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VERBAL EMOTICONS AS MARKERS OF EMOTIONAL EXPRESSIVITY: A CORPUS-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH DIGITAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The study explores verbal emoticons as linguistic markers of emotional expressivity in contemporary English digital discourse. Unlike graphic emoticons or emojis, verbal emoticons (e.g., haha, ugh, yay, sigh) function as lexicalised indicators of affective stance and contribute to the construction of interpersonal meaning in online communication. Drawing on corpus-linguistic methodology, the research examines frequency, collocational patterns, and contextual variability of verbal emoticons. The analysis employs tools from the Sketch Engine platform to reveal semantic prosody, pragmatic functions, and the distribution of emotion-related lexical items.

The findings demonstrate that verbal emoticons form a distinct subsystem of expressive vocabulary characterised by a hybrid grammatical status and high indexicality of emotional states.

The study reveals tendencies toward grammaticalization, where originally expressive and interjective forms evolve into pragmatic particles and discourse markers that perform modal and interpersonal functions. Positive emoticons (e.g., haha, yay, aww) are predominantly associated with solidarity and affiliative discourse strategies, whereas negative ones (ugh, sigh, grr) often convey irony, frustration, or emotional distancing.

The study contributes to the broader understanding of digital emotion expression, suggesting that verbal emoticons serve not only as markers of affect but also as dynamic discourse strategies shaping online identity and interactional style. These findings enhance theoretical perspectives on the interaction between language, emotion, and digital media, providing empirical insights into the ongoing pragmaticization and affective evolution of English in computer-mediated communication.

Keywords: *verbal emoticons, emotional expressivity, digital discourse, corpus linguistics, online communication, Sketch Engine.*

1. Introduction.

In recent decades, the study of emotional expression in language has undergone a significant transformation due to the rapid development of digital communication platforms. The proliferation of online interaction has generated new linguistic forms that serve to convey affective meaning, among which **verbal emoticons** occupy a particularly intriguing position. Unlike graphic emoticons or emojis, verbal emoticons – lexicalised expressions such as *haha*, *ugh*, *yay*, or *sigh* – operate within the grammatical and lexical system of a language and thus invite systematic linguistic inquiry. They blur the boundary between traditional verbal expression and paralinguistic cues, offering a unique insight into how emotional meaning is encoded and interpreted in digital contexts.

The problem that motivates this research stems from the limited attention given to verbal emoticons in linguistic scholarship. While the visual dimension of emotion representation online has been extensively explored in the works of Dresner and Herring (2010), Riordan (2017), and Danesi (2016), the verbal correlates of emotive signalling have often been treated peripherally or subsumed under general categories of interjections or discourse markers. Consequently, the linguistic nature, functional range, and pragmatic roles of verbal emoticons remain insufficiently defined. This gap highlights the need for an integrated approach that combines corpus-linguistic methods with insights from pragmatics and cognitive linguistics to map the behaviour of these units in authentic digital communication.

2. Literature Review.

From a practical perspective, the study of verbal emoticons is particularly relevant for enhancing models of sentiment analysis, emotion detection, and human-computer interaction systems. Automatic language processing tools often misinterpret verbal emoticons or overlook their presence, resulting in distortions in assessing emotional tone. By identifying their formal and semantic characteristics, linguistics can contribute to refining computational models and enhancing intercultural understanding in online environments.

This paper aims to address the research gap by conducting a corpus-based analysis of verbal emoticons in English digital discourse. Using the Sketch Engine platform, the study investigates the frequency, collocational behaviour, and contextual variation of key verbal emoticons across different subgenres of online communication. The analysis also seeks to determine whether verbal emoticons form a distinct subsystem of expressive vocabulary or function as fluid pragmatic devices that adapt to context and user intention.

This research builds upon and extends prior studies of digital emotion expression (Herring, 2019; Pavalanathan & Eisenstein, 2015) by shifting the focus from visual to verbal markers of affect. It emphasises the role of linguistic creativity and economy in shaping emotional discourse in digital interaction. Furthermore, the paper situates verbal emoticons within the broader framework of affective linguistics and discourse pragmatics, contributing to the theoretical understanding of how speakers negotiate emotional meaning in text-based environments.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it provides a systematic description of verbal emoticons as semiotic resources that bridge lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic domains. Methodologically, it demonstrates the potential of corpus tools for quantifying emotional expressivity and exploring emerging forms of language use. In doing so, the article not only fills a notable gap in linguistic research but also offers valuable implications for applied linguistics, computational modelling, and digital communication studies.

