

FROM DENOTATION TO PRAGMATICS: WHEN EMOJI ‘UNIVERSALITY’ BREAKS DOWN IN ENGLISH–UZBEK ONLINE INTERACTION*Jalilova Nilufar Toxirjon qizi**Independent researcher***Abstract**

This extended abstract argues that universality mainly holds at the denotative level (the recognizable pictorial referent), while connotative and pragmatic meanings are localized through cultural norms, platform conventions and interactional expectations. Using English and Uzbek computer-mediated communication as a comparative case, we outline recurrent sites of misalignment (e.g., politeness cues, irony markers, and face-work strategies) and describe how global online trends trigger semantic extension that is adopted at different speeds in the two discourse communities. We propose practical guidelines for intercultural digital literacy and suggest directions for culturally adaptive emoji modelling in NLP.

Keywords

emoji, universality, cultural pragmatics, English–Uzbek comparison, misinterpretation, semantic extension, digital literacy.

Emoji have become a standard component of CMC, providing compact cues for affect, stance and interpersonal alignment. Because emoji are pictorial and supported by global standards (e.g., Unicode), they are often assumed to be universally interpretable. However, cross-cultural interaction suggests that the same emoji may be ‘read’ differently depending on local norms of politeness, humor, hierarchy and relational distance. This is particularly important for languages that are under-represented in mainstream emoji research, including Uzbek.

Basic affective emoji such as 🙄 or 😊 tend to be interpreted similarly across English and Uzbek because they map onto widely recognizable facial expressions. Divergence increases when emoji function as pragmatic operators (softeners, irony signals, stance markers). For example, 🙄 can be a neutral friendly tone cue in English, but in Uzbek it may be used more systematically to mitigate potential tension and to maintain harmony.

Intercultural misalignment often concentrates around emoji with wide pragmatic ranges. Examples include 🙄, 😊, and 🙄. In Uzbek interaction, 🙄 may be strongly associated with polite gratitude, apology or respectful requesting. In English online discourse, the same emoji can also appear in playful or alternative readings (depending on community conventions), which may surprise Uzbek interlocutors. Similarly, 😊 and 🙄 are common irony/teasing cues in English, but in Uzbek semi-formal contexts they may be evaluated as overly informal or boundary-crossing.

A recurring contrast concerns social distance and hierarchy. Uzbek digital etiquette is often sensitive to age and status asymmetries, which constrains the use of certain playful or strongly evaluative emoji in interactions with seniors or in official contexts. Emoji are frequently used to cool

down directives and disagreements and to maintain respectful alignment. English informal CMC, while not free of politeness, more readily tolerates overt stance and playful sarcasm among peers, making emoji a conventional device for explicit irony signaling.

Emoji meanings expand through metaphor and metonymy (semantic extension). In English CMC, this process is often rapid and widely diffused through online subcultures. In Uzbek CMC, new readings may enter via global platforms but can be filtered by local norms and generational differences. Table 1 summarizes comparative tendencies in semantic/pragmatic change.

Table 1. Tendencies in emoji semantic/pragmatic change (English vs Uzbek)

Type of change	English CMC	Uzbek CMC
Semantic extension	Fast and highly productive	Slower, more cautious uptake
Near-lexicalization (fixed pragmatic uses)	High	Partial
Ironic interpretation	Widespread	More restricted
Multimodal integration (emoji + memes/stickers)	Strong	Moderate
Generational gap	Relatively smaller	Relatively larger

First, intercultural digital literacy should treat emoji as culturally embedded pragmatic resources, not as universal pictograms. Second, translation and localization of online content should account for emoji-supported tone. Removing or replacing emoji may alter illocutionary force (e.g., turning a soft request into a blunt directive). Third, NLP applications should avoid treating emoji as universal sentiment tokens. Culturally adaptive models need to represent mitigation and face-work functions, and should be calibrated with language and community-specific data.

Emoji are only universal in a limited denotative sense. In English–Uzbek interaction, pragmatic interpretation is shaped by local norms of politeness, irony, hierarchy and discourse genre. Recognizing emoji as pragmatic operators helps explain misinterpretation and supports more robust intercultural communication practices.

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