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Emoji-Based Politeness in Digital Communication: A Discourse Analysis of WhatsApp and Instagram Interactions

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Abstract

Emojis are much more than just amusing symbols in today's digital communication; they are effective tools for creating meaning and preserving connections online. With concentrating on WhatsApp and Instagram's interactions, this study investigates how emojis serve as strategies of politeness in online communication. Today, the multimodality of digital platforms emphasizes the symbolic and emotive function of emojis, whereas the focus of previous studies of politeness were on spoken and written languages. Emojis, in this study, are analyzed as multimodal tools that assist politeness strategies like reinforcement, substitution and mitigation. The study adopts Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies and supplemented by Kress's concept of multimodality to analyze the corpus of 100 messages which are collected from Arab and Western social groups of teachers. This study aims to: investigate the way in which emojis are used to convey politeness such as making requests, softening rejections, and expressing gratitude; examine the extent to which emojis substitute, reinforce, and lessen traditional verbal politeness cues; and examine the variety of emoji use across cultural contexts and gender. The study concludes that emojis are affective tools which enhance solidarity and mitigate face threatening acts. They also demonstrate distinctive patterns across cultural and gender groups.

Keywords: emojis, politeness, digital pragmatics, multimodality, WhatsApp, Instagram

الملخص

تُعدّ الإيموجيات أكثر من مجرد رموز مسلية في التواصل الرقمي المعاصر؛ فهي أدوات فعّالة في بناء المعنى والحفاظ على الروابط الاجتماعية عبر الإنترنت. يركّز هذا البحث على تعليقات تطبيقَي WhatsApp و Instagram، إذ يستكشف كيفية استخدام الإيموجيات بوصفها استراتيجيات للتأدب في التواصل الإلكتروني. وفي حين ركّزت الدراسات السابقة للتأدب على اللغة المنطوقة والمكتوبة، فإن تعددية الوسائط في المنصات الرقمية اليوم تُبرز الوظيفة الرمزية والعاطفية للإيموجيات.وتُحلَّل الإيموجيات في هذه الدراسة بوصفها أدوات متعددة الوسائط تُسهم في استراتيجيات التأدب مثل التعزيز، والاستبدال، والتخفيف. وتعتمد الدراسة على استراتيجيات التأدب لبراون وليفينسن، إلى جانب مفهوم تعددية الوسائط لدى كريس لتحليل البيانات المكوّنة من (١٠٠) رسالة جُمعت من مجموعات اجتماعية عربية وغربية من المعلّمين. وتهدف الدراسة إلى: استقصاء الكيفية التي تُستخدم بها الإيموجيات للتعبير عن التأدب، مثل تقديم الطلبات، وتلطيف الرفض، والتعبير عن الامتنان؛ وفحص مدى قيام الإيموجيات بوظائف الاستبدال، والتعزيز، والتخفيف لعلامات التأدب اللفظية التقليدية؛ إضافةً إلى دراسة تنوّع استخدام الإيموجيات عبر السياقات الثقافية

والجندرية المختلفة.وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الإيموجيات تُعد أدوات عاطفية تُعزّز التضامن الاجتماعي وتخفّف من الأفعال المهدِّدة للوجه، كما تُظهر أنماطًا مميّزة تختلف باختلاف المجموعات الثقافية والجندرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرموز التعبيرية, التأدب, البراغماتية الرقمية, تعدد الوسائط, واتساب وانستغرام .

1. Introduction

Digital communication transforms the interacting of individuals, transferring meaning, and maintaining relations. From social media platforms to instant messaging applications, users not only depend on written text but also on visual and symbolic resources such as emojis. According to Evans (2017), emoji has emerged as particularly salient, with billions exchanged daily.