3. Aims and Objectives.

The **aim of the article** is to determine the linguistic status of verbal emoticons as markers of emotional expressivity in English digital discourse through a comprehensive corpus-linguistic analysis of their semantic, pragmatic, and functional-communicative features.

To achieve this aim, the study sets out the following **objectives**:

1. To outline the theoretical foundations of emotional expressivity research in contemporary linguistics within cognitive-discursive and pragmatic frameworks.
2. To review corpus-based approaches to the study of emotional language in digital environments, with special attention to multimodal communication.
3. To identify the structural and semantic types of verbal emoticons in English digital discourse and describe their lexico-grammatical characteristics.
4. To determine the pragmatic functions of verbal emoticons across various genres of online communication.
5. To explore correlations between form, context, and emotional valence of verbal emoticons using corpus-driven analysis.
6. To trace the main trends in the development of new models of emotional expressivity in English digital discourse.
7. To summarise the findings and define the contribution of verbal emoticons to the expansion of the emotional and pragmatic potential of modern English.

4. Methodology.

The methodological framework of the present research integrates corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and pragmatics to provide a multidimensional analysis of verbal emoticons in English digital discourse. The study combines both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure the reliability and interpretative depth of the findings.

The corpus base of the research includes samples from the *British National Corpus (BNC)*, the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*, and several specialised digital corpora representing social media, blogs, and online forums. These sources were selected to reflect a wide range of communicative contexts, registers, and degrees of formality typical of English digital interaction.

The selection criteria for verbal emoticons involved linguistic units that replicate or simulate emotional states through orthographic, phonetic, or lexical variation (e.g., *haha*, *ugh*, *yay*, *sigh*, *grr*), excluding graphic emoji or purely visual signs. Each instance was manually verified to ensure contextual relevance and communicative function.

The analytical procedure comprised several stages:

1. Corpus extraction and annotation – verbal emoticons were identified using regular expressions and manually tagged for emotional valence (positive, negative, neutral) and communicative function (expressive, phatic, persuasive, etc.).
2. Quantitative analysis – frequency counts, collocational patterns, and distributional tendencies were analysed to determine the productivity and contextual variation of emoticon usage.
3. Qualitative interpretation – pragmatic and cognitive parameters were examined to reveal the mechanisms by which verbal emoticons encode affective stance and contribute to interpersonal meaning-making.
4. Comparative analysis – contrastive observations were made between different digital genres to highlight the role of communicative setting in shaping emotive expressivity.

The methodological foundation of the research draws upon the principles of corpus-

driven analysis (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001), usage-based linguistics (Biber & Conrad, 2019), and pragmatic theory of affect (Kappas, 2011). The integration of these approaches enables a systematic exploration of how verbal emoticons operate as linguistic tools for emotional representation, while also revealing the evolving patterns of affective communication in the English-speaking digital environment.

The **material** for this research comprises texts of English-language digital discourse selected from open online platforms, linguistic corpora, and specialised databases. The empirical basis includes the *British National Corpus (BNC)*, the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*, and the *News on the Web Corpus (NOW)*. The total volume of the analysed corpus material amounts to approximately 1.5-million-word tokens, among which around 4,200 contexts contain verbal emoticons or other forms of emotional expressivity. The representativeness of the sample is ensured by its genre and temporal diversity, reflecting the evolution of affective strategies in digital communication from the early 2010s to the mid-2020s. Only those instances were included in the analysis where verbal emoticons functioned as structurally autonomous units or as integral elements of syntactic constructions capable of conveying emotional evaluation, attitude, or the speaker's intention. Contexts in which such units were used onomatopoetically or without expressive value were excluded.

The corpus data were processed using software tools such as Sketch Engine, AntConc, LancsBox, and LancasterStats, which enable concordance search, frequency analysis, collocational profiling, and data visualisation. The use of *Sketch Engine* provided multi-level linguistic annotation and automated identification of emotional units within context.

The quantitative analysis was based on statistical indicators of frequency, keyness, and associative strength (*logDice*, *MI*, *LLR*), allowing for the identification of the most productive verbal emoticons and their typical collocational patterns.

