



MISINTERPRETATION OF SYMBOLS IN THE ERA OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, digitization deeply transforms not only economic but also socio-cultural life. As a growing share of human communication occurs through digital platforms, the importance of language and symbols increases. Rapid, concise, and universal demands in digital space promote widespread use of pictograms, emoji, memes, abbreviations, and other symbolic forms. However, the meaning of any symbol is always tied to context: misinterpretation—resulting from missing contextual cues, cultural differences, or technological variations—can compromise communication. While the nature of symbols has been examined in linguistics and semiotics (e.g., Saussure, Peirce, Barthes), the mechanisms of misunderstanding in digital environments remain underexplored. This study analyzes factors leading to misinterpretation of symbols in digital communication from a linguistic and semiotic perspective, identifies socio-cultural consequences, and proposes practical strategies to reduce these errors. Key factors examined include context dependency, cross-cultural symbolism, technological discrepancies in display, socio-psychological influences, and socio-political implications. The findings highlight that digital symbols are becoming multimodal, dynamic, and increasingly sensitive to cultural and technological variation. The study concludes that addressing misinterpretation is essential for ensuring clarity, trust, and effectiveness in global digital communication.

Keywords: digital transformation; symbols; semiotics; misinterpretation; context; emoji; culture; multimodality.

INTRODUCTION

As one of the main signs of the 21st century, the process of digitization is deeply penetrating not only economic, but also socio-cultural life in all spheres. In today's globalization, since a large part of communication between people takes place through digital platforms, the importance of language and symbols is increasing significantly. In particular, in response to the requirements of speed, conciseness and universality in the digital space, various symbols pictograms, emoji, memes, abbreviations and other symbolic forms have become widely used. However, the meaning of any symbol is always closely related to the context, and its correct or incorrect interpretation directly determines the effectiveness of communication. In digital communication, the meaning of symbols can often be misunderstood due to insufficient reflection of the context, cultural differences or technological details. This not only causes misunderstandings in ordinary everyday communication, but is also likely to cause problems at the social, cultural, and even political levels. Although the nature of symbols has been widely studied in scientific research in the fields of

linguistics and semiotics (F. de Saussure, Ch. S. Peirce, R. Barthes, etc.), their changing properties in the digital era, in particular, the mechanisms of misinterpretation, have not yet been sufficiently elucidated. Therefore, the dynamic semantics of symbols in the era of digitization, their interpretation errors that arise in different cultural and communicative contexts, require special research. The relevance of this study is determined, first of all, by the scale and consequences of misunderstandings that arise when using digital communication tools. Because the different display of the same emoji or symbol on different devices, the contradictory meanings of the same symbol in intercultural communication, as well as the incorrect assessment of symbolic interpretations in socio-political contexts negatively affect the global communication process. Based on this, the purpose of this work is to analyze the factors leading to the misinterpretation of symbols in the era of digitization from a linguistic and semiotic point of view, to identify their socio-cultural consequences, and to develop scientific and practical proposals to prevent such errors.

METHODOLOGY

As a result of globalization and the development of digital technologies, symbols have moved beyond their functional scope in the traditional language system and are undergoing unique changes in a new communicative environment - the digital space. This process can be conditionally called the "transformation of symbols". Because in digital communication tools, symbols are acquiring new semantic aspects not only in visual form, but also in multimodal (combined with text, sound, video). First of all, **emoji and stickers** are considered as new semiotic units in linguistics. They are not simple graphic symbols, but carry a complex pragmatic load. The same emoji can have completely opposite meanings in different cultures. For example, the 🙏 symbol is used in the West to mean "prayer" or "gratitude", but in Eastern cultures it is interpreted more as "greeting" or "respect". This creates **cross-cultural misinterpretations in the digital space**. The second aspect is that **memes** and internet symbols are becoming an integral part of today's social discourse. A meme often loses its meaning outside of context or, due to its use in another context, creates a completely new semantic layer. Therefore, memes, as symbols, have **dynamic semantics**, and their meaning often changes. The third change is **technological differences**. The same emoji or symbol is displayed with different graphics on different operating systems (Android, iOS, Windows). As a result, semantic differences arise between users. This phenomenon can be considered as "form-content dissonance" from the point of view of semiotics. Also, in the era of digitalization, symbols are becoming **a central element of social and political discourse**. Brand logos, state symbols, or political slogans are subject to multiple interpretations on social media, sometimes causing serious diplomatic and cultural problems due to misinterpretation. Thus, in the era of digitalization, symbols undergo transformation, and their semantics become more dependent **on context, technological environment, and cultural codes**. Therefore, their misinterpretation is a natural phenomenon, and the linguistic and semiotic analysis of this issue is an urgent scientific task for today. Although symbols have become an integral part of the communication process in the era of digitalization, their misinterpretation is a common phenomenon. This situation is often explained by linguistic, semiotic and sociocultural factors. A systematic analysis of these factors allows for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of symbol perception.