Politeness, is defined as strategies which maintain face and enrich positive personal relations (Brown & Levinson, 1987), has traditionally studied by using linguistic strategies like mitigation markers, honorifics, or hedges. However, in online communications, politeness is increasingly being managed by using a variety of means. Locher and Watts (2005) state that emojis, as symbolic and affective clues, provide extra resources for making requests, expressing gratitude , or softening rejections— all of which are essential components of face management.

In spite of emojis being widely used, research that deals with their role in politeness is limited. Most of the studies focus on user attitudes or affective functions (Danesi, 2017; Herring & Dainas, 2020), but few look at the relationship between emojis and traditional politeness strategies. This study fills this gap by placing emoji use (as a multimodal resource) within politeness theory and examining variation across cultural contexts and gender.

2. Research Questions

This study covers the following questions:

1- How do emojis pragmatically function in online interactions on WhatsApp and Instagram?
2- In what ways do emojis contribute to expressing gratitude, making requests, and softening refusals?
3- To what extent do emojis reinforce, substitute, or mitigate verbal politeness markers?
4- How does the use of emojis as politeness strategies vary across gender and cultural contexts?

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Evolution of Politeness and "Face"

Brown and Levinson (1987) develop the conceptual foundation of "Face Management" model, which itself draws heavily from Erving Goffman's sociological theories. Face is defined as the public self-image that every individual wishes to maintain during social interaction.

Politeness strategies are used to lessen face threatening acts (FTAs) such as criticism, refusals, or request. However, some critics argue that it privileges verbal strategies and Western norms (Watts, 2003). In online discourse, new forms of politeness like "emojis" may use in managing face when directness is usually unavoidable.

3.1.1 The Dichotomy of Face: Positive vs. Negative

Brown and Levinson (1987) categorize "face" into two interrelated aspects that motivate polite behavior's:

• Positive Face: Is defined as the individual's desire to be liked, approved of, and treated as a member of the same group. In digital or online discourse, emojis such as the "heart" ❤ or "smiling face" ☺ function as digital tokens of solidarity, satisfying the receiver's positive face by indicating emotional alignment (Herring, 2013).

• Negative Face: is defined as the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions and free from imposition. When a user makes a request or asks for a favor online, they risk threatening the receiver's negative face, as such acts impose on the addressee's freedom of action (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this context, emojis act as "hedges" or "softeners" (e.g., 🙏 or 😅), signaling the sender's awareness of the imposition and his/ her attempt to mitigate it (Herring, 2013).

3.1.2 Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) in Digital Spaces

Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that certain speech acts are inherently classified as Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) because they conflict with the interlocutors' face wants. The impact of FTAs, in text - based communication, may be increased because prosodic markers (such as intonation) are absent. FTAs can be classified into two main categories: Direct and mitigated FTAs. The first one includes unmitigated expressions like orders and straight refuses that show little regard to addressee's face, while the second (mitigated FTAs) includes redressive strategies in which the speaker uses linguistic devices to decrease the possible harm to the hearer's face.

The main contribution of this study is to identify emojis as main redressive tools in contemporary digital pragmatics. Dresner and Herring (2010) state that emojis serve as illocutionary force markers in addition to conveying emotion. For instance (I can't go) is a refusal expression that reflects high level of FTA, but in (I can't go 😔) the emoji shows the regret feeling of the sender which preserves the social relationship and mitigates face threatening act.

3.2 The "Non-Verbal Gap" and Digital Compensatory Strategies

Non- verbal cues such as facial expressions, gesture and body language play essential role in conveying emotions and building social relationship in face to face communication, whereas they are often lost in digital communication. This leads to a significant non- verbal gap that may result to misunderstanding and reduces social interaction.

So that compensatory strategies, such as emojis, are developed to convey emotion and preserve social connection in digital communication. By following Gumperz's concept of contextualization cues (1982), emojis can serve as contextualization cues that lead to the interpretation of the speaker's intended meaning in digital communication.

According to Dresner and Herring (2010), emojis can function as illocutionary force to clarify the intended meaning of the messages and help interlocutors to know whether the utterance intended as humorous or friendly or FTA.

