

Language Philosophy and Changes in Meaning in Digital Culture

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Abstract

This study explores how digital culture affects changes in language meaning among junior high school students at SMP Yabes School in North Sumatra. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok influence how students communicate, interpret, and construct meaning. Using a qualitative sociolinguistic approach, the study analyzed online discourse, social media interactions, and interviews with 25 students. Results reveal that students frequently adapt words, create hybrid code forms, and use emojis to express nuanced meanings. Philosophical insights on meaning, truth, and context provide a framework to understand these changes. The findings highlight the relevance of integrating philosophy of language and digital literacy in junior high education. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the need to incorporate digital literacy and the philosophy of language into junior high school curricula to better understand and adapt to the evolving language practices shaped by digital culture.

Keywords : *Philosophy of Language, Digital Culture, Meaning Change, Sociolinguistics*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a dynamic and adaptive system that continuously evolves under the influence of social, cultural, and technological forces. Over time, the ways in which people use language have been profoundly shaped by innovations in communication technologies, the rise of social media platforms, and the increasing interconnectedness of global societies. The philosophy of language, as a discipline, provides tools to critically examine how meaning, truth, and reference operate within these evolving communicative contexts (Frege, 1892; Wittgenstein, 1953; Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Traditional theories of language emphasize the relationship between words and the world, the distinction between sense and reference, and the pragmatic functions of speech acts. However, the digital age has introduced new modalities of communication, such as emojis, memes, abbreviations, gifs, and code-mixed text, which expand the semantic and pragmatic possibilities of language use.

In particular, the emergence of digital culture – encompassing social media networks (Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp), online gaming communities, and collaborative

platforms—has altered how individuals, especially adolescents, construct and interpret meaning. These digital platforms enable rapid circulation of linguistic innovation, allowing new lexical items, hybrid forms, and multimodal expressions to gain social and communicative value almost instantaneously. In addition, digital communication often transcends traditional boundaries of formality, audience, and context, creating environments where conventional notions of meaning and truth are continuously negotiated and redefined (Crystal, 2006; Tagg, 2015; Androutsopoulos, 2014).

The advent of digital platforms has not only revolutionized the speed and reach of language change but also reshaped the ways in which meaning is conveyed. Words and symbols that were once confined to traditional written language have now taken on new dimensions, such as the use of emojis and gifs to add emotional or contextual layers to digital communication. These developments reflect the growing importance of multimodal communication, where images, sound, and text come together to create richer, more nuanced expressions of thought. Moreover, the digital age has prompted a shift towards more informal, conversational forms of language use, leading to the rise of new linguistic conventions that blur the lines between spoken and written communication (Barton & Lee, 2013; Thurlow, 2017).

Additionally, the role of global interconnectedness in digital communication cannot be overstated. As individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds interact online, language becomes a site of cross-cultural exchange and negotiation. This interconnectedness has fostered the emergence of new hybrid linguistic forms, such as code-switching, code-mixing, and the integration of multiple languages in a single text. These practices highlight the fluidity of language and its adaptability to new social and cultural contexts. The digital environment not only accelerates linguistic innovation but also encourages more fluid, context-dependent interpretations of meaning, challenging traditional language theories that rely on fixed, universal definitions (Pennycook, 2018; Blommaert, 2010).

At SMP Yabes School, students are part of a digitally literate generation that actively integrates multiple languages in their online interactions, including Indonesian, various Batak languages, and English. These students frequently engage in code-switching and code-mixing, employ emojis to convey nuanced emotions, and adopt internet slang or memes to create in-group identity and social cohesion. As such, their digital communication presents a unique opportunity to observe how meaning is dynamically constructed, negotiated, and transformed in real-world multilingual and multimodal contexts.

