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THE MICROLANGUAGE OF THE VISUAL INTERFACE: EMOJIS, REACTIONS, LIKES

Summary. The article examines the microlanguage of the visual interface as an emerging and increasingly autonomous layer of digital communication, including emojis, reactions, likes, and other graphic elements that are gradually forming their own system of signs and usage norms. These units perform paralinguistic functions traditionally associated with intonation, facial expressions, and gestures in offline interaction, and they are capable not only of accompanying but also fully replacing verbal messages, thus creating self-contained communicative acts.

The article is based on contemporary linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic approaches, along with a review of empirical research highlighting the role of visual microelements in creating discourse tone, marking speaker's attitude, and maintaining social connections. Special attention is given to cultural, generational, and platform-based variations in symbol interpretation, as well as to instances of reinterpretation driven by collective use and evolving digital norms. The functions of emojis and reactions are analyzed as acts of economical communication that can serve as phatic signals, tools of solidarity or distancing, instruments of irony or sarcasm, and markers of group identity. The article also addresses the influence of platform-specific "visual grammar" on meaning shifts, semantic change, and the emergence of context-dependent interpretations.

Combining theoretical and pragmatic analysis, this study analyzes examples from various digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter/X, messengers, corporate chats), synthesizes findings on the impact of emojis on both interpersonal and intergroup interaction, and demonstrates how these elements evolve into fully functional units of digital language with their own rules and restrictions. The results can be applied in sociolinguistic studies, intercultural communication analysis, media literacy research, and the development of automated systems for interpreting emotional signals in online environments.

Key words: emoji, visual interface, paralinguistic code, digital discourse, phatic communication, semantic shift, platform grammar, online interaction.

Problem statement. In the modern digital environment, communication increasingly goes beyond the traditional verbal format. Emojis, reactions, likes and other micro-elements of the visual interface are becoming universal (albeit culturally variable) markers of emotions, social connections and communicative intentions. They perform paralinguistic functions that in offline communication have been expressed by intonation, facial expressions and gestures, and can replace verbal responses in some digital contexts. This creates a new layer of digital language, which significantly affects the semantics and pragmatics of online discourse and requires sci-

entific understanding for linguistic, sociolinguistic and cross-cultural research.

Theoretical background. Current research [1; 2; 3; 4] considers emojis mainly as a supplement to text, performing the functions of non-verbal communication in written format. The paralinguistic approach [5] emphasizes their role as graphic equivalents of gestures and intonations. Empirical work [6; 7] demonstrates their impact on feelings of closeness, reaction speed and the quality of interpersonal relationships, while other studies [8; 9] focus on cultural and generational differences in the interpretation of symbols. At the same time, other questions remain insufficiently studied: how micro-elements of the interface shape the tone and semantic accents of online discourse; how interpretation depends on the platform and its visual "grammar".

The **goal** of this research is to analyze the microlanguage of the visual interface (emojis, reactions, likes) as elements of the paralinguistic code that form the tone of online discourse, change its semantics, and serve as tools for social interaction. The article is therefore aimed at determining their functions in interpersonal, group, and public communication, as well as at pinpointing cultural and platform variations in interpretation.

Results and discussion. The genesis of emoji. In the world of digital communication, where the messaging speed is rapidly increasing, visual elements of language – in particular emojis – have transformed from simple emotional replicas into important semantic and pragmatic units. To understand this transformation, it is important to turn to the historical context.

The origins of emoji can be traced back to early emoticons (such as :-) or ¯_(ツ)_/¯), which appeared in digital communications back in the 1980s. Due to the initial "impersonality" of Internet communication, as well as the limited capabilities of the first computer networks, which were unable to transmit complex audio and video information, users were limited in expressing and conveying the emotional context of messages – functions that are performed in oral speech by intonation, facial expressions, and gestures. With the development of the mobile Internet and instant messengers, the Japanese company NTT Docomo created the first set of icons in 1999, which laid the foundations of the modern emoji standard.

It is interesting to note that, despite the multitude of existing emoji and animated images, various emoticons still remain a significant element of electronic communication. The popularity of emoticons has been traced in academic and applied research, from Twitter analyses to corporate chats and sociolinguistic studies [10].

