



Pragmatic Functions of Emojis in Online Learning Communication: Cyberpragmatics Study

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the pragmatic functions of emojis in online learning communication. The approach used in this research was descriptive qualitative. The data of this research are emojis used in online learning communication. The source of data was in the form of messages between lecturer and undergraduates in online learning. The data of this research were collected using documentation, observation, and note-taking methods. The data analysis was carried out using referential equivalent and pragmatic equivalent methods. The results of this study indicate that the functions of emojis in learning communication with this cyberpragmatics perspective are for (1) apologizing, (2) showing gratitude, (3) showing doubt, (4) showing joyfulness, (5) praying, (6) showing sadness, and (7) showing happiness.

Keywords: *Emoji; Communication; Online Learning; Cyber Pragmatics*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way a learning is carried out, from a conventional face-to-face format to online-based learning. Cantoni in Agustina et al. (2016) states that actually online-based learning, during which technology is used to deliver learning materials, is an innovative approach to improve students' knowledge, skills, and performance. This shift results in changes from face-to-face communication to digital communication and static information to dynamic information, and information available in certain places to information available anywhere. The implementation of online learning begins to be thoroughly adapted when the Learning from Home policy is implemented.

Online-based learning itself is closely related to 21st century competencies, competencies resulted by the combination of social and cognitive skills with technology mastery, which are required to face the current competition and challenges. Thus, in order to help the students, prepare for the challenges of the 21st century and live in a global society connected to technology, it is necessary to innovate and integrate technology in learning, one of which is the application of an online-based learning system.

The benefit of using online-based learning for educators is that they can be more acknowledge with the notion of synchronous and asynchronous learning. The word “synchronous” means “at the same time”, which means that synchronous learning is a method during which the educator and the students are at the same time communicate each other either offline (live-synchronous learning) or online (virtual synchronous learning) and either using internet or intranet (Arfan et al., 2021). Meanwhile, asynchronous learning, as the opposite of synchronous learning, allows the educators and students to not meet at the same time during the lesson. Instead, the educators provide e-materials, like PPT, files, PDFs, or videos; that can be accessed freely anytime and anywhere by the students and the students can study independently, but still under the monitoring of the educators (Arfan et al., 2021).

The existence of online-based learning shifts the communication pattern of the learning itself, from open and direct communication into closed communication. During offline learning, there is the use of verbal tools, like stress, intonation, as well as tone; and non-verbal tools, like facial expression, gesture, as well as attire; to communicate effectively. However, during the online learning, they can only use written expression.

Communication in the context of online learning, which mostly uses written language, often uses nonverbal tools to convey the pragmatic intention of the communication. The nonverbal tool referred in the context of online learning communication is the use of emoji. Emoji in communication is not only to convey an expressive function, but also to convey a pragmatic function (Sampietro, 2019). The use of emoji in online learning is widely used to convey the pragmatic intentions of the students to the other students and the students to the lecturers. The use of emoji in communication is an alternative option due to the lack written expressions. The use of emoji also makes the online learning more alive (Peng & Zhao, 2021). Emojis have even become an integral part of virtually mediated communication (Kaye et al., 2021); (McShane et al., 2021). The use of emoji in online learning communication in universities is interesting for further study. Therefore, this study focuses on the pragmatic function of emoji in online learning communication with a cyberpragmatics perspective.

Cyberpragmatics, in this study, is considered more relevant to understand the pragmatic function of emoji in online learning communication. There is a shift of understanding of pragmatics that it can only be used in real communication, but it turns that it can also be used in online communication, though there is significant difference in terms of communication context (Kusmanto & Widodo, 2022). Hence, the analysis of pragmatic function of emoji is more relevant using cyberpragmatics. Cyberpragmatics concerns on how an information is contextually produced and interpreted which is mediated by the internet (Yus, 2011; Yus, 2016).

There are several basic implications of cyberpragmatics: (1) internet is the medium used to achieve the purpose of communication, (2) linguistic messages can be interpreted through internet, (3) interpretation of internet-mediated communication requires contextual information so that the message can be received, and (4) different attributes of cyber media affect the quality of users' access to contextual information, the amount of information obtained, the interpretation chosen, and the cognitive effects that are inherited and the mental effort involved in obtaining those effects.

The purpose of internet-mediated speech act analysis is to understand the intention of the locutor. In other words, the main purpose of analysis in cyberpragmatics is to determine the extent to which the quality of this cyber media affects the stimulus of relevance, that is, how it affects the assessment of cognitive effects that may be derived and the mental effort required in return (Yus, 2011).

