USING AND UNDERSTANDING OF SEMIOTIC ELEMENTS IN ONLINE MEDIA

Dr. Jonida Cungu
Department of linguistics,
University of Elbasan "Aleksandër Xhuvani", Albania
jonida.cungu@uniel.edu.al

Abstract

Symbolic activity widely disseminated through online communication has become a media communication trend in recently. The signs that are used to replace language are adapted in such a way that they serve as models of meaning, which symbolically link perception to cognition. Through the use of these signs in communication, we manage to distribute our knowledge in different meaningful situations, which have an effect on the common use of language.

This paper aims to describe and analyze the development of symbolic meanings (combination of written text with different visual forms) in media communication, through the expression and content they convey in communication. Understanding text and language richness in visual meaning systems (emoji and language) will be evidenced from social networks (i.e: Facebook) and online media, using observational and descriptive methods. The collected data show that the images in the text play the role of a meaning system interacting with the language, manifesting thoughts and perceptions through the emotional attitude of the speaker. At the end of this paper, it will be shown that images play a special role in media communication, because they convey connotative meanings as forms of expressions and emotions, which are combined with the common use of language.

Keywords: media online, communication, sign, meaning system, interaction.

1. Introduction

The Internet age is reflecting significant changes in the paradigm of human communications. The beginnings of written communication through pictograms or icons are considered to be the first traces of writing of the most primitive forms, which have no connection with the sound composition of the word. These pictograms appear frequently in online communication today, producing new forms of writing through the use of signs. Conventionalization is a process where signs evolve from being motivated (e.g., iconic), to becoming more and more conventional, sometimes to the point where the relationship of meaning to form appears arbitrary (Konrad et.al. 2020). Currently, there is an increased interest in the communication sciences regarding the role that non-linguistic elements play in communication. The interaction of non-linguistic elements (in our paper we will refer to the pictographic images used in the social networks Facebook in the statements of politicians) with communication reflects a model of extended meaning, where attitudes and emotions are interwoven simultaneously.

This paper analytically describes the use of pictographic images in media communication through social networks (mainly Facebook), in order to interpret the lingusitics and meaning interactivity of language-pictogram within a certain context. For the realization of this work, the data has been collected from the Facebook posts of the heads of European countries have been analyzed the cases where the pictographic images in media discourses were used. The interpretation of the language-pictogram semantic connection reflects new features in online communication through linguistic interaction, which

according to Logi, L. & Zappavigna, M (2021) is called co-text. The purpose of this paper is an attempt to understand the role of the interaction of non-linguistic elements in media communications, as well as the contextual meaning they reflect in specific communicative situations. Another important aspect within the aims of this paper is the assessment of the social impact that it has on communication. Given that the type of communication that has been analyzes refers to the statements of top politicians on social network Facebook, we intend to argue and prove that:

- pictographic images interact with language producing a coherent meaning in communication
- pictographic images are always chosen in accordance with the context in which they are used, having specific roles and functions
- the use density of pictographic images reflects their semiotic, semantic and pragmatic function in the role of a new communication they offer in social networks.
- language interacted with visual images is recently being looked at in another aspect, the creation of models of meaning in a new type of communication, where the writing and the visual aspect are intertwined.

The origin of picture-words (emoji) comes from Japanese, whose authorship belongs to the Japanese Shigetaka Kurita in 1998 (Danesi, M. 2016). Over time, as well as with the intensity of the use of written communication through individual social networks, the use of pictographic images would know an increased development, such as, that their presence in any communication has become so natural, that it seems that the replacement of linguistic and non-linguistic means is fully acceptable and accessible. Emoji are a subcategory of what Herring and Dainas (2017) classify as 'graphicons' (graphical icons) a classification of graphical features found on social media platforms, while the first recorded case of emoticon use occurred in 1982 on the Carnegie Mellon bulletin board, emoji was created in Japan in 1997 (Logi, L. & Zappavigna, M: 2021). In 2015, a truly remarkable event occurred. The emoji known as "Face with Tears of Joy", was chosen by the Oxford Dictionary as the "Word of the Year." Not only was it not a word, it was a pictogram, but it was chosen by one of the most prestigious dictionaries in the world (Danesi, M. 2016).