The emergence of new emoticons is driven by the creative needs of the virtual community. They play an important role in conveying emotions, communication style, and cultural context, especially in

texting, business, and medical environments [11]. Although emoticons have gradually been replaced by emojis, they still remain a living phenomenon among some user groups (especially in less digitally developed regions) [12].

As observed by the researchers, we are watching the birth of a new type of language. Emoji assist in a peculiarly modern task: conveying emotional layer in short, online utterances [13]. As Vyvyan Evans notes, "Emoji can help: it fulfils a similar function in digital communication to gesture, body language and intonation in spoken interaction" [1; 33]. This verifies the idea that emojis act as paralinguistic markers that compensate for the absence of non-verbal signals in the textual environment, performing functions such as:

- conveying emotional tone (😡 – anger, 😊 – affection),
- establishing phatic communication (👋 – greeting, 🙌 – confirmation),
- subtext, irony or sarcasm (😏, 😒, 😬).

The fundamental concept of paralanguage, according to George Trager, includes all non-verbal modal elements that accompany speech: intonation, pauses, facial expressions, etc. In the digital environment, these functions are performed by visual paralinguistic code – in particular, emoji, GIF reactions, stickers. In essence, emojis, reactions, and other microelements are "adaptive modules" of language – the same as words or grammar once were. As researchers note, "Language should be viewed as a multitude of communication techniques developed in response to selective pressure and human needs" [5].

According to Gretchen McCulloch [2], emojis do not create a new language, but are a new form of gesture in written communication – they convey what words cannot express: the tone, mood, and social position of the speaker. They not only "express feelings", but also perform a phatic function (according to R. Jakobson), maintaining contact, indicating intention (even without text) and creating a social codification of relationships (for example, the use of 🍷 in a work chat or 🍷 between friends).

The classic "Like" is one of the oldest examples of paralanguage that functions today as a social affirmative modality. In most cases, like does not mean "I like it" in the literal sense, but rather performs a phatic function: it establishes and maintains a connection, confirms presence or recognition – especially in group online discussions, chats, comments.

This phatic gesture is something between a digital nod and a facial expression. That is why like is often used in formal or semi-formal contexts as a neutral interface feedback, without unnecessary semantic layers. It denotes participation, but does not always mean agreement or sympathy – therefore, it functions more as a grammar of engagement than as a token in the traditional sense. As researchers conclude, "In an age where we write more than ever, emoji is the new language of the heart" [13].

Structure of the microlanguage: emojis, reactions, likes and their combinations

The microlanguage of the digital interface consists of small but highly functional units of communication that form the paralinguistic level of online language. Unlike full-fledged textual utterances, these elements have a semi-verbal, graphic-semantic nature, and at the same time perform pragmatic, social and emotional functions.

Modern emoji communication goes beyond the simple transmission of emotions. Visual symbols such as 😊, ❤️, 😬 increasingly serve as semantic markers of participation, emotional valida-

tion and even existential "marks" – that is, non-verbal statements that replace verbal cues, maintain communication or signal social closeness.

In the digital environment, a "smile" or "heart" does not necessarily mean "joy" or "love" in the literal sense – more often they are linguistic markers of agreement, support, approval, working in a phatic mode, solidifying the relationship between the participants in communication. Such emojis increasingly function as signatures of status – similar to "I am here and I hear you," or even as "lexical surrogates" [4] of "hmm" or "uh-huh" in oral communication.

Facebook introduced its own reaction system in 2016, allowing users to express a wider range of emotions using five additional options to the usual "like": ❤️ Love, 😂 Haha, 😮 Wow, 😞 Sad, 😡 Angry. This innovation was supposed to facilitate tonal expression, especially for emotionally complex content – for example, news about death or loss, where the usual "Like" is no longer suitable.

From the point of view of linguistics, these words have different grammatical categories: "Love" is a noun or verb; "Sad" and "Angry" are adjectives; "Wow" and "Haha" are interjectional emotional exclamations. This creates a certain cognitive effect: by choosing a reaction, the user, in essence, completes an informal sentence (like "I love this", "This makes me angry", or expresses delight or amazement ("Wow!")). Although this process is not conscious, it is an important pragmatic gesture – a mini-communication beyond the text, containing tone, attitude, hidden message [14].