Emoji was originally used to express a psychological condition through virtual facial expressions that contain certain information (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Sakai, 2013; Vandergriff, 2013; Maíz-Arévalo, 2015; Al Zidjaly, 2017). The use of emoji in online learning communication is often used as a complement to textual communication. However, the problem is that not all communication participants understand the meaning of each emoji being used. Furthermore, the use of emoji does not only convey the psychological expression of the speaker, but also contains a pragmatic purpose.

The pragmatic functions of emoji cover illocutionary power marker (Dresner & Herring, 2010), politeness (Darics, 2010; Kavanagh, 2010), face-saving strategy (Maíz-Arévalo, 2015), and a power to build relationships with the speech partner (Maíz-Arévalo, 2015). Emoji, basically has a function to clarify the meaning of messages conveyed through written language (Thompson & Filik, 2016). Based on these various opinions, it shows that emojis have various pragmatic functions. So, emoji are not just to show the psychological expression of the speaker.

According to Yus (2014), the pragmatic functions of emoji, in terms of emotional gradations, are to: (1) signify propositional attitudes that underlie speech and which would be difficult to identify without the help of emoticons; (2) communicate a higher intensity of verbally coded propositional attitudes; (3) strengthen/reduce the illocutionary power of a speech act; (4) contrast to the content of the speech (humor); (5) contradict the explicit content of the speech (irony); (6) add feelings or emotions to the propositional content of the utterance (affective attitude towards the utterance); (7) add feelings or emotions to the overall communicative action (feelings or emotions parallel the communicative action); (8) communicate the intensity of feelings or emotions that have been coded verbally. These eight pragmatic functions of the emoji are considered complete and comprehensive.

Based on the existing research, it shows that a study of the pragmatic function of emoji in communication has been carried out. However, there are some limitations in the existing research. First, the study of emoji is only focused on the illocutionary markers. Second, the emphasis is on humor. Third, the focus is on the emoji as a language politeness strategy. Fourth, the function of emoji to clarify the speakers' intention. Fifth, the emoji used is one or two emojis. Research on the function of emoji in learning communication has not specifically been studied. Therefore, this study fills the gap that has not been widely studied by previous researchers.

The context in the study of pragmatics in the cyber era has undergone such changes due to the existence of the virtual media themselves. The context of the situation can be broken down into four: (1) participants or locutors, (2) actions of the locutors, (3) context of situation, and (4) effects of speech acts (Halliday, 1975). The context of the situation presented by Halliday is the context in face-to-face communication so that the expression of a locutor has implications for the quality of speech. This is different from the context of the situation in virtual communication, the context outside the language does not directly have implications for the quality of communication.

In terms of context of situation, Leech (2014) divides it into five aspects: (1) locutor and interlocutor, (2) speech context, (3) purpose of the speech, (4) speech as a speech act, and (5) speech as a product of verbal acts. Based on the theory stated by Leech, the context of the situation in the cyber era has also changed, which is dominated by the context of one's goal of communicating through virtual media.

According to Rahardi (2019), context has shifted drastically in this cyber era; hence, he identifies the types of the context within cyberpragmatics: social, cultural, and situational context. Furthermore, Yus (2011) states that the context of the communication situation includes the context of cross-cultural differences, the context of the individual's relationship with society, the special context in communication, and social strength, social distance and coercion ratings.

Based on the description that has been presented above, the problem is how the pragmatic function of emoji in online learning communication is seen from the perspective of cyberpragmatics? In line with the problem of this research, the purpose of this study is to describe the pragmatic function of emoji in online learning from the perspective of cyberpragmatics. So, this study aims to describe the pragmatic function of emoji in online learning communication from the point of view of cyberpragmatics. Hopefully, with this description, the use of emoji in online learning will not cause misunderstanding for both locutor and interlocutor.

Methods

The approach used in this research is descriptive qualitative (Moodie, 2020; Banegas, 2020). A qualitative descriptive approach in this study was used to generate a generalization of the description of the pragmatic function of emoji in online learning communication in universities. This research was conducted in one of the Islamic universities in Surakarta City. The data were the use of emoji in online learning communication. Sources of data cover speech in online learning communication, both using verbal and nonverbal tools.








Data collection in this study was carried out using documentation, observation, and note-taking methods (Jamshed, 2014). The documentation method in this study was carried out by collecting documents in the form of online learning communication on WhatsApp application. Furthermore, after doing the documentation, the researcher reads the document carefully and thoroughly to find the data. Furthermore, after the researchers obtained the data, the research data were then encoded.

