

274. EMOJIS AS A MEANS OF EXPRESSING SOLIDARITY ONLINE

*Riabykh V. A. PhD Student of the Department of Speech Studies and Communication Theory at
Belarusian State University of Foreign Languages*

*Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics
Minsk, Republic of Belarus*

Shaputsko A. V. – Lecturer, Master of Arts (Philology)

This paper explores emojis as a pragmatic and socio-semiotic resource for expressing solidarity in online communication. It argues that emojis function as paralinguistic markers that enhance illocutionary force, facilitate digital empathy, and contribute to the construction of social bonds in digital discourse.

The expansion of digital communication has profoundly transformed the ways in which individuals express emotions and maintain interpersonal relationships. In text-based online environments, where face-to-face interaction is absent, users lack access to traditional nonverbal cues such as intonation, facial expressions, and gestures. As a result, alternative semiotic resources have emerged to compensate for this limitation. Among these resources, emojis have become one of the most prominent and widely used tools for conveying affective and interpersonal meanings.

Originally introduced in the late 1990s as simple pictographic symbols, emojis have evolved into a complex system of visual communication that complements and sometimes replaces verbal language. Their increasing integration into everyday digital practices has attracted significant scholarly attention, particularly within the fields of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and computer-mediated communication [1]. One of the most important yet understudied functions of emojis is their role in expressing solidarity, understood as the manifestation of empathy, support, and alignment with others in social interaction.

From a pragmatic perspective, emojis can be interpreted as paralinguistic markers that modify or reinforce the meaning of verbal messages. According to Dresner and Herring, nonverbal elements in computer-mediated communication contribute to the illocutionary force of an utterance, shaping how it is interpreted by the recipient [2]. In this sense, emojis function similarly to prosodic and gestural features in spoken discourse, helping to disambiguate intent and reduce the risk of misunderstanding.

Within the framework of speech act theory, emojis can be seen as devices that enhance or transform communicative acts. For instance, a statement such as “I understand” may function as a neutral assertion in isolation, but when accompanied by emojis like a heart (Figure 1) or handshake (Figure 2), it acquires the characteristics of an expressive act conveying empathy and solidarity. Thus, emojis play a crucial role in performing interpersonal functions that go beyond the literal meaning of words.



Figure 1. Heart



2. Handshake



Figure 3. Hugs



Figure 4. Folded hands



Figure 5. Broken heart



Figure 6. Dove Emoji

In online communication, the expression of solidarity often relies on concise and symbolically rich forms. Emojis provide an efficient means of conveying complex emotional states with minimal linguistic effort, making them particularly suitable for fast-paced digital environments such as social media platforms and messaging applications. Their use allows participants to maintain social bonds and demonstrate emotional involvement even in brief interactions.

One of the primary functions of emojis in this context is the expression of emotional support. When users respond to messages describing personal difficulties, loss, or stress, they frequently employ emojis such as heart (Figure 1), hugs (Figure 3), folded hands (Figure 4), or broken heart (Figure 5) to signal empathy and compassion. These symbols can function either in combination with verbal messages or as standalone responses that constitute complete communicative acts. In many cases, a single emoji is sufficient to convey

understanding and solidarity, illustrating the high degree of high semantic density associated with these visual signs.

In addition to expressing individual support, emojis also serve as markers of collective identity. In online communities, repeated use of specific emojis can indicate affiliation with a group, shared values, or participation in a common cause. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the context of social movements, public events, or collective experiences, where users adopt certain symbols as shorthand representations of their position. Through such practices, emojis contribute to the construction and reinforcement of group cohesion [3]. Emojis play an important role in intensifying the emotional tone of messages. A neutral or ambiguous statement can be reinterpreted as supportive, ironic, or empathetic depending on the accompanying emoji. This capacity to modify meaning highlights the importance of emojis as pragmatic tools that shape interpersonal communication. By providing additional contextual cues, they help users navigate the complexities of online interaction and maintain positive social relationships.