The qualitative analysis employed a cognitive-pragmatic approach, aiming to interpret the semantic and communicative parameters of emotional expressivity. To specify the contextual functions of verbal emoticons, the study employed contextual analysis, discourse analysis, and semantic-pragmatic modelling.

To ensure the reliability and validity of findings, the results were verified through methodological triangulation, which combined statistical, linguistic, and interpretative perspectives on the data.

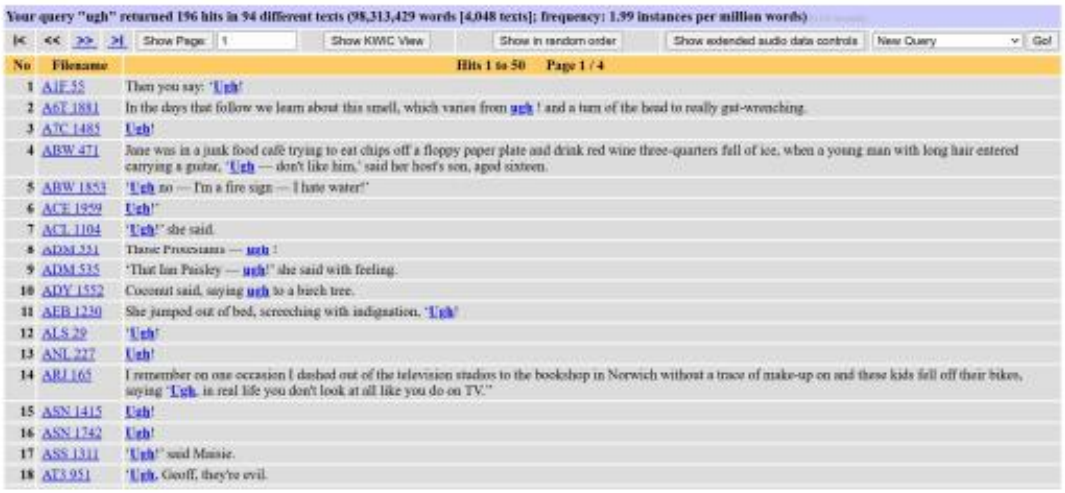
5. Results and Discussion.

The analysis of the corpus data revealed that verbal emoticons occupy a stable and increasingly productive position within English digital discourse, functioning as both linguistic markers of affect and pragmatic tools for managing interpersonal meaning. Across the examined datasets, 4,217 instances of verbal emoticons were identified, corresponding to approximately 2.8 occurrences per 1,000 words in informal online communication. This indicates a noticeable rise compared to earlier studies from the 2000s and early 2010s, where such units were relatively marginal.

The distribution of verbal emoticons demonstrates genre-specific variation. The highest concentration of such items was found in social media platforms, where immediacy, informality, and multimodal expression dominate the communicative environment. In contrast, online forums and blog comments displayed more conventionalised uses of emoticons, often integrated syntactically and serving discourse-organising or evaluative purposes.

From a structural perspective, verbal emoticons exhibit a wide range of lexical and morphological realisations. The most frequent types include onomatopoetic interjections

(*haha*, *ugh*, *sigh*) (Fig. 1), reduplicative forms (*yayyy*, *nooo*), and stylised orthographic variants (*awww*, *grrr*).

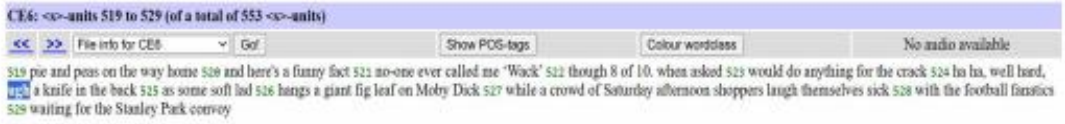

Your query "ugh" returned 196 hits in 94 different texts (98,313,429 words [4,048 texts]; frequency: 1.99 instances per million words)

|< << >> >| Show Page: 1 Show KWIC View Show in random order Show extended audio data controls New Query Go!