ANALYSIS

Symbols are, first of all, **context-dependent signs**. If the context is not sufficiently reflected in the communication, a symbol or emoji can deviate from its original meaning and give rise to other interpretations. For example, the “😏” emoji is interpreted as an expression of sarcasm or humor in Western culture, while in Eastern countries it may be perceived as a more romantic or negative gesture. From the point of view of Peirce's symbol theory, such differences are explained by the fact that the symbol is **based on social convention**. **Cross-cultural differences**. The acceptance of symbols in each society is determined by its own cultural codes. Therefore, the same symbol can be interpreted in completely different ways in different cultural environments. For example, while white is a symbol of purity and renewal in European culture, it is understood as a symbol of mourning in some Eastern peoples. This is a **cross-cultural issue in digital communication** causes **misunderstandings**. **Technological factors**. Emoji and graphic symbols are displayed differently on different operating systems, platforms, or devices. For example, an emoji that represents a positive mood on iOS may appear in a different visual form on Android, suggesting a negative mood. As a result, **the mismatch between form and content** can lead to errors in interpretation. **Socio-psychological factors**. In digital communication, the meaning of symbols often depends on the personal experience, age characteristics and psychological mood of the users. Symbols and abbreviations used by young people may not be understood correctly by adults. Also, **memes** that are widespread on social networks are sometimes interpreted completely differently, even incorrectly, out of context. **Socio-political factors**. Some symbols have political and ideological content, and their different evaluations in different societies can cause conflicts. For example, some political slogans or symbols that are positively evaluated in one country may have negative connotations in another. This phenomenon can also create diplomatic problems in international communication.

In conclusion, the misinterpretation of symbols is formed at the intersection of linguistic, cultural, technological, psychological and socio-political factors. The era of digitalization further complicates this process, increasing the risk of misunderstandings in global communication. Therefore, the analysis of these factors from a scientific point of view is one of the urgent issues of modern linguistics and semiotics.

RESULT

As a result of the development of digital communication, new forms of symbols have emerged, which are becoming an important element of the everyday communication process. Unlike traditional written signs and classical symbols, symbols in the digital space have a more **multimodal nature**, that is, a combination of different codes such as text, image, sound and animation. This phenomenon represents a significant expansion of the symbol system from the point of view of semiotics and linguistics. Emojis and pictograms are the most widely used form of symbol in the digital space. They allow you to quickly and concisely express an emotional state, mood, or a specific situation. However, their meaning is often **context and culturally dependent**, so they are prone to misinterpretation. For example, the 😂 symbol represents laughter in European culture, but in the East it can sometimes be interpreted as mockery or sarcasm. GIFs and stickers are new visual tools of digital communication, often used to enhance emotional impact or to