4. Kress' multimodality Concept (2010)

Kress (2010) states that any communication integrates both linguistic and visual devices and considers as a multimodal. Participants, in digital discourse, rely on formatting, punctuation and emojis more than facial expression, body language or gesture. Online discourse is multimodal and platform-shaped, as digital discourse studies has long demonstrated (ibid.). Emojis serve as a visual semiotic tool in a digital setting that increases meaning beyond words and complements textual language.

5. Digital Pragmatics and Multimodality

While digital pragmatics investigates how meaning is constructed in digital interaction, multimodality highlights that communication is formed through numerous semiotic modes, including text, images, emojis, and visual symbols. These multimodal resources, according to Kress (2010), function pragmatically to convey emotion, mitigate requests, control politeness, and make speaker's intentions more clear than words alone.

Text, visuals, and symbols are all combined in digital discourse, which is multimodal by nature (Herring, 2013). The term "Digital pragmatics" describes how users carry out speech act and maintain politeness in digital communication (ibid.). Danesi (2017) states that emojis function as emotional cues, pragmatic softeners, and contextualization cues, reshape online communication where users create meaning through text and visual cues like emojis, GIFs, and stickers.

6. Emojis as Pragmatic Tools

One of the most fascinating aspects of contemporary computer-mediated communication is the pragmatic study of emojis. Emojis serve some pragmatic functions now. Many studies demonstrate that emojis can support or replace verbal expressions specifically in relational work as stated by Evans (2017). For Dresner and Herring (2010), emojis are similar to punctuation or prosody in spoken language. They indicate directly the illocutionary force of the words.

According to Maiz-Arevalo (201٥) , emojis serve as face saving, enhancing or preserving devices when using politeness strategies in online communication. A happy expression 😊, for instance, could soften a request or lessen a complaint (Skovholt et al., 2014).

Emojis can serve as contextual constraints, as Yus (2014) demonstrates. They can either lessen FTAs or strengthen speaking acts.

For Danesi (2017), emojis are components of a new "visual language" that improve interpersonal communication in digital settings by expressing affective meaning.

Miller et al. (2016) argue that the interpretations of emoji may vary across users because meaning is affected by context, individual perception, and variations in platform rendering.

7. Theoretical Framework

The data in the current study will be analyzed according to Brown and Levinson's positive and negative politeness strategies (1987) and supplemented by Kress' concept of multimodal (2010) in which emojis will be treated as multimodal elements that serve as politeness strategies to enhance the intended meaning of words in digital communication.

8. Methodology

8.1 Data Collection

A corpus of 100 authentic messages are collected from social groups on WhatsApp and Instagram. The data are collected from 50 participants, 25 females and 25 males, who are from different ages and different cultural background (Arab and Western). The analysis of the corpus is based on a qualitative and descriptive method. After collecting the corpus, the researcher has reviewed the discourse of the messages and the emojis used, then selected 18 messages as examples of the analysis.

8.2 Analytical Framework

Three politeness acts (request, refusals and gratitude), are coded for the use of emojis in the selected messages. Emojis are classified into three pragmatic categories:

a) Reinforcement: Emojis used alongside polite phrases.

b) Substitution: Emojis replacing verbal markers (emoji replaces words).

c) Mitigation: Emojis used to soften the tone of potentially offensive act.

9. The Analysis

9.1 Expressing Gratitude

Emojis often reinforced verbal thanks, adding warmth or emotional intensity. In some cases, they substituted for words entirely. The following are some examples of expressing gratitude.

Extract 1 (WhatsApp, Arab female):

Arabic: شكراً جزيلاً🙏 😊

Translation: Thank you so much 🙏 😊

Analysis: the 🙏 reinforces gratitude, while 😊 adds warmth.

Here the emojis function as multimodal resources (Kress, 2010) that enhance the verbal expression. Within Brown and Levinson's framework, they realize positive politeness by strengthening solidarity and expressing appreciation.