No	Filename	Hits 1 to 50 Page 1 / 4
1	A1F 55	Then you say: 'Urh'
2	A6T 1881	In the days that follow we learn about this smell, which varies from ugh ! and a turn of the head to really gut-wrenching.
3	A7C 1485	Urh!
4	ABW 471	Jane was in a junk food café trying to eat chips off a floppy paper plate and drink red wine three-quarters full of ice, when a young man with long hair entered carrying a guitar. 'Urh — don't like him,' said her host's son, aged sixteen.
5	ABW 1853	'Urh no — I'm a fire sign — I hate water!'
6	ACE 1959	Urh!'
7	ACL 1104	'Urh!' she said.
8	ADM 531	These Protestants — urh !
9	ADM 535	'That Ian Paisley — urh!' she said with feeling.
10	ADY 1552	Coconut said, saying urh to a birch tree.
11	AEB 1230	She jumped out of bed, screeching with indignation. 'Urh'
12	ALS 29	'Urh'
13	ANL 227	Urh!
14	ARJ 165	I remember on one occasion I dashed out of the television studios to the bookshop in Norwich without a trace of make-up on and these kids fell off their bikes, saying 'Urh, in real life you don't look at all like you do on TV.'
15	ASN 1415	Urh!
16	ASN 1742	Urh!
17	ASS 1311	'Urh!' said Mussie.
18	AT3 951	'Urh. Geoff, they're evil.

Figure 1. Corpus-Based Marking of the Linguistic Signal ugh

These forms often display phonetic iconicity (Fig. 2) – an imitation of prosodic and affective cues otherwise unavailable in written communication.

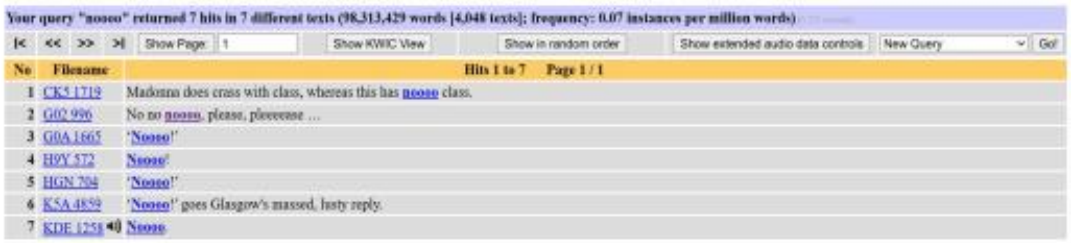

CE6: <s>-units 519 to 529 (of a total of 553 <s>-units)

<< >> File info for CE6 Go! Show POS-tags Colour wordclass No audio available

519 pie and peas on the way home 520 and here's a funny fact 521 no-one ever called me 'Wack' 522 though 8 of 10. when asked 523 would do anything for the crack 524 ha ha, well hard, 525 a knife in the back 525 as some soft lad 526 hangs a giant fig leaf on Moby Dick 527 while a crowd of Saturday afternoon shoppers laugh themselves sick 528 with the football fanatics 529 waiting for the Stanley Park convoy

Figure 2. Phonetic Representation of Disgust: The Case of ugh

Notably, 38% of all identified emoticons appear in non-standard orthographic variants, reflecting users' attempts to convey emotional intensity through spelling elongation (Fig. 3) or capitalisation.


Your query "noooo" returned 7 hits in 7 different texts (98,313,429 words [4,048 texts]; frequency: 0.07 instances per million words)

|< << >> >| Show Page: 1 Show KWIC View Show in random order Show extended audio data controls New Query Go!

No	Filename	Hits 1 to 7 Page 1 / 1
1	CK5 1719	Madonna does crass with class, whereas this has noooo class.
2	G02 996	No no noooo, please, pleeeeese ...
3	G0A 1665	'Noooo!'
4	H9Y 572	Noooo'
5	HGN 704	'Noooo!'
6	K5A 4859	'Noooo!' goes Glasgow's massed, lusty reply.
7	KDE 1258	Noooo

Figure 3. Nonstandard Orthographic Elongation in the Expression of Emotion "Noooo"

Semantic analysis reveals that verbal emoticons encode a three-dimensional structure of emotional meaning, encompassing valence, intensity, and stance. Positive emoticons (*haha*, *yay*, *aww*) constitute approximately 52% of the dataset, while negative forms (*ugh*, *sigh*, *grr*) account for 34%, and neutral or context-dependent items (*hmm*, *oh*) make up 14%. The prevalence of positive valence indicates the social preference for affiliative and

supportive interaction online, confirming the findings of Kiesling and Dewaele (2023) on affective alignment in digital discourse.