Pictographic images are becoming incresingly more popular within people, as their greatest use is seen in daily communications on social networks. It seems that people have borrowed this new communication in their use of online communication networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.). The joint using effect creates the possibility of cultural and emotional rapprochement between people, avoiding social and cultural diversities. Also, the presence of pictographic images in communication shows that communication is developing in another dimension, in the growth of the semiotic perspective of communication. They carry a special importance regarding the meaning of the media message that is worth studying within the meaning system, how these signs are used in media communication to interpret. Systems of meaning are also interpreted by Chandler (2002, p.41) where it is stated that: "Iconic and indexical signs are more likely to be read as natural than symbolic signs when making the connection between signifier and signified has become habitual. Iconic signifiers can be highly evocative. Such signs do not draë our attention to their mediation, seeming to present reality more directly than symbolic signs". The idea of continuous development and evolution of signs towards symbolism is also supported by Pierce (1931).

2. Methods

Descriptive and analytical were the methods used for the realization of this study. There have been monitored the Facebook social network accounts of the Prime Ministers of 48 European countries, where quantitative data was collected on the use of pictographic images in their media discourses. There have been identified cases of interweaving of language and pictographic images and has been analyzed the linguistic interactivity in certain contexts of the use of this type of media discourse. It has been compared the use density of pictograms from one statement to another and has been evaluated the language that creates such text, where the interaction of linguistic and non-linguistic signs produce and create a new type of communication, where non-linguistic elements are spread in the social media discourse.

The object of this study is related only to Facebook as a social network. The observation of Facebook for 48 prime ministers of European states was carried out during the month of April 2023, i.e. for 30

days. First, we registered the heads of european states according to the official website of the Council of Europe, who had an active facebook social network. Data were recorded manually for each post made, focusing on the linguistic functions of pictographic images, consisting of semantics and pragmatics in communication.

Quantitative data on the use density and the type of non-linguistic elements in media communication have been used for the theoretical interpretation of the study. We want to prove and argue that the study of communications where language interacts with pictographic images reflects the different types of meanings being derived from linguistic contexts.

3. Results

Society today is being faced with the fact that images have completely influenced human communication, taking the role of the developer of various features in writing and reading. The use of pictographic images is frequently encountered today, not only in casual discourse. If until now it has been considered the most used visual element in individual social networks (WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, etc.), now it seems that it is also widely used in the political statements of senior officials, therefore they are part of the written political discourse. This means that pictographic images are gaining a different status in the framework of communication, because they manage to generate meanings in the symbolic systems where they are used. The question arises whether: are they considered simply as a contemporary style in communication or do they carry meanings that completely replace written graphics for reasons of time economy and emotional enrichment? The interweaving of words and images produces a new system of worldwide communication, where emerges the natural connection of words with pictures. This communication system should be perceived on two planes: in the way people have begun to read and understand the messages, i.e. in the reading plane (the word is read and the picture is perceived as a word in the reader's consciousness) and in the way they have begun to express and write messages, thus, in the writing plane (the word is perceived as a word and as a picture at the same time).

Social media communication reflects the use of language interwoven with various signs in order to better express textual and cultural meaning. In the age of the "electronic global village" where people of different national languages and cultures are in frequent contact through online interactions, the emoji code might well be the universal language that can help solve problems of comprehension that international communications have always involved in the past (Logi, L. & Zappavigna, M: 2021). But in this paper we will prove that the use of pictographic images in the media communication of senior politicians has mostly the function of linguistic economy and the function of cultural interactivity. Such communication seems to be a bilateral linguistic contract: between the writer and the text, since the use of these signs has become part of the textual and semantic structure on the one hand, and between the writer and the reader on the other hand, which binds the two parties in affective way. Although according to the analysis of Danesi (2016) in the texts which are classified according to the discourse function, it was found that the main uses of emoji are to convey emotions and to serve the phatic function, it seems that with their increase in the use intensity in different types of communication, they have become integral parts of the text structure. In this way, we find ourselves in front of a new type of communication, where signs are as present as the linguistic tools.

