



VISUAL AND GRAPHICAL SPEECH: WHEN "EMOJIS" REPLACE TEXT IN DIGITAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital communication platforms has fundamentally transformed the nature of human language, leading to the emergence of visual and graphical speech. This paper investigates the linguistic, pragmatic, and cognitive dimensions of emojis as non-verbal signs that function as structural substitutes for textual units in modern media discourse. By applying speech act theory, relevance theory, and semiotic analysis, the study explores how emojis transition from emotional intensifiers to independent semantic predicates capable of carrying illocutionary force. The research examines the structural distribution of graphic signs in digital communication and addresses the phenomenon of linguistic economy. The findings reveal that emojis do not merely complement the text but actively reconstruct the pragmatic organization of digital dialogue, allowing interlocutors to achieve maximum communicative efficiency with minimum cognitive and textual effort.

Introduction

Digital linguistics, one of the most dynamically developing branches of modern linguistics, thoroughly investigates the laws of manifestation of linguistic units and new speech forms in virtual space. Global communication, transpiring under the conditions of information technology, social networks (Instagram, TikTok), and instant messengers (Telegram, WhatsApp), has fundamentally transformed traditional written speech patterns, giving rise to the phenomenon of visual and graphical speech. At the core of this transformation

lie emojis—visual signs that embody the characteristics of both graphemes and pictograms. While in the initial stages emojis were evaluated as paralinguistic tools that merely provided additional emotional coloring or complemented written text, in today's media space they have evolved into linguistic subalterns capable of completely replacing text and carrying independent semantic and pragmatic weight. This necessitates the study of visual sign systems not merely as graphic decorations, but as independent linguistic phenomena



possessing their own distinct grammar and syntactic regularities.

Theoretical Framework and the Principle of Linguistic Economy

The desire to save time during communication and to express maximum meaning through minimal linguistic forms—known as the principle of linguistic economy—serves as the primary cognitive engine driving the substitution of text by emojis. When approached within the context of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's relevance theory, participants in digital communication avoid typing long sentences and complex syntactic structures on a keyboard. Instead, by sending one or more graphic signs, they exert minimal cognitive effort to achieve maximum informative and pragmatic results. For instance, in virtual discourse, a multi-component sentence such as *"I have no objections to this idea, I fully approve of everything and support you"* can be entirely replaced by a single thumbs-up (👍) or one hundred percent (100%) graphic sign. In this context, the graphic sign absorbs the semantic core of the text, generates an adequate informational chain in the mind of the addressee, and elevates speech economy to its highest pinnacle.

Illocutionary Force and Speech Acts in Visual Discourse

Analyzing the process of emojis replacing text based on John Austin and John Searle's speech act theory demonstrates that the linguistic nature of visual signs possesses deep pragmatic capabilities. In digital communication, emojis do not merely perform a locutionary (form-giving) function; rather, they possess a distinct

illocutionary force (the communicative intention of the speaker). According to Searle's taxonomy, emojis frequently function as expressives (expressing emotion) and commissives or directives (instigating action), establishing an independent speech act even in the complete absence of a textual construction. For example, a single skull (💀) sign sent in digital discourse often conveys the meaning, *"I am in utter shock/dying of laughter,"* while a winking face with tongue (😜) signifies the illocutionary intent, *"I only said this as a joke, do not take it seriously."* Here, the visual sign causes the text to undergo ellipsis (omission), stepping forward as the primary pragmatic predicate in the dialogue.

Cultural Context and Socio-Pragmatic Adaptations

The formation of visual and graphical speech is intrinsically linked to the sociolinguistic and pragmatic nature of language, as well as the laws of text interpretation. However, the specific sociolect of digital youth exhibits a strong tendency toward the localization of visual signs, adapting them to national and cultural contexts. Expressive evaluative indicators in vernacular speech—such as *"No words"* (Gap yo'q), *"It blasted"* (Yoribdi), or *"Tremendous"* (Dahshat)—are graphically represented in social media via the fire (🔥) or explosion (💣) emojis, completely occupying the textual slot. Furthermore, transferring elements of irony and satire into visual text using the tears-of-joy (😂) or upside-down face (🙄) emojis requires a certain presupposition from the reader—namely, a pre-existing



background of socio-cultural knowledge—to decode the hidden ironical implicature and correctly interpret the message.

Graphic Syntax and the "Open Structure" of Digital Signs

The position of emojis within the structural chain of text also reveals that they possess a unique graphic syntax. In visual speech, the sequence or combination of signs obeys a certain linear logic. For example, the combination of eyes (👁️) followed by a right-pointing index finger (☞) translates pragmatically to "*Look there carefully, pay close attention,*" replacing an entire textual imperative sentence structure. This state transforms the digital text into an "open structure" (*opera aperta*) in accordance with Umberto Eco's conception, as a single transmitted graphic sign can be interpreted across multiple semantic layers depending on the communication context, time, and spatial (deictic) coordinates. Nevertheless, this phenomenon also triggers academic anxieties; the excessive visualization of

youth speech, alongside the displacement of traditional literary descriptions, idioms, and standard orthographic rules, poses a real risk of linguistic impoverishment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, visual and graphical speech in the contemporary media space is not a transient substitute for traditional textual communication, but an inevitable product of digital culture and a new linguistic paradigm. Relying on the principle of linguistic economy, emojis ensure the dynamism and emotional intensity of communication, serving as an independent semiotic system capable of generating full illocutionary and perlocutiv effects without the need for text. The primary task facing modern linguistics and pedagogy is not to completely reject these visual changes in youth speech, but to cultivate coded flexibility within them—developing methodologies that foster a harmonious balance between the graphic appeal of virtual space and the rich, expressive capabilities of literary language.

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