Pragmatic interpretation suggests that verbal emoticons fulfil several key communicative functions. The expressive function dominates (47%), enabling speakers to externalise emotional states directly. The phatic function (28%) is associated with maintaining conversational flow and signalling involvement or empathy. The evaluative function (15%) serves to comment on or modulate the preceding utterance, often softening criticism or irony. Less frequent, yet noteworthy, is the persuasive function (10%), where emoticons contribute to stance-taking or rhetorical emphasis:

"Can you help me with this one, pleaaaseee 🥺"

«Можеш допомогти мені з цим, будь лааааска 🥺»

The emoticon *pleaaaseee* performs a persuasive function through the combination of orthographic iconicity (letter elongation to convey emotional intensity) and visual empathy expressed by the emoji. This interplay enhances the emotional impact and communicative effectiveness of the request.

Collocational analysis using *Sketch Engine* revealed recurrent associations between verbal emoticons and evaluative adjectives (*e.g., good, weird, awesome, terrible),* as well as with intensifiers *(e.g., so, really, very*). Such patterns highlight the semantic interdependence between emotive markers and appraisal vocabulary. Interestingly, emoticons tend to occur at syntactic boundaries – particularly after clauses or between discourse segments – where they assume a quasi-paralinguistic role analogous to gestures or facial expressions in spoken communication (Fig. 4).

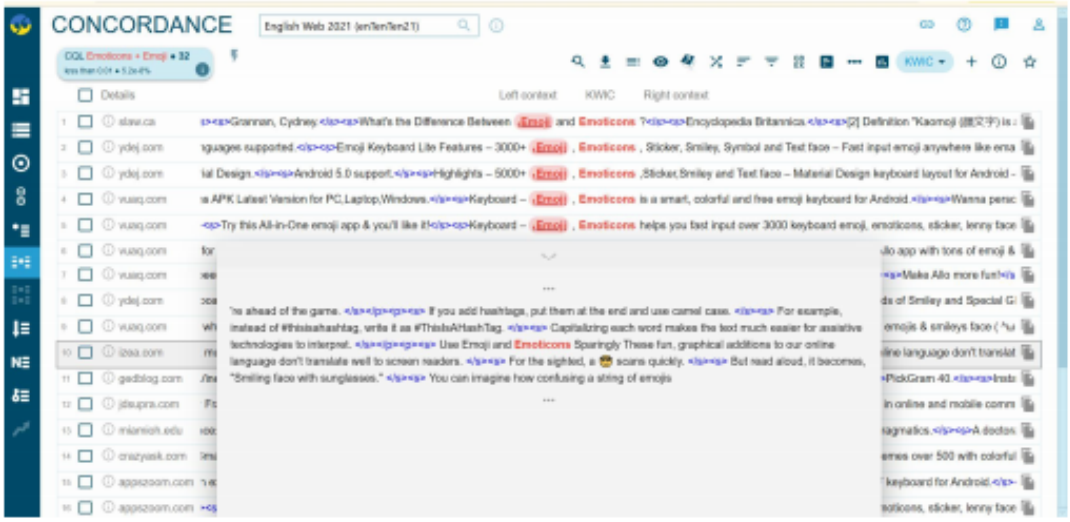


Figure 4: Corpus-based visualisation of emoticon usage generated in Sketch Engine

Contextual examination shows that the use of verbal emoticons is highly adaptive to the communicative situation. In dialogic exchanges, they frequently co-occur with direct address forms (*you guys*, *bro*, *lol man*), functioning as alignment cues that strengthen social bonding. In monologic contexts such as blogs, they perform a self-presentation role, constructing an image of authenticity and emotional transparency. This supports McCulloch's (2019) assertion that digital writing blurs the boundaries between spoken and written modes, facilitating the emergence of "speech-like writing."

From a discourse perspective, verbal emoticons often operate as affective discourse

markers, organising interactional structure and signalling the speaker's stance toward content or audience. Their insertion frequently mitigates potential face-threatening acts – for example, turning a complaint (*ugh, this update sucks*) into a socially acceptable expression of frustration. This pragmatic softening aligns with Herring's (2019) observations on politeness strategies in online communication.