We collected data from the social network accounts of the Prime Ministers of 48 European countries regarding the use of pictographic images in their communications during April 2023 and it turns out that: 16 or 33% of politicians do not use pictographic images in their media communications, 9 or 18% of them they use them seldomly and 23 or 49% of them have a dense use of pictographic images (Table 1).

607

Table.1 Density of use of pictographic images by politicians in online media communication
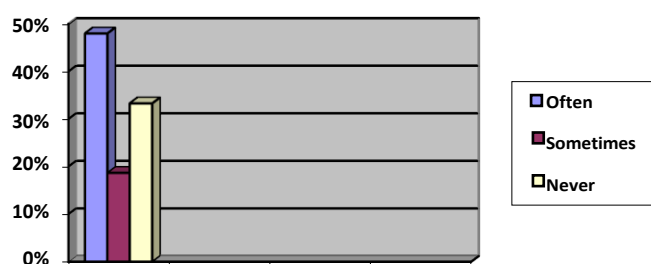
From the data collected in the selected texts of media communications of the senior politicians, it results that the most used pictographic image is the flag sign , the handshake sign , the heart sign , the check mark sign and the right and down arrow sign . Politicians generally include in their texts a myriad of pictographic images, which are coherent with the context of the writing posted on the social network. These images are present in almost all communications of politicians and have a high intensity of use in each post. According to various sources, such as Unicode, there are over 800 emoji characters commonly supported across most platforms. These include mainly core items (Danesi, 2016), while in the online communications of the political leaders of the European countries, during April, about 250 types of pictographic images were used in their posts. Emojis are used with different intensity from one politician to another, but those that present communication with a higher diversity of pictographic images are the heads of state of Albania, Poland, Montenegro, Slovakia, Hungary and the United Kingdom (Table 2). In their posts for April 2023 only, have been counted around 2528 pictographic images being placed in the function of media communication materialized in nearly 240 types.

Table.2 Amount of pictographic images used most by politicians of different European countries
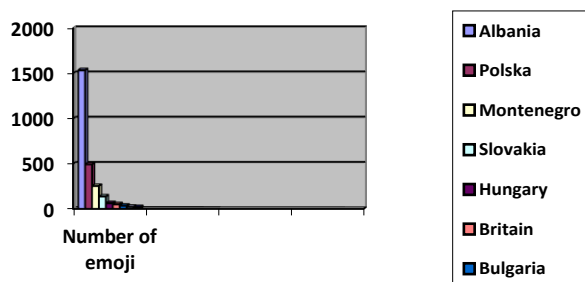
Such a high number of different types of emoji shows that these signs have become part of the structure of written communication, which is reflected in signs in addition to words. They belong to a special type of language, where the sign text is combined with the written one. The political discourse is constructed in such a way, where pictographic images are not only used as introductory or closing elements of the sentence, but also as substitutes for words with a special linguistic function. In this way, their replacement is sometimes essential and sometimes marginal. This means that their meaning function is also essential or marginal, depending on the words they replace. Such an idea has also been put forward by Danesi (2016), who states that "Trends such as these are leading to the need for more and more diversity in the emoji code leading, in turn, to the emergence of what has been called here a peripheral (subsidiary) lexicon to supplement the core one for specific or specialized communications. The share of pictographic images in media communications differs from each analyzed individual. Although their use in written communication tries to preserve the formal nature of communication, it is noticed that their positioning is extending throughout the text. The exception is the case in using the right and down arrow, check mark and thumbtack signs which are always placed at the beginning of the text. The use of these signs carries a certain meaning, which is related to the demand for increased attention towards communication. Images play the role of a code, to dictate the reader to a presentational