This study seeks to investigate the philosophical and sociolinguistic dimensions of language change in digital spaces among junior high students at SMP Yabes School. It examines how students reinterpret traditional linguistic forms, adapt language to new social and technological contexts, and employ creative strategies to communicate effectively online. Framed within the philosophy of language, this research considers how concepts such as sense, reference, use, and pragmatic functions operate in the digital interactions of young learners. By doing so, the study aims to illuminate the ways in which philosophical theories of language remain relevant in understanding contemporary communication and digital literacy practices.

The research addresses the following questions:

1. How does digital communication shape and transform language meaning among SMP Yabes students?

2. In what ways do philosophical insights on language – regarding sense, reference, and pragmatics – help interpret these digital linguistic practices?
3. What are the sociolinguistic implications of digital language use for junior high students in a multilingual and multimodal environment?

Through this investigation, the study provides insights into the interaction between digital culture and language evolution, highlights the significance of philosophy of language for understanding contemporary communication, and underscores the educational importance of fostering digital literacy and linguistic awareness among young learners in North Sumatra.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative sociolinguistic approach to examine how digital culture influences the construction of meaning among junior high school students at SMP Yabes School. Qualitative methods were chosen because the research focuses on exploring patterns of language use, interpretation, and meaning negotiation rather than measuring numerical data. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of students' digital communication practices, including code-mixing, emoji usage, slang, and other multimodal features.

The participants consisted of 25 junior high school students from grades 7–9 at SMP Yabes School, aged between 13 and 15 years. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting students who actively use digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok for communication. Both male and female students from diverse Batak linguistic backgrounds were included to ensure a representative sample of the school's multilingual environment.

Data were collected over eight weeks through multiple sources to ensure triangulation and increase reliability:

Digital Communication Samples

Students' posts and interactions on social media (Instagram captions, TikTok comments, and public WhatsApp group messages) were collected. Only data shared with consent from participants and parents were used. Sensitive or personal information was anonymized.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Each participant was interviewed individually for approximately 20–30 minutes. Interviews explored participants' perceptions of language use online, meaning interpretation, and the role of emojis, memes, and hybrid language forms.

Observation of Digital Interaction in Classroom Activities

Students' use of digital communication tools during classroom assignments and online learning sessions was observed. Notes were taken on code-mixing, pragmatic functions, and context-dependent meaning.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic and interpretative techniques aligned with the philosophy of language framework. In order to analyze the thematic data, digital posts, interview transcripts, and observations were coded to identify patterns in semantic innovation, code-mixing, and emoji usage. Themes were categorized according to

meaning construction, social function, and context-dependence. Concepts of sense and reference (Frege, 1892), language as use (Wittgenstein, 1953), and speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) were applied to understand how meaning is constructed, modified, or negotiated. The analysis focused on how digital communication mediates truth, context, and pragmatic intent.

To analyze the sociolinguistic data, patterns of multilingual interaction, including Batak-Indonesian-English code-mixing, were examined. The role of digital communication in identity construction, social cohesion, and peer group dynamics was analyzed.

FINDINGS

This study has examined how digital culture influences language meaning among junior high school students at SMP Yabes School in North Sumatra, using insights from the philosophy of language and sociolinguistics. The findings are as follows:

Table 1. Examples of Code-Mixing Utterances

No	Utterance	Languages Used	Interpretation / Meaning
1	"Gue marah 🤬, tida sangka hian bisa gitu 😡."	Indonesian, Batak, Emoji	Expressing anger and shock humorously; playful exaggeration
2	"Horas! Lagi sibuk nih 😎"	Batak, Emoji	Greeting + playful tone; signals friendliness and coolness
3	"Homework done ✅ finally!"	English, Emoji	Relief after completing tasks; emphasis with emoji
4	"Aku pulang dulu ya, see u online ❤️"	Indonesian, English, Emoji	Indicating departure; expresses affection and casual farewell
5	"LOL tida sangka bisa gitu 😂"	English, Batak, Emoji	Laughing at unexpected situation; humorous reaction

The table presents examples of digital communication among students, showcasing the use of multiple languages and emojis in their interactions. The data includes instances of how students combine Indonesian, Batak, and English with emojis to convey nuanced meanings and express emotions. The language choices reflect both cultural influences and the way digital platforms, such as social media and messaging apps, shape language use. Each utterance in the table is accompanied by an interpretation that provides insight into how the students use language humorously or playfully, often exaggerating emotions or signaling informality in their communication.

