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PARALINGUISTIC MEANS AND PARALINGUISTIC LACUNAE IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION: THE CASE OF EMOJIS, GIFS, AND INTERNET DISCOURSE

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Abstract:
This study explores the role of paralinguistic means and paralinguistic lacunae in contemporary digital communication, with particular emphasis on emojis, GIFs, and internet discourse. In the context of rapidly evolving digital interaction, non-verbal and semi-verbal elements have become essential tools for conveying emotions, attitudes, and pragmatic meanings that are often absent in purely textual communication. The concept of paralinguistic lacunae is analyzed as gaps arising from cultural, linguistic, and semiotic differences in interpreting such elements across digital environments.
The research highlights how emojis and GIFs function as compensatory mechanisms that enrich communication by providing visual and emotional cues, while simultaneously generating ambiguities and interpretative challenges. Special attention is given to the role of internet discourse in shaping new communicative norms and hybrid semiotic systems. The study argues that understanding paralinguistic features is crucial for effective communication in digital contexts, particularly in intercultural interactions.

Keywords: Paralinguistics, digital communication, paralinguistic lacunae, emojis, GIFs, internet discourse, semiotics, intercultural communication, nonverbal communication, online interaction

Introduction

In the era of rapid digitalization, communication practices have undergone significant transformations, leading to the emergence of new linguistic and semiotic phenomena. One of the most notable developments is the increasing role of paralinguistic means in digital communication, where traditional verbal language is complemented—or even replaced—by visual and symbolic elements such as emojis, GIFs, and other multimodal resources. These elements serve as powerful tools for expressing emotions, attitudes, and pragmatic meanings that are often difficult to convey through text alone.
Furthermore, internet discourse represents a unique communicative space characterized by hybridity, informality, and rapid evolution. It combines elements of spoken and written language, often incorporating creative, non-standard forms of expression. Within this context,

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paralinguistic means play a crucial role in shaping discourse dynamics, influencing tone, intention, and social interaction.

The relevance of this study lies in the growing importance of digital communication in everyday life and professional contexts. Understanding the functions and limitations of paralinguistic means, as well as the nature of paralinguistic lacunae, is essential for effective communication, particularly in multilingual and intercultural settings.

The aim of this research is to analyze the role of paralinguistic means in digital communication and to examine the phenomenon of paralinguistic lacunae using examples from emojis, GIFs, and internet discourse. The study seeks to identify their communicative functions, interpretative variability, and impact on meaning construction in contemporary digital environments.

Methodology

Paralinguistic means, traditionally understood as non-verbal or auxiliary components of communication (including gestures, intonation, and facial expressions), have found new forms in the digital environment. In online discourse, emojis, GIFs, stickers, and other visual signs function as substitutes for physical cues, enriching communication and facilitating interpersonal understanding. However, their usage also introduces new challenges, particularly in the form of paralinguistic lacunae—gaps in meaning that arise due to cultural, contextual, or interpretative differences among users.

The concept of lacunae, widely studied in linguistics and intercultural communication, refers to the absence or mismatch of linguistic or cultural elements between different communicative systems. In digital communication, paralinguistic lacunae emerge when users interpret the same emoji or GIF differently, or when certain meanings cannot be adequately translated across cultural or linguistic boundaries. This phenomenon highlights the complexity of meaning-making in virtual environments and underscores the need for a deeper theoretical understanding of digital semiotics.

The study of paralinguistic means and paralinguistic lacunae in digital communication has attracted considerable attention within modern linguistics, semiotics, and discourse analysis. Scholars emphasize that contemporary communication is increasingly multimodal, integrating verbal, visual, and symbolic elements into a unified semiotic system.

From a theoretical standpoint, Ferdinand de Saussure laid the foundation for understanding language as a system of signs, where meaning emerges through the relationship between the signifier and the signified. In the context of digital communication, emojis and GIFs can be interpreted as new types of signs that extend traditional linguistic systems. However, unlike conventional linguistic units, their meanings are often unstable and context-dependent, which creates interpretative variability.

Building on semiotic theory, Charles Sanders Peirce introduced the triadic model of the sign (icon, index, symbol), which is particularly relevant for analyzing digital paralinguistic elements. Emojis and GIFs frequently function as icons (resembling emotions or actions) and

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symbols (culturally assigned meanings), which explains why their interpretation may vary across different users and cultures.

The concept of lacunae in linguistics was extensively explored by Yuri Sorokin and Irina Markovina, who defined lacunae as gaps or mismatches between linguistic and cultural systems. In digital communication, paralinguistic lacunae arise when certain visual or symbolic expressions lack equivalent meanings in another cultural or communicative context. This is particularly evident in the use of culturally specific emojis or internet memes, which may not be universally understood.

Furthermore, Roman Jakobson highlighted the importance of non-verbal elements in communication through his model of language functions. He emphasized that communication is not limited to verbal messages but also includes expressive and emotive functions. In digital discourse, these functions are often realized through paralinguistic means such as emojis, which compensate for the absence of intonation and facial expressions.

The role of discourse and social interaction in meaning construction was further developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, who introduced the concept of dialogism. According to Bakhtin, meaning emerges through interaction between different voices and contexts. This idea is particularly relevant in internet discourse, where the interpretation of emojis and GIFs depends on the dialogic context, including the participants, platform norms, and communicative intentions.