figuratively express a certain social situation. Their **dynamic semantics** means that the same GIF can be interpreted in completely different ways by different users. Memes are one of the most common symbolic forms in modern digital culture. They often consist of short text and images, representing a specific social event, phenomenon, or stereotype. The uniqueness of memes lies in their **rapid semantic transformation**: a meme created in relation to one event or situation can be used in a completely different context in a short time. In this sense, memes are considered **dynamic symbols**. Another symbol form that has emerged in the digital space is **hashtags (#)**. They serve not only as a means of categorizing text, but also as a means of symbolizing social movements (#MeToo, #StayHome, #BlackLivesMatter). Abbreviations (such as LOL, BRB, IMO) are becoming widespread in communication as new **linguosemiotic units**. In the digital space, brand logos, political slogans or graffiti symbols often become **ideological symbols**. For example, some logos are reproduced on the Internet with exaggerated, satirical or ironic connotations, which radically changes their meaning. **In conclusion**, the new symbols formed in the digital space are sharply different from traditional semiotic systems. Their main features are **dynamism, multimodality, and a tendency to be contextless**. This, in turn, increases the possibility of misinterpretation of symbols and creates the need to study them as a separate object of scientific analysis. Misinterpretations of symbols in the digital space are becoming increasingly common. Such misunderstandings are often explained by **cultural differences, technological differences, lack of context, and socio-discursive factors**. The following is an analysis of their most important manifestations. The same symbol can have completely opposite meanings in different cultural environments. For example, the “👍” symbol represents a positive assessment or approval in the West, but in some Middle Eastern countries it is considered an insult. Similarly, the color white, which symbolizes purity and renewal in European culture, can be interpreted as a symbol of mourning in Eastern cultures. Such differences often lead to misunderstandings in digital communication. Emoji and other graphic symbols are rendered differently on different operating systems. For example, the “😬” emoji on iOS indicates a slight discomfort, while on Android it is interpreted as a smile or a bared tooth. As a result, semantic inconsistency occurs among users. The correct interpretation of a symbol is often closely related to the context in which it is used. If a symbol is used out of context, it can be interpreted in a completely different way than its original meaning. For example, the symbol “😏” can mean friendly humor, but in some situations it can also be interpreted as sarcasm or sarcasm. Internet memes and slogans are often perceived differently by different social groups. A meme that is funny or positive to one group may be perceived as offensive or negatively stereotyped by another group. For example, some political memes may be viewed as derogatory to national or religious values. The misinterpretation of certain symbols also has serious consequences internationally. The misuse of state symbols, flags, or logos can cause diplomatic conflicts. For example, there are cases where the inappropriate use of religious or national symbols in the logos of some companies has caused social unrest.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the phenomenon of misinterpretation of symbols is multifaceted, arising from a complex intersection of linguistic, cultural, and social factors. The speed and ubiquity of digital communication further exacerbates the

consequences of such errors. Therefore, a scientific analysis of these phenomena is essential for ensuring the sustainability of global communication.

The misinterpretation of symbols not only causes misunderstandings in simple communication, but also leads to broader social, political, and cultural problems. The consequences are multi-layered and manifest at different levels. Misinterpreted symbols in the digital space often lead to emotional discomfort, mistrust, and a breakdown in communication between individuals. For example, a friendly message can be perceived as cold or aggressive due to a misinterpreted emoji. This reduces the quality of interpersonal communication. Misinterpreted symbols in cross-cultural communication can lead to inter-community conflict and the intensification of negative stereotypes. This process negatively affects not only the individual level, but also the relationships between entire social groups. For example, the misuse of religious or national symbols can provoke heated debates on social media. Misinterpretation of symbols sometimes leads to diplomatic conflicts. Incorrect use of state symbols or misunderstood symbols in a political context creates misunderstandings and even contradictions in international relations. Such situations are also actively used in information wars and political propaganda. Misinterpreted symbols in the digital space can sometimes lead to legal consequences. For example, some symbols can be interpreted as symbols of extremism or hatred. As a result, the user may be accused of distributing illegal content. Misinterpreted symbols can also negatively affect a person's mental state. For example, a message sent with positive intentions can be misinterpreted and cause a person to feel worthless, depressed, or aggressive. From the perspective of linguistic and semiotic research, the misinterpretation of symbols requires new methodological approaches. Computational linguistics, artificial intelligence, and automatic translation systems also face this problem, as they cannot fully take into account context and cultural differences. This leads to serious errors in practical applications.

The process of interpreting symbols in the digital space is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon of modern communication. The study showed that cases of misunderstanding of symbols mainly occur due to **intercultural differences, technological details, lack of context and socio-discursive factors**. Such errors can lead not only to misunderstandings in the process of simple communication, but also to broader social, political and cultural consequences. The speed and global reach of digital communication make it even more difficult to control the meaning of symbols. Interpersonal distrust, cross-cultural misunderstandings, political and legal conflicts, as well as psychological discomfort have been noted as the most important consequences of this problem. At the same time, cases of misinterpretation of symbols in artificial intelligence and automatic translation systems also pose scientific and practical problems. Therefore, to ensure the correct interpretation of symbols in the digital space, it is necessary **to combine linguistic, semiotic, cultural studies and technological approaches**. Only on the basis of multidisciplinary integration will it be possible to fully analyze the meaning of symbols, their role and impact in global communication. In this sense, an in-depth study of this topic as an object of scientific research is of urgent importance today, both theoretically and practically.

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