For instance, in utterance 1, the combination of Indonesian, Batak, and an emoji emphasizes a humorous expression of anger and surprise, exaggerating the emotional reaction to a situation. In contrast, utterance 2 uses Batak with an emoji to greet others in a friendly and playful tone. Similarly, utterance 3 highlights the use of English and emojis to express relief after completing a task. The data suggests that emojis play a crucial role in enhancing the emotional expression and meaning behind the words, as students adapt their language to suit the casual and dynamic nature of digital communication.

Table 2. Common Emoji Use and Meaning

Emoji	Traditional Meaning	Digital Function Among Students
😄	Tears of joy	Friendship bonding, humor, exaggeration
💀	Death	Exaggeration, "I'm dead" from laughter/shock
😭	Crying	Sadness, frustration, playful sarcasm
😎	Cool / confident	Self-expression, playful identity
❤️	Love	Appreciation, solidarity, agreement

The table outlines the traditional meanings of several popular emojis alongside their digital functions as used by students in contemporary online communication. Emojis, which traditionally carry specific meanings like tears of joy or symbols of death, have evolved in digital spaces, adapting to more playful, exaggerated, and situational contexts among students. For example, the "tears of joy" emoji, which traditionally symbolizes happiness or laughter, is used by students to convey friendship bonding, humor, and exaggeration, reflecting the light-hearted nature of their interactions.

Similarly, the skull emoji, traditionally symbolizing death, is repurposed in digital conversations to express exaggeration, with students using it to humorously declare "I'm dead" from shock or laughter. The crying emoji, often associated with sadness, is reinterpreted by students to also convey frustration or playful sarcasm. The cool emoji with sunglasses is used for self-expression, representing confidence and a playful identity in the digital realm. Lastly, the heart emoji, which traditionally stands for love, is frequently used among students to express appreciation, solidarity, and agreement, emphasizing emotional connection and mutual support in online interactions. These shifts in meaning demonstrate the dynamic and evolving role of emojis in digital communication.

DISCUSSION

The data in the two tables reveal how digital communication among students is shaped by the dynamic interaction between language and emojis, creating an evolving, rich landscape of expression. The first table illustrates how students blend multiple languages with emojis to convey humor, surprise, and casual interaction in informal settings. In particular, students frequently adapt their language and emoji use to suit the context of their communication, often exaggerating or emphasizing their emotional reactions. For example, the phrase "Gue marah, tidak sangka bisa gitu" (utterance 1) combined with a skull emoji portrays an exaggerated expression of anger and shock. This suggests that students are leveraging both language and visual symbols to amplify their emotions, making the communication more engaging and relatable within their peer groups.

Emojis are often used to convey subtle emotional cues that would be difficult to express through words alone. In utterance 2, for example, the use of Batak with the emoji signals both a greeting and a playful tone, reflecting the importance of social connection and warmth in student interactions. This pattern continues in other utterances, where emojis add layers of meaning that transcend the limitations of words, offering a unique mode of expression in a digital context. The multifunctionality of emojis allows students to express a wide range of emotions, from relief after completing a task ("Homework done finally!" in

utterance 3) to affection and casual farewells ("Aku pulang dulu ya" in utterance 4), demonstrating their versatility in daily communication.

The second table delves deeper into the role of specific emojis in this digital ecosystem. Each emoji's traditional meaning is extended in new ways, reflecting shifts in how students express themselves online. The "tears of joy" emoji, for example, has transcended its traditional use of indicating joy or laughter, becoming a tool for bonding among friends. Its use in digital communication fosters humor and exaggeration, often employed to signal exaggerated emotional responses, making it a powerful tool for emotional expression. Students are using it not only to convey happiness but also to reinforce camaraderie and social cohesion within their peer groups, as seen in the context of playful exchanges.