Data analysis in this study used referential equivalence and extralingual equivalence methods (Sudaryanto, 2015; Mahsun, 2014). The referential equivalent method was used to analyze the meaning of emoji used in online learning. Meanwhile, the pragmatic equivalent method was used to analyze the context of the emoji being used. So, the two data analysis methods were used to identify the intended use of emoji in online learning that took into account the context of communication.


Results and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate the function of emoji in online learning communication using a cyberpragmatics perspective. The functions of emoji include: (1) apologizing, (2) showing gratitude, (3) showing doubt, (4) showing joyfulness, (5) praying, (6) showing sadness, and (7) showing happiness. Further details are presented in Table 1.

Table. 1 Pragmatic Functions of Emoji in Learning

No	Emojis	Names	Percentage
1.		Joined palms	31
2.		Grinning face with smiling eyes	29.5
3.		Funny guy	20
4.		Sparkle	8
5.		Raised and held together hands	6.5
6.		Crying face	3
7.		Smiling face	2
			100

1. The Function of Emoji

The function of emoji  in the act of communication in online learning has a pragmatic function of apologizing to the interlocutor. It is an important emoji to be used since it shows politeness. Rodrigues et al. (2022) states that the use of emoji in interpersonal communication is very important to use.

Explicature	Context	Function
Sampai di akhir pengerjaan draf dikumpulkan dulu nggak papa ya pak? 🙏 <i>Are we allowed to submit the draft first, Sir?</i> 🙏	The lecturer informs the deadline of an assignment	Apologizing

The interaction occurred when a lecturer informed student about the deadline for submitting the assignments. This interaction shows a student who tries to negotiate with the lecturer regarding his unfinished work, and he ends the interaction by using emoji 🙏, which is pragmatically used to apologize to the interlocutor. The emoji of joined palms 🙏 has another function that students not only make an apology, but also a request for negotiation to the lecturer politely.

2. The Function of Emoji 😊

In a communication, in this case is in the context of online learning, emoji 😊 pragmatically functions as a way to show gratitude and happiness in a polite way. The following is an example of a learning communication that uses the emoji to show gratitude and happiness.

Explicature	Context	Function
Oh ya pak, baik pak. Terima kasih banyak 😊 <i>Oh alright, Sir. Thank you very much</i> 😊	The lecturer answers an undergraduate's question	Showing gratitude and hapiness

The context of the interaction is that the lecturer answers the undergraduate's question regarding the deadline, and he answers that the deadline is on 23:59. Therefore, to shows gratitude and happiness towards that information, the undergraduate uses the emoji 😊. This is in line with what Riordan (2017) says that emoji can represent behavior similar to the expression of the emoji. Besides showing happiness from the locutor, actually this emoji also makes the interlocutor, the lecturer, happy. Therefore, the use of this kind of emoji is good for communication, since it builds up the feeling.

The grinning face with smiling eyes emoji has another function as an expression of gratitude. The emoji expression when used in the context of different speech situations also means to show friendliness and intimacy. However, this kind of interaction often happens when the intimacy between the lecturer and undergraduate is close enough.

3. The Function of Emoji 😏

The function of emoji 😏 in an online class interaction is pragmatically to show doubts and as well as to strengthen the argument. The following is an example of data showing the function of the emoji 😏 which indicates doubt.

Explicature	Context	Function
Belum berani presentasi, Pak 😏 Artikelnnya saja belum selesai 😏 <i>Not ready to do the presentation, Sir</i> 😏 <i>The article is not yet finished</i> 😏	The lecturer asks an undergraduate to present an article	Showing doubt

The context of the interaction is that the lecturer asks the undergraduate to present the material, yet the undergraduate is not ready due to the unfinished work. The emoji 🤔, based on this context, is to show doubt as well as to make the interlocutor less angry. The use of emoji 😊 is important in developing a polite communication. Besides, this funny guy with a sweat emoji can also be used to negotiate and apologize over something with the interlocutor and beget a tolerance between the locutor and interlocutor.

4. The Function of Emoji 🌟

The function of emoji 🌟 in online learning communication functions to show joyfulness and show positivity towards the interlocutor. The following is communication data using emojis that show joyfulness.

Explicature	Context	Function
Ini link untuk perkuliahan hari ini ya, Pak Hari dan teman-teman 🌟 <i>Here is the link of today's class</i> <i>Sir Hari and guys 🌟</i>	An undergraduate reminds about today's class to the lecturer and their friends	Showing hapiness

This explicature uses the emoji 🌟 in order to show joyfulness and readiness, of the locutor in joining the lecturer's class. Showing joyfulness in communication is important to establish a quality communication. The use of this glowing emoji can also be used to show politeness in reminding the lecturer about today's class since this emoji represents positivity it can reduce any negative thought of the lecturer. The interpretation of this emoji is in line with the shape of star that symbolizes positive ideas.