Extract 2 (Instagram DM, Western male):

English: Thanks ❤️

Analysis: the ❤ emoji substitutes part of the verbal expression and intensifies emotional meaning. It reflects positive politeness by reinforcing interpersonal closeness.

Extract 3 (WhatsApp, Arab male):

Arabic: 🙏الله يبارك بك

Translation: May God bless you 🙏

Analysis: The emoji 🙏 represents religious-cultural alignment. It functions as multimodal resource which enhances positive politeness by supporting respect and gratitude expressions with culturally appropriate context.

Extract 4 (Instagram DM, Western female):

English: Omg tysm 😭 💖 (Oh, my God, thank you so much)

Analysis: the emoji 😭 represents emotional intensity, and the 💖 intensifies affect. They together function as multimodal enhancers of positive politeness. They amplify gratitude and emotional expression.

Extract 5 (WhatsApp, Arab female):

Just emojis: 🙏 🙏

Analysis: Here, emojis fully replace verbal language. They function as positive politeness strategies, expressing gratitude visually.

Extract 6 (Instagram DM, Western male):

English: Appreciate it, man. Lifesaver. 🤝

Analysis: the emoji 🤝 is a formal gratitude by which the speaker fulfills the social duty of expressing thanks without burdening the receivers emotionally or forcing them into high-pitched intimacy. This is a form of negative politeness.

9.2 Making Requests

Requests are frequently softened with emojis to reduce imposition on the receiver's face. The following are some examples of making requests.

Extract 7 (WhatsApp, Western female):

English: Could you please send me the notes 🙂?

Analysis: the emoji 🙂 is softened the request and reduced imposition. It acts as a multimodal marker and reflects negative politeness by reducing the FTA.

Extract 8 (Instagram DM, Arab male):

Arabic: 😅 ممكن تساعدني شوي لو سمحت

Translation: Can you help me a little, please 😅?

Analysis: the 😅 emoji reduces directness and expresses hesitation. It reflects a negative politeness strategy by showing awareness of imposition.

Extract 9 (WhatsApp, Western male):

English: Bro, cover my shift? 🙃

Analysis: the emoji 🙃 humorously mitigates imposition. It enhances positive politeness strategy by informal and relational alignment.

Extract 10 (WhatsApp, Arab female):

Arabic: 🥺🙏 اذا ما تمانع

Translation: If you don't mind 🥺🙏?

Analysis: the 🥺 dramatizes vulnerability and the 🙏 reinforces deference. These emojis intensify politeness by emotional expressions. They act as multimodal markers which enhance negative politeness by stressing humility and respect.

Extract 11 (Instagram DM, Western female):

English: Hey, could you tag me in the photo? 😇

Analysis: the emoji shapes the request as innocent. It acts as a mitigating mean that moderates the request and enhances positive politeness by reducing potential imposition and signaling friendliness.

Extract 12 (WhatsApp, Arab female):

Arabic: حبيبتي الله يبارك بقلبك ويعطيك القوة 🥺❤ اذا سمحت لي ان اقترح ..

Translation: Habibti, may Allah bless your heart and give you strength 🥺❤ if I may suggest …

Analysis: the emojis 🥺❤ function as a powerful emotional support. They establish deep alignment and emotional mirroring before delivering any advice to protect the receiver's positive face and mitigate FTA.

9.3 Softening Refusals

Refusals are softened with humor, embarrassment, or regret emojis. The following are some examples of softening refusals.

Extract 13 (WhatsApp, Arab female):

Arabic: 🙈والله مشغولة اليوم

Translation: Honestly, I'm busy today 🙈.

Analysis: the emoji 🙈 represents a mitigate multimodal resource that expresses embarrassment and softens refusal. It supports negative politeness through mitigating the FTA.

Extract 14 (Instagram DM, Western male):

English: Sorry man, can't make it 😅.

