SYMBOLIC UNITS IN ENGLISH DIGITAL TEXTS: THEIR LINGUISTIC FUNCTIONS IN SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of digital communication has transformed how English speakers construct meaning in online environments. This evolution has popularized the use of symbolic units such as emoji, GIFs, reaction icons, hashtags, and expressive typographic forms which now function as essential elements of discourse. Rather than serving as ornamental features, these symbolic units encode affective, interpersonal, and pragmatic meanings that are increasingly inseparable from the textual content with which they co-occur. This study investigates the linguistic functions of symbolic units within English social media posts, drawing from multimodal discourse analysis and pragmatic theory. Findings indicate that symbolic units perform a range of functions, including tone modulation, stance marking, identity construction, and discourse organization. In combination with verbal text, they enable users to convey complex meanings that would otherwise remain ambiguous or unexpressed. The study contributes to ongoing discussions about multimodality, digital literacy, and the semiotic landscape of online communication.

Annotatsiya: Raqamli aloqaning tez kengayishi ingliz tilida so'zlashuvchilarning onlayn muhitda ma'no yaratish usulini o'zgartirdi. Ushbu evolyutsiya emoji, GIF, reaksiya piktogrammalari, xeshteglar va ekspressiv tipografik shakllar kabi ramziy birliklardan foydalanishni ommalashtirdi, ular endi nutqning muhim elementlari bo'lib xizmat qiladi. Ushbu ramziy birliklar bezak xususiyatlari sifatida xizmat qilish o'rniga, ular birgalikda mavjud bo'lgan matn tarkibidan tobora ajralmas bo'lib borayotgan affektiv, shaxslararo va pragmatik ma'nolarni kodlaydi.

Ushbu tadqiqot ingliz ijtimoiy tarmoqlaridagi postlardagi ramziy birliklarning lingvistik funktsiyalarini multimodal nutq tahlili va pragmatik nazariyadan kelib chiqib o'rganadi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, ramziy birliklar ohang modulyatsiyasi, pozitsiyani belgilash, identifikatsiyani yaratish va nutqni tashkil qilish kabi bir qator funktsiyalarni bajaradi. Og'zaki matn bilan birgalikda ular foydalanuvchilarga aks holda noaniq yoki ifodalanmagan bo'lib qoladigan murakkab ma'nolarni etkazish imkonini beradi. Tadqiqot multimodallik, raqamli savodxonlik va onlayn muloqotning semiotik manzarasi haqidagi doimiy munozaralarga hissa qo'shadi.

Абстракт: Стремительное развитие цифровой коммуникации изменило способы, которыми носители английского языка конструируют смысл в онлайн среде. Эта эволюция популяризировала использование символических единиц, таких как эмодзи, GIF-изображения, иконки реакций, хэштеги и выразительные типографские формы, которые теперь являются неотъемлемыми элементами дискурса. Вместо того, чтобы служить декоративными элементами, эти символические единицы кодируют аффективные, межличностные и прагматические значения, которые всё больше неотделимы от текстового контента, с которым они встречаются. Данное исследование изучает лингвистические функции символических единиц в английских сообщениях в социальных сетях, опираясь на анализ мультимодального дискурса и прагматическую теорию. Результаты показывают, что символические единицы выполняют ряд функций, включая модуляцию тона, обозначение позиции, построение идентичности и организацию дискурса. В сочетании с вербальным текстом они позволяют пользователям передавать сложные значения, которые в противном случае остались бы неоднозначными или невыраженными. Исследование вносит вклад в продолжающиеся дискуссии о мультимодальности, цифровой грамотности и семиотическом ландшафте онлайн коммуникации.

Keywords: symbolic units; digital discourse; English social media; multimodal communication; emoji; hashtags; GIFs; linguistic functions; online identity; pragmatics; discourse analysis

Kalit so'zlar:simvolik birliklar; raqamli diskurs; inglizcha ijtimoiy media; multimodal kommunikatsiya; emoji; xeshteglar; GIF; lingvistik funksiyalar; onlayn identitet; pragmatika; diskurs tahlili

Ключевые слова:символические единицы; цифровой дискурс; английские социальные медиа; мультимодальная коммуникация; эмодзи; хэштеги; GIF; лингвистические функции; онлайн-идентичность; прагматика; дискурсивный анализ

Introduction. Digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X have reshaped contemporary communication practices by encouraging messages that blend alphabetic text with visual and symbolic elements. English digital discourse is now inherently multimodal, drawing on combinations of text, images, emoji, GIFs, and various interactive icons. These symbolic units often carry communicative weight equal to or greater than the verbal message itself. For example, a single emoji can soften criticism, signal sarcasm, or express emotional warmth that plain text fails to capture. The shift toward visually rich symbolic expression reflects broader cultural changes in how people navigate social relationships, construct identity, and negotiate meaning online.