frame of communication, which carries special meaning from the very beginning with the use of right and down arrow, check mark, warning and thumbtack signs, for example: ⚠️ *It's important! Only one month left until the deadline for applications for the first mobility call of the new initiative "Culture Moves Europe".* 🤳 *You can apply untill 31 May 2023. here* 👉, (Marya Gabriel: 28 April).

The opposite happens with some other pictographic images, such as: folded hands, handshake, raised hands, clapping, smiling face, thumbs up, backhand index pointing right, etc., which are almost always found at the end of sentences, even at the end of a complete text, such as: *Philip and Pope Francis.* 🙏 (Viktor Orban 29 April). We think their interpretation is related to the closing role in the sentence, which is realized through the presenting function. Such uses of pictographic images apply to the communications of European heads of state in their social networks to illustrate the conative meaning of the message they convey. Emoji have been observed at the end of sentences to clarify their tone or mark their ending far more than they substitute for lexical items or homophonous letters (Duerscheid & Siever, 2017). In the examples being analyzed, we identify cases where pictographic images are used more densely than words in a given text. So words are spared to be replaced by pictographic images. This fits with the simple two-unit grammatical units of pronunciation that we use in communication (Cohn, N. et al 2019), while the enrichment of the missing grammatical units is supplemented by pictographic images. The interaction of these elements is realized in full coherence, producing an understandable and interesting text in terms of the way and type of use of pictographic images.

But do emojis manage to replace the language tool in communication, to create interaction with language to enable a full understanding of the media discourse? Every image used has a literal and interpretable meaning when being used. They are in the function of the system of meaning of the text, although often it is created the impression that they are complementary rather than illustrative. It seems that their diversity in use is passing the phase from pictographic image to ideographic image, as the meaning and semantic shades of the images are increasing added everyday to communication. Emoji typically encode ideational meaning through iconic representations of physical entities, processes and qualities (Logi & Zappavigna, 2021). From the semantic point of view, we are interested in observing the relationships that are created between visual representation and references, including objects, things and ideas (Fan, 2006) For example: in one of the posts of the heads of European counturies announcing the construction of a new stadium for fans of the local team, which has achieved consecutive victories, the communication is accompanied by pictographic images that create ideographic relationships with the written text (*I know that football is a very important topic for the residents of Silesia. This is at least proven by the fact that two teams from Silesia have a golden star* ⭐, *has the most Polish championship titles, after Legia Warsaw.* 🏅 *We keep our promises, we are reliable and we want as many fans from Silesia to enjoy cheering on the new stadium as soon as possible!* 🇵🇱🏟️🟦⚽ (Mateusz Morëiecki: 26.04.2023).

The social relationship that is created between the written text and the pictographic image in communication, regarding to us, is related to the connotative ways (Barthes, 1968), whose aim in the text is to implicate the mendtioned objects in order to accompany the denotative meaning given through the written text. Thus, they form a kind of interlaced code between the denotative and connotative aspects, merging into the text as a whole, linguistic tools and pictographic images. This case, as well as many others evidenced in the posts of European heads of state on Facebook, prove that pictographic images have become part of the structure of the written text. In all cases of their use, pictographic images aim to affirm or reinforce the written text. Placed at the beginning, in the structure or at the endof the text, they appear as accompanying words in the written text. They provide contextual informationthat facilitates the processing and understanding of verbal messages, as well as social information aboutthe emotional state and personality traits of others (Boutet et al: 2021). This means that we are in the conditions of a new type of communication, where the reinforcement of thought is provided simultaneously with words and images. The identification of such realizations shows significant semantic features of the discourse in function of the affirmative or supporting role of pictographic images.