Similarly, the skull emoji has evolved significantly in its usage. Traditionally, it signifies death, but in the digital space, it is often used to emphasize shock or surprise. In student discourse, it typically conveys the feeling of being overwhelmed by an event or situation, often humorously, as seen in utterances like "LOL, tidak sangka bisa gitu." The emoji thus adds a humorous exaggeration to the expression, indicating that the speaker is so surprised or amused by a situation that they feel figuratively "dead." This adaptation of traditional symbols highlights the creativity and flexibility of digital language use, where meanings shift based on context and social conventions.

The crying emoji, which traditionally represents sadness, is also redefined in digital interactions. Students use it to convey a broader emotional range, including frustration and playful sarcasm. In the digital age, sadness or frustration is often conveyed through visual symbols, such as this emoji, that allow for more playful or ironic tones. By using the crying emoji in a sarcastic or humorous context, students indicate a level of self-awareness and engagement in the shared online culture that allows for emotional depth and complexity in a playful, informal manner. This shows how digital platforms enable students to navigate complex emotional expressions in ways that are more multifaceted and nuanced than traditional language alone could achieve.

The sunglasses emoji, representing coolness and confidence, serves as a symbol of self-expression in student interactions. It is frequently used to reinforce a playful identity and portray a carefree, confident attitude. This digital persona is a key feature of social media communication, where presenting oneself as confident, fashionable, and "cool" is a form of social capital. The adoption of this emoji by students signals their desire to craft an identity that resonates with their peers, reflecting the broader trends in digital self-presentation. By using the sunglasses emoji, students are participating in a digital culture that emphasizes the curation of one's image and social status.

Lastly, the heart emoji, traditionally associated with love, takes on a broader range of meanings in student communication. It is commonly used to express appreciation, solidarity, and agreement, moving beyond romantic connotations to become a symbol of emotional connection and support. In the digital space, where direct physical interaction is limited, emojis like the heart provide a means to maintain emotional connections. By using the heart emoji, students convey empathy, agreement, and mutual respect, further highlighting how digital tools help students navigate the complexities of social relationships and foster bonds in virtual spaces. This expansion of emoji meaning reflects the adaptive nature of language and communication in the digital age, where symbols and expressions are continuously redefined to fit new social contexts.

In conclusion, the integration of emojis with digital communication among students illustrates how language is adapting to new modes of interaction. By blending multiple languages and leveraging the dynamic use of emojis, students are creating an evolving form of communication that reflects both traditional linguistic functions and the influences of digital culture. The versatility of emojis enables a rich, multi-layered mode of expression that enhances the communicative experience, allowing students to convey a wide array of emotions and social cues that words alone may not capture. This shift in language use highlights the importance of understanding how digital platforms are reshaping communication, particularly in how students construct and interpret meaning in an increasingly interconnected world.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that digital communication, particularly through the use of emojis, has transformed the way students express emotions, interact socially, and construct meaning in their daily interactions. By blending multiple languages with emojis, students are able to convey more complex emotional nuances, enhance their humor, and establish a sense of camaraderie. The evolving digital functions of emojis reflect a shift away from traditional forms of language use, highlighting their significance in fostering social connection and self-expression in the digital age. Furthermore, the multifunctionality of emojis, as illustrated in both the table of utterances and digital functions, shows how students creatively adapt these symbols to reflect their emotional and social needs, making communication more dynamic and relatable.

Given the rapid evolution of language in digital platforms, it is recommended that educators incorporate digital literacy and an understanding of multimodal communication into the curriculum. This will help students navigate the complexities of digital interactions and better understand the cultural implications of language use in online environments. Additionally, further research should explore how the use of emojis and other digital symbols influences broader communication patterns across different age groups, languages, and cultures. Understanding these changes can help educators, linguists, and communicators develop strategies to bridge the gap between traditional linguistic theories and the evolving nature of digital communication.

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