Recent studies have shown that the range of emotional reactions in social networks depends largely on the topic of the content. A systematic review published in *Frontiers in Sociology* (2024) analyzed the results of empirical works devoted to the relationship between the type of publications and user reactions. The meta-analysis showed that posts of an entertaining or entertaining-comedic nature mainly receive positive reactions (Love, Haha), and political or crisis topics – a wider emotional range, including negative reactions (Sad, Angry), depending on the content [8].

Therefore, Facebook reactions are not just a click. They are small speech acts that transmit emotional, interpretive and social signals. Depending on the context, they can be direct (Love, Sad) or ambiguous (Haha – from sincere laughter to irony). Such linguistic heterogeneity creates an interesting tension between the simplicity of the interface and the semantic depth of communication.

Pragmatics: functioning in discourse. The microvisual units of the digital interface do not simply add emotional coloring to the text. They perform a pragmatic function: they modify the meaning of the message, determine the interpretive context, signal the speaker's intentions, and often – reconfigure the very performativity of the message. It is in the pragmatic dimension that they become active elements of digital language.

One of the main pragmatic mechanisms of emoji is strengthening or adjusting the tone of the message. For example, the phrase "Nice." can be neutral by itself, but with the addition of ❤️ it acquires a shade of sincere sympathy, while with 😏 it signals irony or passive contempt. "I saw your post" usually just means "I saw your post", but "I saw your post 📺" acquires the meaning "I saw it and I am closely watching you / This is something interesting or suspicious". In these cases, the emoji acts as a contextual operator, creating a parallel interpretive layer, often contradictory to the literal one.

As research and social observations show, among Generation Z, the emoji 🙌 is losing its traditional meaning of approval and is

increasingly perceived as a cold end to a conversation or a passive-aggressive gesture. For example, one Gen Z user noted that a “thumbs-up” conveys “I’m here, but I won’t add anything more” [9].

At the same time, statistical analyses record a significant perception of “thumbs-up” as sarcastic or passive-aggressive among younger generations, in contrast to older ones, who interpret it as simple support [9]. Central to this shift is the frequent use of emoji, which leads to semantic “saturation” or “fatigue” of the insult – its meaning loses sincerity and becomes a marker of distance or termination of contact [15].

In political or emotionally charged online discussions, the choice of visual reaction serves the function of social/ideological positioning. For example, on Facebook or Twitter (X), under publications about controversial topics, users often choose reactions rather than words as a way to express support or opposition:

- ❤️ (Love) → support, solidarity
- 😡 (Angry) → anger, disapproval
- 😞 (Sad) → sympathy, grief
- 😂 (Haha) → often used as a form of ridicule or sarcasm,

particularly in political discussions

Such reactions function as economical discursive acts – micro-messages that allow us to quickly and publicly “mark our position” without engaging in verbal polemics. As researchers affirm, “We also use emoji to convey a sort of ambient presence, when words aren’t appropriate” [13]. In this sense, emoji and reactions become a language of soft protest, solidarity, or resistance, which is especially important in highly conflictual information environments.

Moreover, recent research demonstrates that emojis are not only paralinguistic markers in text, but also prosodic indicators in spoken language [16]. Emojis, despite their visual nature, have a prosodic “shadow” in speech and influence how people speak, even when they speak messages that would contain emojis in written form. Thus, emojis indirectly structure verbal communication even when they are visually absent, opening up new perspectives for research on digital pragmatics and the evolution of language in multimodal space.

Cultural implications and platform modes of visual language. Current empirical research confirms that emojis serve as affective signals that enhance feelings of closeness and reactive presence in digital communication. For example, experimental studies show that including emojis in text responses increases the perception of the interlocutor’s “responsibility/responsiveness” – and as a result, liking, feelings of closeness and relationship satisfaction increase. The latest major example is PLOS ONE [6]: emojis are shown to increase the perception of promptness of response and thereby enhance closeness and quality of relationships.

Separate studies and review articles confirm the practical effects of emojis in group and professional interactions. Zhang et al. [7] show that in team contexts, positive emojis can reduce the distance between the manager and subordinates, reduce the feeling of objectification and increase creativity/mutual trust; however, the impact often depends on the roles, platform, and expectations of professional etiquette. In corporate messengers (Slack, Teams, Discord, etc.), emojis act as “social glue” – they sometimes lead to faster emotional synchronization of the group, but at the same time can create misunderstandings or seem unprofessional in other contexts.