If we were to group them according to the meaning they carry or convey, then the pictographic images would represent:

-pictographic images that describe concrete objects (Gawne&McCulloch, 2019). This group includes pictographic images that refer to people, animals, nature, food, drinks, travel, places, activities, events, objects, symbols, flags, etc., such as: "Montenegro on the right track!
👷👷 *Opening the vodka factory.* ✅ *4000 bottles per hour will be produced. Montenegro on the right track!* 🇲🇪❤️🇪🇺" (Dritan Abazovic: April 13). This is the group most used by heads of state in their online communications. We think that this is related to the need to concretize and reinforce each of their statements, in order for the communication to have a convincing effect.

-pictographic images used to illustrate. This group includes pictographic images that refer to different sports and different professions, which in most cases are also represented by a human figure performing the action, such as: *You are an inspiration* 👷👩‍🔧👩‍🍳👩‍🏭👩‍⚕️💃🏃👩‍🎤 (Edi Rama: April 27).

-pictographic images that are used with emotional impact: hearts, faces, hands, etc., such as: *Happy Birthday, King Philip* 🎂 (Alexander de Croo: April 15). This group of pictographic images seems to be used to create a positive attitude towards the readers, which is concretized with the dependence that is created between the interlocutors due to the approximation that these pictographic images bring.

Table. 3 The role and function of pictographic images according to representation groups in social network texts by heads of state

Type of emoji	Role of emoji	Function of emoji in the text
Pictographic images used to illustrate	Introductory/Closing role	Presentation function
Pictographic images depicting concrete objects	Accompanying role	Reinforcement function
Pictographic images that have an emotional use	Affective role	Psycho-social function

Understanding the interpretation of a text through the use of pictographic images seems to emphasize their role as accentuating words, reinforcing ideas and thoughts, as well as expressing a particular word. They serve to illustrate, describe or emphasize the sensitivity of the speaker. Therefore, emoji can provide contextual information that improve the processing of the content of verbal messages (Boutet et al: 2021).

4. Discussion

The issue that raises discussions lies in the fact whether pictographic images have only a media effect and demonstrative function of words or have a multilingual effect and an essential function in the content of a writing. The identification of typical achievement of pictographic images in online communications of social networks and their semantic features were analyzed in the interpretation of interactive relations that the speaker establishes between the use of linguistic and visual text. These typical achievements depend on the contextual nature they create and the meaning potential they present. We need an answer as to why the linguistic nature and behaviour of emoji have not been studied more, analyzing, for example, how far it is possible to stretch the theory on the linguistic condition of emoji, given its morphological and syntactic simplicity (Ferrari, E. 2023). From the data used to analyze the role and function of pictographic images, it is thought that their use in communication reflects the interaction they have with words in a written text.

The presence of pictographic images in the political discourse presents us with a new type of communication, which resembles speech, where spoken language and gestures are combined. Emoji are often used to express emotions, but they are also effective in conveying semantic meaning in

communication (Na'aman et al., 2017). This type of interaction with full communication efficiency is widely embraced, it seems that communication in social networks has taken on another dimension: a language (written language) and interactive gestures (pictographic images). Such approach of the study of pictographic images has been done by other studies, which have analyzed emoji in this perspective (Goldin-Meadow 2003a). Perhaps the increasing use of emoji and other visual signs in internet communications is going to change how alphabet-using cultures will eventually reshape or modify their writing practices (Danesi, 2016).

