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INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATIC DIFFERENCES OF EMOJIS: A LINGUOPRAGMATIC AND COGNITIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of emojis across cultures, focusing on their pragmatic interpretation and their role in meaning construction. The study examines whether emojis function as universal or culturally conditioned signs through linguopragmatic and cognitive approaches. Special attention is given to the polysemy of emojis, their context-dependence, and their significance in intercultural communication. The findings demonstrate that both cultural and cognitive factors play a decisive role in emoji interpretation.

Keywords: emoji, intercultural communication, linguopragmatics, cognitive linguistics, digital discourse, semiotics, polysemy.

Introduction: In recent years, digital communication has become one of the primary forms of human interaction. In computer-mediated communication (CMC), traditional nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and intonation are largely absent. This limitation often creates ambiguity in meaning transmission.

To overcome this challenge, users increasingly rely on visual symbols, particularly emojis. While emojis were initially considered simple emotional markers, they have evolved into significant semiotic units within digital discourse. However, their interpretation is not uniform across cultures. Therefore, examining emojis from an intercultural pragmatic perspective has become an important area of research.

Methods: Due to their visual nature, emojis are often perceived as universal signs. For example, 😢 (crying face) and 😀 (smiling face) are generally interpreted similarly across cultures. However, closer analysis reveals that many emojis are strongly influenced by cultural context:

- 🙏 — interpreted as "apology" or "request" in Japan, "prayer" in Western cultures, and "thank you" in Central Asia
- 👍 — positive in Western contexts, but offensive in some regions
- 👌 — "OK" in many cultures, but inappropriate or offensive in others

These examples show that emojis are not fully universal but rather "quasi-universal," combining global recognizability with cultural specificity.

Results: From a linguopragmatic perspective, emojis perform several important communicative functions:

1. Emotional-expressive function

Emojis such as 😊, 😍, and 😢 directly convey the speaker's emotional state.

2. Illocutionary function

Emojis can modify the force of speech acts:

"Come 🥺" — invitation

"Come 😠" — command or pressure

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3. Modality marking

Emojis like 😏, 🙄, and 😳 signal irony, doubt, or ambiguity.

4. Discourse function

Emojis such as 😂, 👍, and 👏 function as responses, maintaining interaction flow.

5. Social distance regulation

💙 and 😊 indicate closeness, while 😐 and 👍 may signal neutrality or formality.

Polysemy of Emojis: Illustrative Examples

Emojis are often polysemous, meaning they can convey multiple meanings depending on context:

- 😳
  - friendly smile
  - passive-aggressive tone
  - reluctant agreement
- 😂
  - strong amusement
  - mockery
  - dismissal
- 💀
  - literal death
  - “I’m dead from laughter” (internet slang)
- 🤡
  - clown
  - “fool” or self-embarrassment in online discourse

These examples illustrate the semantic instability and flexibility of emojis.

Interaction Between Verbal and Visual Components: in digital discourse, meaning is constructed through the interaction between text and emojis:

- “Good.” → neutral
- “Good 😳” → friendly
- “Good 😏” → ironic
- “Good 👍” → brief, formal

Thus, emojis function as pragmatic markers that shape interpretation.

Cognitive Mechanisms of Emoji Interpretation: the interpretation of emojis involves several cognitive stages:

1. visual perception
2. activation of cultural schemas
3. meaning construction
4. emotional response

Individuals interpret emojis based on their personal experiences and cultural knowledge. As a result, the same emoji can trigger different associations in different users.

Challenges in Intercultural Communication: although emojis can facilitate communication, they may also cause misunderstandings:

- misinterpretation (😏 as flirting vs disrespect)

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- failure to recognize irony
- inappropriate level of formality

For instance, 😳 may be interpreted as polite in one context but cold or distant in another.

Discussion: The analysis demonstrates that emojis are not universally interpreted symbols. Instead, they are:

- culturally conditioned
- context-dependent
- pragmatically multifunctional
- cognitively grounded

Therefore, emojis can be described as a hybrid semiotic system combining linguistic and visual features.

Conclusion: Emojis play a crucial role in modern digital communication, yet their meanings are shaped by cultural and contextual factors. Their interpretation is not fixed but dynamic and flexible.

Future research should focus on:

- the role of emojis in translation
- their application in language teaching
- global versus local variations in meaning

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