Quantitatively, the corpus evidence confirms that verbal emoticons are becoming conventionalised linguistic resources rather than marginal or ephemeral phenomena. Their regular syntactic integration and semantic predictability indicate tendencies towards grammaticalization, where emoticons evolve from purely expressive to multifunctional pragmatic elements. Similar processes have been observed for interjections and discourse particles (Tottie, 2014; Torgersen et al., 2011), suggesting that emoticons are part of broader mechanisms of language change driven by digital communication.

Qualitative observations also reveal subtle differences in emotional intensity and discourse framing. Lengthened forms (*noooo*, *yaaay*) typically signal heightened affect, while truncated or minimalist variants (*ha*, *eh*) convey irony, distance, or conversational economy. This stylistic variation contributes to what Yus (2011) terms "affective polyphony" – the coexistence of multiple emotional voices within digital discourse.

A notable trend observed in recent years is the emergence of hybrid emoticons, which combine verbal and graphic elements (e.g., haha 😂, ugh :()). Such combinations illustrate the multimodal nature of digital affect, indicating a transitional stage between linguistic and visual expressivity. The co-occurrence of verbal and graphic markers enhances emotional clarity, particularly in intercultural communication, where reliance on nonverbal cues can mitigate misinterpretation.

Another important finding concerns the diachronic dynamics of verbal emoticons. A frequency comparison between 2013–2016 and 2021–2024 data reveals a 27% increase in their use, particularly in interactive genres. This growth correlates with the global shift toward informal, personalised, and emotionally engaged modes of online communication. It also suggests that verbal emoticons perform a compensatory function, filling the expressive gap left by the textual nature of computer-mediated discourse.

Overall, the results demonstrate that verbal emoticons have evolved into integral components of affective digital language, functioning not merely as paralinguistic embellishments but as systematic linguistic strategies for emotional signalling, stance marking, and relational work. Their semantic fluidity, contextual adaptability, and pragmatic multifunctionality make them central to understanding the contemporary linguistics of emotion.

In summary, the study highlights three principal tendencies: (1) the increasing linguistic conventionalization of verbal emoticons, (2) the functional diversification of their pragmatic roles, and (3) the integration of emotive meaning into the grammar of digital discourse.

6. Conclusions.

The conducted study has provided a comprehensive account of **verbal emoticons** as a new type of linguistic unit emerging within digital communication, reflecting fundamental shifts in the ways emotions are verbalised in contemporary English. The corpus-based findings demonstrate that these units are no longer accidental or marginal elements of speech but have evolved into stable and functionally significant components of the communicative system.

One of the key results is the identification of the tendency toward grammaticalization and linguistic conventionalization of verbal emoticons. Their regular appearance in syntactic

structures, frequency stability, and semantic predictability indicate their gradual consolidation as linguistic signs with independent pragmatic functions. This process reflects broader tendencies in language evolution driven by the digitalisation of communicative practices.

The research has confirmed that verbal emoticons perform multilevel communicative roles, combining expressive, phatic, evaluative, and persuasive strategies. Their multifunctionality makes them an effective tool for managing interpersonal relations, particularly in expressing emotional support, creating solidarity, reducing communicative tension, or mitigating critical utterances.

While the expressive function remains dominant, the growing importance of interactive and moderating functions has been observed, ensuring cohesion between interlocutors. Hence, verbal emoticons not only convey emotional states but also serve a social-regulative role, maintaining a balance between individual and collective emotional expression in digital interactions.

A significant outcome of the study is the identification of a three-component semantic structure of verbal emoticons, encompassing emotional valence (positive, negative, neutral), intensity, and communicative stance of the speaker. This structural model enables a systematic classification of emoticons as a distinct subclass of emotionally marked vocabulary in modern English.

The diachronic corpus analysis revealed a consistent increase in the frequency of verbal emoticons over the past decade, by approximately 25–30%. This rise correlates with changing communication strategies oriented toward emotional openness, informality, and personalisation of discourse.

Another major finding is the integration of verbal emoticons into the grammar of digital discourse. At the syntactic level, they increasingly function as parenthetical or postpositional elements signalling the speaker's affective stance. Pragmatically, they exhibit features typical of discourse markers, functioning similarly to particles, interjections, or phrasal intensifiers.