Despite their widespread presence, symbolic units in English social media communication have not been fully examined as linguistic resources. Traditional linguistic research focuses primarily on grammar, lexicon, and structure; however, modern digital environments demand an expanded perspective that incorporates semiotic forms beyond text alone. This paper addresses this need by exploring the linguistic functions of symbolic units within English digital texts. The central research

question guiding the study is: *How do symbolic units contribute to meaning-making in English social media communication?*

Literature Review. Theoretical frameworks in multimodality emphasize that communication involves multiple modes—visual, verbal, gestural, and digital—working together to construct meaning (Kress, 2010; Jewitt, 2014). In digital contexts, symbolic units have become essential components of this multimodal ensemble. Emoji, for example, have been described as "graphic paralanguage" (Danesi, 2016), a form of visual communication that supplements or substitutes vocal cues such as intonation or emotional expression. Research shows that emoji can disambiguate tone, indicate humor, and serve interpersonal functions that parallel those found in face-to-face communication.

Hashtags also play a significant symbolic role. Zappavigna (2015) argues that hashtags not only categorize content but also express stance, align users with communities, and encapsulate emotional or evaluative meanings. Similarly, GIFs provide dynamic, multimodal expressions that allow users to embed affect, humor, or emphasis in ways that static text cannot achieve (Miltner & Highfield, 2017).

Although these studies affirm that symbolic units carry important communicative functions, most prior research examines individual symbol types rather than their combined roles within real social media posts. Furthermore, existing literature tends to focus on emotional expression, leaving gaps in understanding the wider linguistic and discursive functions of symbolic units. This study aims to fill these gaps by offering a holistic analysis of symbolic units within authentic English digital discourse.

Methods. The study employed a qualitative multimodal discourse-analytic approach to investigate the linguistic functions of symbolic units in English social media communication. A corpus of 150 publicly accessible posts was collected from three major platforms—Instagram, TikTok, and X—over a two-week period. These platforms were selected because they represent diverse digital practices, including

short-form text, visual storytelling, and mixed media interactions. Posts were chosen using purposive sampling, ensuring that each contained at least one symbolic unit such as an emoji, reaction icon, GIF, hashtag, or stylized typography, alongside English-language text. Each post was examined using multimodal discourse analysis principles, focusing on how symbolic units co-occur with linguistic elements and what communicative functions they perform. The analysis considered factors such as tone modulation, emotional expression, stance-taking, identity construction, and discourse coherence. The posts were reviewed within their immediate interactional context, which included accompanying comments, platform conventions, and user engagement when relevant. The methodology prioritized context-sensitive interpretation rather than quantitative frequency counts, allowing for a deeper exploration of meaning-making processes.

Results. The analysis revealed that symbolic units played several major linguistic functions across the dataset. One of the most prominent functions was **tone modulation**. Emoji frequently softened direct statements, transformed neutral comments into playful ones, or signaled sarcasm that would otherwise remain ambiguous in plain text. Their presence often clarified communicative intent, reducing the risk of misinterpretation in emotionally charged or humorous posts.A second key function was **stance expression**. Users often employed hashtags, emoji combinations, and GIFs to express alignment, evaluation, or mood. For example, hashtags such as blessed, tired, or relatable served as concise symbolic summaries of the user's emotional state, functioning as metadiscursive commentaries on the post itself. GIFs, particularly those depicting exaggerated gestures or facial expressions, operated as extensions of emotional stance, conveying reactions more vividly than text alone.

Symbolic units also contributed to **identity construction**. Consistent patterns of emoji use, specific meme GIFs, or stylized typography helped users craft recognizable online personas. These symbolic choices communicated personal style, humor preferences, cultural affiliations, or community membership.

In addition, symbolic units enhanced **discourse cohesion**. Emoji chains acted as transitions between parts of a post, while hashtags grouped related ideas or created thematic cohesion across multiple posts. Reaction icons in comment threads structured interaction by indicating agreement, amusement, or disapproval without requiring verbal elaboration.

Overall, symbolic units enriched the semantic and pragmatic layers of communication, enabling users to construct nuanced messages that combined visual and textual meaning.

Discussion. The findings highlight that symbolic units are not supplementary but essential to digital discourse in English. Their capacity to convey affective, interpersonal, and pragmatic information reflects the increasing visual orientation of digital culture. In line with multimodal theory, meaning is created not through text alone but through the orchestration of multiple semiotic resources. Symbolic units operate as pragmatic cues that guide interpretation, influence tone, and support interactional coherence, especially in brief or rapid exchanges typical of social media environments.Furthermore, the integration of symbolic units into identity construction illustrates their broader socio-cultural significance. Users strategically employ certain symbols to signal affiliation with online communities, engage in cultural practices, or assert individuality. These functions indicate that symbolic units have become part of digital linguistic competence.The study's findings underscore the need for expanded frameworks in linguistics and communication studies to account for multimodal resources. Digital literacy education would benefit from incorporating training in symbolic interpretation, as misunderstanding symbols can lead to miscommunication. The results also align with previous research emphasizing that digital communication requires new competencies that extend beyond traditional grammar and vocabulary.

Conclusion. This study demonstrates that symbolic units in English social media discourse perform a wide range of linguistic functions, including tone modulation, stance marking, identity construction, and discourse organization. Their role is fundamental to meaning-making and cannot be considered peripheral to written communication. As digital platforms continue to evolve, symbolic units will likely grow even more diverse and integral to communication practices. Future research may explore cross-cultural comparisons, platform-specific symbolic conventions, or the impact of emerging AI-generated symbols on language use.

<div align="center">References (APA 7th)</div>

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