Beyond individual exchanges, the use of emojis in expressing solidarity often takes the form of collective practices that resemble digital rituals. In many online contexts, users engage in coordinated symbolic actions, such as posting identical emojis in comment sections or sharing them as part of broader communicative trends. These practices create a sense of shared participation and reinforce collective emotional experiences. For example, during times of crisis, tragedy, or global events, social media platforms frequently become spaces for mass expressions of support, where users collectively employ symbols such as dove (Figure 6), folded hands (Figure 4), or broken heart (Figure 5). The repetition of these emojis across numerous posts and interactions generates a form of visual solidarity that transcends linguistic boundaries. Such patterns demonstrate that emojis function not only at the level of individual expression but also as tools for large-scale social coordination.

These collective uses of emojis can be interpreted as forms of digital ritual, in which symbolic repetition contributes to the construction of shared meaning and emotional alignment. By participating in these practices, users affirm their belonging to the community and their engagement with its values. In this way, emojis facilitate both personal and collective dimensions of solidarity. Despite their widespread use, emojis are not entirely universal in meaning. Research indicates that their interpretation is influenced by cultural, social, and contextual factors [4]. The same emoji may convey different connotations depending on the cultural background of the users, their communicative norms, and the specific context of interaction.

This variability can affect the effectiveness of emojis as tools for expressing solidarity. In some cases, differences in interpretation may lead to misunderstandings or reduce the intended emotional impact. Therefore, successful use of emojis requires a degree of shared interpretive competence and awareness of contextual nuances. At the same time, the globalisation of digital communication contributes to the formation of more stable and standardised meanings for many emojis, particularly those associated with basic human emotions such as love, sadness, and support. This process enhances the potential of emojis to function as cross-cultural markers of solidarity, even in linguistically diverse environments. The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that emojis occupy a central position in contemporary online communication, particularly in relation to the expression of solidarity. Their ability to convey emotional meaning, reinforce social bonds, and facilitate interpersonal understanding makes them indispensable tools in digital interaction. From a pragmatic standpoint, emojis enhance the illocutionary force of utterances and enable users to perform expressive speech acts in an efficient and accessible manner. They also contribute to the reduction of ambiguity, which is a common challenge in text-based communication. By providing visual cues, emojis help users interpret messages more accurately and respond appropriately [5].

Moreover, the collective use of emojis highlights their role in the construction of social reality in digital environments. Through repeated and shared practices, emojis become symbols of group identity and collective experience. This function underscores their significance not only as linguistic elements but also as socio-cultural phenomena. However, the increasing reliance on emojis also raises important questions. On the one hand, they simplify communication and make it more accessible; on the other hand, they may lead to the reduction of linguistic complexity and nuance. Additionally, their interpretation remains context-dependent, which can result in ambiguity or miscommunication.

In conclusion, emojis represent a powerful and multifaceted means of expressing solidarity in online communication. They function as paralinguistic markers that enhance meaning, support the performance of speech acts, and facilitate emotional connection between users. As digital communication continues to evolve, the importance of emojis is likely to increase, making them a key subject for further research in linguistics, communication studies, and social sciences. Future studies may focus on cross-cultural differences, the role of emojis in political discourse, and their impact on language change in digital environments.

References:

1. Dresner E., Herring S. C. *Functions of the nonverbal in CMC: Emoticons and illocutionary force* // *Communication Theory*. – 2010. – Vol. 20, № 3. – 20 p.
2. Danesi M. *The semiotics of emoji: The rise of visual language in the age of the Internet*. – London: Bloomsbury, 2017. – 240 p.
3. Riordan M. A. *Emojis as tools for emotion work: Communicating affect in text messages* // *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. – 2017. – Vol. 36, № 5. – 19 p.
4. Miller H., Thebault-Spieker J., Chang S. et al. *"Blissfully happy" or "ready to fight": Varying interpretations of emoji* // *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (ICWSM)*. – 2016. – Vol. 10, № 1. – 10 p.
5. Kelly R., Watts L. *Characterising the inventive appropriation of emoji as relationally meaningful* // *Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on Supporting Group Work*. – 2015. – 10 p.