Analysis: the emoji 😅 presents a softer tone and mitigates the bluntness of refusal. It reflects negative politeness by lessening the FTA.

Extract 15 (WhatsApp, Arab male):

Arabic: 🙂 ان شاء الله, وقت اخر

Translation: God willing, another time 🙂.

Analysis: the emoji 🙂 offsets disappointment and functions as a multimodal politeness marker which softens the refusal to maintain a neutral positive tone. It supports negative politeness through mitigating directness and maintaining social harmony.

Extract 16 (Instagram DM, Western female):

English: Ugh I wish, but I'm broke 😂.

Analysis: the emoji 😂 transforms refusal into humor to reduce tension. It represents positive politeness by maintaining social harmony through humor.

Extract 17 (WhatsApp, Arab female):

Arabic: 😔 سامحني ما اقدر

Translation: Forgive me, I can't 😔

Analysis: the emoji 😔 signals regret and empathy. This sad emoji acts as a multimodal resource which enhancing negative politeness through sincerity expression and mitigating the FTA .

Extract 18 (Instagram DM, Western female):

English: I would literally love to come so much, but I am completely dead after work today! 😭 💀 Let's please reschedule for next week though!! 🥰

Analysis: Using high-emotion emojis such as 😭 💀 to explain the physical constraint. It concludes with a warm, urgent request for future reconnection 🥰 to carry out social repair in order to maintain the receiver's positive face.

10. The Findings and Discussion

The findings are explained in the following table:

Group	Frequency of Emoji Use	Dominant Emojis	Politeness Function
Females	Higher	😭, 🥺 😊 💖 🥰 🙏 💀 ❤ 🙈	Solidarity, gratitude, warmth
Males	Moderate	😅, 😂, 😎	Humor, informality
Arab speakers	High frequency	🥺 😊 💖 🥰 ❤, 😳, 🙏	Expressive politeness
Western speakers	Moderate	🤝 , 😊, 😅	Balanced politeness and irony

The above table highlights the significant variations in the use of emojis as politeness strategies across gender and cultural groups in online interaction. From gender's perspective, the results shows that women use emojis more often than men, specially emojis that convey emotion and gratitude like 💖, ❤, and 🙏. This reveals that women use emojis as politeness strategies to support solidarity and maintain their personal relationships. Thus, they reduce social distance by using linguistic and paralinguistic features and showing positive politeness. On the other hand, the study reveals that men use of emojis are more moderate and they use them for informal expressions and humorous rather than affective expressions.From cultural perspective, the findings demonstrate that Arab participants employ emojis more often and with greater expressiveness than Western ones. The most dominant emojis such as ❤ 🙏 used by Arabs could reflect cultural norms which emphasize personal warmth and affective expressions in communication.Western users, in contrast, show a more moderate use of emojis with focusing on smiling emojis such as 😊 and 😅 which reflect irony or humor with balance politeness. This highlights the differences in cultural norms which form the function and the pragmatic interpretation of emojis. This variety in emoji usage shows how pragmatic factors and cultural norms have a significant impact on digital interaction

11. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that emojis are not mere decorative icons but vital elements in managing politeness online. Through gratitude, requests, and refusals, emojis perform functions traditionally associated with linguistic markers. Their strategic use across WhatsApp and Instagram highlights the multimodal nature of digital discourse. By situating emoji use within politeness theory, this research contributes to the growing field of digital pragmatics and underscores how courtesy and face-management are evolving in today's communication landscape.

The current study also shows that there are significant differences in the use of emojis through cultural and gender groupings. While men and Western participants use emojis more for comedy (humor) and balanced communication, women and Arab participants typically use them for expressive and solidarity purposes.

Overall, the study concludes that emojis are significant pragmatic markers that regulate social interactions, express politeness, and reflect gender-based and cultural communication methods rather than just being ornamental aspects.

These differences reflect how emojis are employed to achieve distinct communicative goals in digital discourse.

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