5. The Function of Emoji 🙏

The pragmatic function of the emoji 🙏 in communication is to symbolize praying and to show hope both for the locutor and the interlocutor, and sometimes to show a feeling of gratitude as well. The following is an example of using the emoji in learning communication.

Explicature	Context	Function
🙏🙏🙏	The lecturer asks the undergraduates to pray before the class	Praying

The context of this explicature is when the lecturer asks the undergraduates to pray before the class. This explicature does not show any verbal communication, since emoji 🙏 can be used to replaced words in virtual communication (Scheffler et al., 2022). Besides showing the act of praying and showing hope, this emoji can also be used to show gratitude towards the interlocutor in certain context (Rong et al., 2022), but not on this context.

6. The Function of Emoji 😭

The pragmatic function of the emoji 😭 in virtual communication is to express sadness. In learning context, it can be used by the undergraduates to express sadness from being failed to do certain tasks, for example having a bad grade, failing to do the tasks, failing to compile assignment, and the others. Negative emoji basically serves to show negative mental traits, such as sadness, which is represented by a crying face emoji (Pfeifer et al., 2022); (Erle et al., 2021)The following is an example of a communication that uses the emoji to indicate sadness.

Explicature	Context	Function
Sudah diunggah pak dari kemarin 😞 <i>Actually, I've uploaded it yesterday Sir 😞</i>	The lecturer informs that many undergraduates have not yet uploaded the assignment	Showing sadness

This explicature, which uses emoji 😞, is stated by an undergraduate to show sadness and to emphasize their argument that they have submitted the assignment yet the uploading process was failed as a reply to the lecturer who says, in a Whatsapp group, that many undergraduates have not yet submitted the assignment. This assignment is important as the proof of their attendances and it will be scored to determine whether the undergraduates will pass the class or not. This crying face emoji can also be used to express anxiety and hope for the interlocutor's understanding.

7. The Function of Emoji 😊

The function of emoji 😊 is to show happiness towards information given by the interlocutor. In the learning context, it can be used by undergraduates to show happiness towards getting good score or having completed the assignment. The following is an example of communication that uses the 😊 emoji to show happiness.

Explicature	Context	Function
Besok hari jumat jam 10 deadline UTS menulis ilmiah, segera untuk di kumpul kan bagi yang sudah selesai 😊 Tomorrow, Friday at 10 is the deadline of the mid-term test of scientific writing, for those who have finished it please submit it immediately 😊	The chairperson of the class reminds their friends about the deadline of the mid-term test	Showing happiness

This explicature uses the 😊 emoji to show happiness of having finished the final assignment, which means the end of the semester is about to come. Schmidt et al. (2021) and Al Rashdi (2018) state that happy face symbolizes happiness. The context of this explicature is that the locutor reminds their friends that the deadline for the final assignment is near. The other pragmatic function of this emoji is that the locutor tries to encourages their friends to submit the assignment punctually and to encourage them that the end of the semester is about to come, which means holidays are near. The use of this emoji impacts positively towards interlocutors. The smiling face emoji can also be used to inform something politely since it represents friendliness and positivity.

Conclusion

In accordance with the problem formulation presented in the introduction, the pragmatic function of emoji in the context of learning is based on a cyberpragmatics perspective. The cyberpragmatics perspective used to understand the pragmatic function of emoji in learning context is carried out with the help of a virtual external context in order to determine whether an emoji has a certain pragmatic function or not. This research produces seven pragmatic functions of emoji in learning context: (1) apologizing, (2) showing gratitude, (3) showing doubt, (4) showing joyfulness, (5) praying, (6) showing sadness, and (7)

showing happiness. However, besides those functions, actually the use of these emojis produce other functions that support those major functions.

In learning through Whatsapp group, written expression is limited, hence, the use of emoji is due to express something unexpressable through written text. Sometimes, these emojis are actually replaceable with other similar emojis, by which broader scope of research can be conducted. Therefore, this study is still limited. Hopefully, the other researchers can explore more on the function of the other emojis as well as the other similar emojis that share the same function with the emojis being studied in this research. By understanding the pragmatic meaning of emojis in virtual communication, hopefully the undergraduates can be wiser in choosing appropriate emojis during the communication and hopefully it can improve the communication quality itself.

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