emoji function as contextualization cues in digital communication. According to Yus, emoji help users interpret the intended meaning of messages by providing additional pragmatic information, such as tone, attitude, and emotional stance [5]. Likewise, Susan Herring and Eljah Dresner [6] examine the role of nonverbal elements in computer-mediated communication. They suggest that emoji and emoticons serve as illocutionary force indicators, modifying how utterances are interpreted. Their studies demonstrate that emoji contribute significantly to interactional coherence and clarity.

From a semiotic standpoint, emoji are best understood as hybrid signs. Rodney Jones argues that digital communication increasingly relies on multimodal resources, where meaning emerges from the interaction of text, images, and other semiotic elements [7]. Further research by Lauren Collister and Michael Herring highlights that emoji function as part of a multimodal discourse system, contributing to both semantic and pragmatic meaning. They emphasize that emoji cannot be fully understood in isolation but must be analyzed in relation to surrounding text and context [8]. A key issue in emoji research is their inherent ambiguity. Hannah Miller et al. demonstrate that emoji interpretation varies significantly across users and platforms. Their experimental study shows that many emoji have low inter-user agreement, indicating high levels of polysemy

[9]. Similarly, Rich Ling notes that emoji meanings are highly context-dependent and socially negotiated. This variability can lead to misunderstandings but also allows for creative and flexible communication [10].

**Research methodology.** Scholars have approached emoji from multiple theoretical perspectives, including cognitive, pragmatic, and semiotic frameworks, each offering distinct insights into how meaning is constructed and interpreted. One of the earliest comprehensive studies of emoji is provided by Marcel Danesi, who argues that emoji constitute a new form of visual language rooted in semiotic principles. According to Danesi, emoji function as signs that combine iconic and symbolic properties, allowing users to convey meaning in a compact and intuitive way. He emphasizes that emoji are not replacing language but rather augmenting it as a parallel semiotic system [1].

**Results and discussion.** The comparative analysis of contemporary approaches to emoji semantics demonstrates that emoji function as complex and multifunctional elements within digital communication. The findings reveal both shared features and key differences across cognitive, pragmatic, and semiotic perspectives. The analysis shows that emoji are consistently treated as meaningful communicative units across all approaches. However, their nature is interpreted differently. From one perspective, emoji are understood as conceptual representations linked to human cognition and mental structures. From another, they are viewed as context-dependent elements whose meaning emerges through interaction. A third perspective considers emoji as part of a broader system of signs that combine visual and linguistic properties. These differences indicate that emoji cannot be reduced to a single category but instead occupy a hybrid position between language and visual communication. The findings in functional roles of emoji indicate that emoji perform several core functions in digital communication: expressing emotions and attitudes, modifying tone and communicative intention, representing or substituting lexical meaning, organizing and structuring discourse. Among these, emotional and pragmatic functions appear to be the most dominant. Emoji are frequently used to convey affective meaning and to clarify the intended tone of a message.



Picture 1. Main functions of emoji in digital communication

A key result of the analysis is the high degree of context-dependence in emoji interpretation. The same emoji may convey different meanings depending on the surrounding text, communicative situation, and user intention. This leads to semantic ambiguity, multiple possible interpretations, variability across different contexts. At the same time, this flexibility allows emoji to be used creatively and adaptively in communication. The analysis confirms that emoji function as part of a multimodal system in which meaning is constructed through the interaction of visual and textual elements. Emoji rarely operate independently instead, they complement verbal messages, reinforce or modify meaning, provide additional interpretive cues. This interaction enhances communicative effectiveness and helps compensate for the absence of non-verbal signals in written communication. Overall, the results indicate that *emoji function as dynamic and flexible meaning-making resources, operate across semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels, form part of an emerging multimodal communication system*. The research suggests that a comprehensive understanding of emoji semantics requires an integrated perspective that accounts for their hybrid and context-dependent nature.

The findings of this article highlight that emoji semantics cannot be fully explained within a single theoretical framework. The comparative analysis demonstrates that emoji operate at the intersection of cognitive processes, contextual interaction, and semiotic structures. This confirms their status as hybrid communicative units that extend beyond traditional linguistic categories. One of the key observations is the dominance of affective and pragmatic functions. Emoji are primarily used to express emotions and modify the tone of communication, which indicates their important role in compensating for the absence of non-verbal cues in digital discourse. This supports the view that modern communication increasingly relies on multimodal resources. At the same time, the high degree of context-dependence introduces both advantages and challenges. On the one hand, emoji allow for flexibility, creativity, and personalization in communication. On the other hand, their variability can lead to ambiguity and potential misinterpretation, especially in cross-cultural contexts. The study also shows that emoji contribute to the development of a multimodal communication system in which meaning is constructed through the interaction of visual and textual elements. This challenges traditional linguistic models that focus primarily on verbal language and suggests the need for expanded analytical frameworks. All in all, the results indicate that emoji are becoming an integral part of contemporary communication practices. Their increasing functional diversity points toward the emergence of new forms of meaning-making that combine linguistic and visual elements in systematic ways.

**Conclusion.** This study has examined contemporary approaches to emoji semantics through a comparative analysis of cognitive, pragmatic, and semiotic perspectives. The research demonstrates that emoji function as complex, multifunctional units that play a

significant role in digital communication. It has been established that emoji perform a range of functions, including emotional expression, pragmatic modification, semantic representation, and discourse organization. Their meaning is highly context-dependent and emerges through interaction with textual elements. The study confirms that emoji should be understood as part of a broader multimodal communication system. Their hybrid nature reflects the ongoing evolution of language in the digital age. In conclusion, emoji semantics represents a dynamic and developing field that requires integrated and interdisciplinary approaches. Future research may focus on empirical analysis, cross-cultural variation, and the development of unified theoretical models.

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