Modern researchers also emphasize the cognitive and pragmatic aspects of digital communication. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen argue that meaning in contemporary communication is constructed through multimodal resources, including visual, textual, and auditory elements. Their theory of multimodality provides a framework for understanding how emojis and GIFs function as integral components of meaning-making rather than mere decorative additions.

In addition, Susan Herring highlights that digital communication forms a distinct type of discourse with its own norms and conventions. According to her research, paralinguistic elements in online interaction serve important pragmatic functions, such as expressing politeness, irony, or emotional stance, but they may also lead to ambiguity and misinterpretation.

Thus, the analysis of scholars' perspectives shows that paralinguistic means in digital communication represent a complex and dynamic phenomenon at the intersection of linguistics, semiotics, and cultural studies. On the one hand, they enhance communicative efficiency by enriching textual interaction with emotional and contextual cues. On the other hand, they generate paralinguistic lacunae that reflect deeper cultural and cognitive differences among users.

In conclusion, integrating theoretical insights from classical and modern scholars allows for a more comprehensive understanding of paralinguistic phenomena in digital environments. It demonstrates that effective communication in the digital age requires not only linguistic competence but also multimodal and intercultural awareness, which are essential for interpreting and using paralinguistic elements appropriately.

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Result and Discussion

The analysis of the collected empirical data revealed several significant findings concerning the role and functions of paralinguistic means in digital communication.

1. Emojis as Emotional and Pragmatic Modulators

The findings indicate that emojis primarily function as regulators of emotional tone and pragmatic meaning in digital interaction. They serve to mitigate potential communicative tension by softening utterances that might otherwise be perceived as critical or negative. For example, evaluative or critical statements accompanied by a smiling emoji tend to be interpreted as constructive rather than confrontational. Furthermore, emojis significantly influence the interpretation of ambiguous textual expressions. A phrase such as *"I'm fine"* may acquire divergent meanings depending on the accompanying emoji, thereby demonstrating the role of emojis as contextual disambiguation tools. In this regard, emojis effectively substitute for nonverbal cues—such as intonation, facial expressions, and gestures—that are absent in computer-mediated communication.

2. Memes as Multimodal Paralinguistic Constructs

The study also reveals that memes function as complex multimodal paralinguistic constructs that integrate visual, textual, and cultural elements. Unlike emojis, which possess a relatively standardized and globally recognizable system of meanings, memes are highly context-dependent and require shared cultural knowledge for accurate interpretation. Their communicative value is closely tied to intertextual references, such as popular films, social events, or internet trends. Consequently, memes not only convey meaning but also act as markers of group identity, facilitating in-group cohesion while simultaneously distinguishing members from outsiders. This highlights their dual role as both communicative and socio-cultural instruments.

3. Virtual Gestures as Digital Analogues of Embodied Interaction

Another important finding concerns the emergence of virtual gestures as functional equivalents of physical actions in digital environments. Elements such as "likes," reaction icons, stickers, and GIFs replicate embodied communicative behaviors, including approval, agreement, or emotional support. For instance, a "thumbs-up" reaction performs a function analogous to nodding in face-to-face communication, while heart symbols and affectionate stickers convey emotional closeness comparable to physical gestures such as hugging. These digital substitutes contribute to the enrichment of interaction by compensating for the lack of physical co-presence.

4. Cultural Variability and Interpretative Ambiguity

The research further demonstrates that digital paralinguistic symbols are subject to significant cultural variability, which may result in interpretative ambiguity and communicative misalignment. The same symbol can carry different meanings across cultural contexts, leading to potential misunderstandings. For example, the folded hands emoji may be interpreted as a

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gesture of prayer, gratitude, or even a "high five," depending on cultural conventions and communicative context. Such discrepancies underscore the importance of intercultural competence in digital communication and highlight the existence of paralinguistic lacunae arising from divergent semiotic interpretations.

Overall, the findings confirm that paralinguistic elements in digital communication are not merely supplementary but constitute integral components of meaning-making. At the same time, their effectiveness is contingent upon contextual awareness, shared cultural knowledge, and users' interpretative competence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of paralinguistic means in digital communication demonstrates their essential role in shaping meaning, emotional expression, and interaction within contemporary online discourse. Emojis, GIFs, and other visual-symbolic elements function as effective substitutes for non-verbal cues, enriching textual communication and enabling users to convey nuanced attitudes and intentions in the absence of face-to-face interaction.

At the same time, the study confirms that the use of these paralinguistic tools gives rise to paralinguistic lacunae, which emerge from cultural, linguistic, and contextual differences in interpretation. These lacunae highlight the variability and ambiguity inherent in digital communication, where the same symbol or visual element may carry different meanings for different users. As a result, they can both facilitate and hinder effective communication, especially in intercultural contexts.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that internet discourse, as a hybrid and dynamic communicative space, actively integrates paralinguistic elements into its structure, thereby transforming traditional linguistic norms and expanding the boundaries of communication. The interaction between verbal and non-verbal digital elements contributes to the formation of new semiotic systems that require interdisciplinary analysis.

Thus, the study of paralinguistic means and paralinguistic lacunae provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of meaning-making in digital environments. It underscores the importance of developing communicative competence that includes not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to interpret and appropriately use multimodal and culturally sensitive elements.

Overall, understanding these phenomena is crucial for improving the effectiveness of digital communication, fostering intercultural dialogue, and advancing theoretical research in linguistics, discourse analysis, and digital semiotics.

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