There is an opinion that emojis simplify language – they shorten the text, impoverish syntax, reduce expressiveness. However, the opposing position [1; 2; 3] emphasizes that emojis are a paralin-

guistic extension, not a replacement. They add to the message tone, connotation, and social frame that were previously lost in writing. This creates a new form of paratextual modality, where the meaning is not declared directly, but is implied through the image, for example: “Okay.” ≠ “Okay 😊” ≠ “Okay 😏”. These utterances have the same syntax, but completely different semantic coloring.

Each platform forms its own “visual grammar” through emoji design, UX structure and display policy. Even with the universal Unicode standard, emojis look different on iOS, Android, Windows – because of this, they can change the emotional impression and cause misunderstandings [17].

Users of certain platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Discord) also prefer different reactions, which indicates the formation of separate “modal dialects” within digital communication.

Conclusions and further research prospects. The analysis shows that emojis, likes and reactions in digital communication have transformed from decorative elements into an independent microlanguage capable of modifying or even replacing verbal expression. They function as linguistic modifiers that influence the tone, intentions and social positioning of communication participants.

These visual units perform the role of paralinguistic grammar, compensating for the absence of non-verbal signals in writing and forming their own system of communicative norms. At the same time, they embody the principle of lexical economy, conveying a significant amount of emotional and social information with minimal means.

Our research also confirms that the microlanguage of the visual interface is not universal – its interpretation depends on the cultural, age and platform context. This creates conditions for the emergence of “platform dialects” and semantic shifts, which poses a challenge for cross-platform communication.

Prospects for further research include: 1) studying cross-platform variations of meanings; 2) analyzing the pragmatic evolution of individual symbols; 3) modeling algorithms for automatic recognition of emotional and social connotations of emoji. Thus, the microlanguage of the visual interface becomes not only a topic of linguistic analysis, but also an object for interdisciplinary research, where technology, culture, and emotional intelligence intersect.

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Чирвоний О. Мікромова візуального інтерфейсу

Анотація. У статті розглядається мікромова візуального інтерфейсу як новий пласт цифрової комунікації, що включає емодзі, реакції, «лайки» та інші графічні елементи, які поступово формують власну систему знаків і норм

використання. Ці одиниці виконують паралінгвістичні функції, традиційно притаманні інтонації, міміці та жестам в офлайн-спілкуванні, і здатні не лише супроводжувати, але й повністю замінювати вербальне повідомлення, створюючи самодостатні комунікативні акти.

Дослідження базується на аналізі сучасних лінгвістичних, соціолінгвістичних та прагматичних підходів, а також на огляді емпіричних робіт, що висвітлюють роль візуальних мікроелементів у створенні тональності дискурсу, маркуванні позиції мовця, підтриманні соціальних зв'язків.

Особливу увагу приділено культурним, віковим та платформним варіаціям інтерпретації символів, а також випадкам їхнього переосмислення через колективну практику. Проаналізовано функції емодзі та реакцій як актив економної комунікації, здатних виконувати роль фатичних сигналів, інструментів солідарності або дистанціювання, засобів іронії чи сарказму, а також як маркерів групової ідентичності. Окремо розглянуто вплив платформної «візуальної граматики» на зміну значень, семантичні зсуви та появу контекстно-залежних інтерпретацій.

Робота поєднує теоретичний і прагматичний аналіз, аналізує приклади з різних цифрових платформ (Facebook, Twitter/X, месенджери, корпоративні чати), узагальнює результати досліджень щодо впливу емодзі на міжособистісну та міжгрупову взаємодію та демонструє, як ці елементи стають повноцінними одиницями цифрової мови з власними правилами й обмеженнями. Її результати можуть бути використані у соціолінгвістичних дослідженнях, аналізі міжкультурної комунікації, медіаграмотності та розробці автоматичних систем інтерпретації емоційних сигналів.

Ключові слова: емодзі, візуальний інтерфейс, паралінгвістичний код, цифровий дискурс, фатична комунікація, семантичний зсув, платформна граматика, онлайн-взаємодія.

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