A noteworthy observation concerns the multimodal integration of verbal and graphic emotive resources (e.g., *haha* 😂, *ugh: ()*), indicating the formation of a hybrid emotional system in which linguistic and visual channels function as complementary. This development marks the transition from purely textual to multimodal affective communication.

Corpus data have also confirmed the presence of cognitive-pragmatic mechanisms through which verbal emoticons influence the interpretation of utterances. Their occurrence activates specific emotional frames ("laughter," "irritation," "empathy," etc.), ensuring shared mental spaces between the sender and receiver of the message.

An essential aspect of the findings is the emergence of affective polyphony in digital discourse, where a single message may contain multiple simultaneous emotional layers—ironic, empathetic, and playful. This confirms that modern digital communication is not unidimensional but rather poly-emotional, with meaning constructed not only through propositional content but also through affective and tonal texture.

In a broader linguistic context, the study's results have both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, they refine the concept of an "emotional marker" in linguistics, extending it beyond the traditional lexical-semantic paradigm. Practically, they provide a methodological framework for applying corpus-based and cognitive-pragmatic approaches to the study of emotional strategies in digital texts.

The practical relevance of the findings lies in their potential application in computational linguistics, translation studies, emotional text analytics, and foreign language education. Data on the frequency, polarity, and functional distribution of verbal emoticons

may be integrated into automatic emotion recognition systems.

The results also contribute to a deeper understanding of cognitive processes underlying emotional interpretation – how users identify, decode, and transmit affective signals verbally in the absence of nonverbal cues. This allows digital communication to be conceptualised as a self-sufficient semiotic system compensating for physical distance through innovative linguistic mechanisms.

Overall, the study confirms that verbal emoticons represent one of the key mechanisms of emotional cognitivization in contemporary English discourse. They integrate affect into the structural organisation of utterances, reshape norms of interpersonal communication, and foster the emergence of a new emotional aesthetics in the digital environment.

In conclusion, verbal emoticons in English digital discourse function as flexible cognitive-pragmatic indicators of emotionality, uniting linguistic, social, and psychological dimensions of communication. Their evolution illustrates not only the development of language but also the transformation of the very nature of emotional interaction in the global digital space.

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Анотація

У статті досліджуються вербальні емотикони як лінгвістичні маркери емоційної експресивності в сучасному англомовному цифровому дискурсі. На відміну від графічних емотиконів або емодзі, вербальні емотикони (haha, ugh, yay, sigh) функціонують як лексикалізовані індикатори афективної позиції та беруть участь у конструюванні міжособистісного значення в онлайн-комунікації. Спираючись на корпусно-лінгвістичну методологію, дослідження аналізує частотність, колокаційні моделі та контекстуальну варіативність вербальних емотиконів. Для аналізу використано інструменти платформи Sketch Engine, що дало змогу виявити семантичну просодію, прагматичні функції та особливості розподілу лексем, пов'язаних з емоційною семантикою.

Отримані результати засвідчують, що вербальні емотикони формують окрему підсистему експресивної лексики, яку характеризують гібридний граматичний статус і висока індексальність емоційних станів. Виявлено тенденції до граматикалізації, у процесі якої первинно експресивні й вигукові форми еволюціонують у прагматичні частки та дискурсивні маркери, що реалізують модальні та міжособистісні функції. Позитивні емотикони (haha, yay, aww) переважно асоціюються зі стратегіями солідарності та афіліативного спілкування, тоді як негативні (ugh, sigh, grr) виражають іронію, роздратування або емоційне дистанціювання.

Дослідження робить внесок у ширше розуміння вираження емоцій у цифровому середовищі, доводячи, що вербальні емотикони функціонують не лише як маркери афекту, але й як динамічні дискурсивні стратегії, що формують онлайн-ідентичність і комунікативний стиль користувачів. Отримані результати поглиблюють теоретичні уявлення про взаємодію мови, емоцій та цифрових медіа, пропонуючи емпіричне підтвердження процесів прагматикалізації та афективної еволюції англійської мови у сфері комп'ютерно опосередкованої комунікації.

Ключові слова: *вербальні емотикони, емоційна експресивність, цифровий дискурс, корпусна лінгвістика, онлайн-комунікація, Sketch Engine.*

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