The use of pictographic images in the political statements of the European heads of states on Facebook social network account also present linguistic functions. This is argued with their order in the sentence, which we find at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the sentence, but also the reinforcing function is an element that connects them more with the linguistic function. Although emoji are sometimes used in isolation, they are most often accompanied by surrounding text (Miller, H. et al, 2017). The need to reinforce their statements with both means at the same time: linguistic and visual, makes us think that pictographic images play the role of the synonymous or polysemic aspect of language, given that they accompany words in most cases, such as: With the Kombardo Ekspressen all over our beautiful country under the sun☀️ (Mette Frederiksen: April). If we were to read a post from political communications where the use of pictographic symbols is absent, the doubt about the ambiguity of the conative aspect in the text would increase. This opinion is also expressed by Hand (2022) "In other words, when processors encounter an emotionally-neutral text without an emoji, there might be a reasonably normal distribution of valence perceptions, with a (sharp) peak around the neutral mid-point".

The frequency of using pictographic images for every post in political communications seems to be entering a new era. If until now pictographic images were part of mobile written communication, now we have them present in official communications as well. Their broader cultural significance has rocketed them into the popular and academic spotlight, with proclamations that emoji are an "emerging language" (Cohn, N. et al, 2019). Their influence on the text is multiplaned, which proves to us the existence of a new era of the way we communicate, which has been radically transformed. Rather, like gesture, emoji are context-sensitive and have far more flexibility in use than language (Gawne&McCulloch, 2019).

Conclusions

Pictographic images (emoji) have become a contemporary phenomenon of writing. The spread of their use has exceeded the limits of informal communication, appearing even as part of the official statements of the heads of state on social networks. They now serve as models of meaning, symbolically connecting perception and cognition. Since the use of pictographic images is universal nowadays, we think that the spirit of universal communication is developing, which is realized by the interconnection and interactivity of writing and visual.

Linguistic and meaningful interactivity in media communication is proven through the presence of pictographic images in political discourses, which produce a bilateral linguistic contract: between the writer and the text and between the writer and the reader. Textual structure is the interconnection of linguistic and visual tools. The use of pictographic images prove the fact that they are mostly in the text in the referential, descriptive, illustrative and companion in communication role, as they serve as signifiers or referents in the context in which they are used. Therefore, the communication acquires referential features, given that they are used as markers with special identification value in the sentence. The signs have an extended position throughout the text, also illustrating the conative meaning for which they are used. In many cases, the pictographic images in a given text are encountered more densely than words, replacing the meanings of words with a sign for reasons of time economy and emotional enrichment. They also exhibit linguistic functions, being in the role of the synonymous or polysemic aspect of the language due to the associative nature of the words in the text.

Pictographic images put us in front of the interest to study further the communication sciences and specifically in the direction of the visual language, which is increasingly being used, placing us in front of the new era of universal communication, where the language of written and visual are intertwined.

Reference List

1. Barthes, R. (1968). Elements of semiology. Hill and Wang, 1968.
2. https://sites.evergreen.edu/arunchandra/wp-content/uploads/sites/395/2018/07/barthes.pdf
3. Boutet, I. LeBlanc, M. Chamberland, J.A. Charles, C.A. (2021). Emojis influence emotional communication, social attributions and information processing. Computer in human behaviour, vol. 119, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106722.
4. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563221000443
5. Chandler, D. (2002). Semiotic the basic. Taylor & Francis Group, London, ISBN 0–203–01493–6. http://www.wayanswardhani.lecture.ub.ac.id/files/2013/09/Semiotics-the-Basics.pdf
6. Cohn, N. Engelen, J. Schilperoord, J. (2019). The grammar of emoji? Constraints on communicative sequencing. Cognitive research: Principles and implications 4, article nr. 33.
7. https://cognitiveresearchjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41235-019-0177-0
8. Danesi, M. (2016). The semiotics of emoji. Bloomsbury advances in semiotics. https://pdfcoffee.com/bloomsbury-advances-in-semiotics-marcel-danesi-the-semiotics-of-emoji-the-rise-of-visual-language-in-the-age-of-the-internet-2016-bloomsbury-academicpdf-pdf-free.html
9. Fan, J.P. (2006). Charles Morris's semiotic models and analytical studies of visual and representations in technical communication. Journal of technical writing and communication, vol.36, issue 2. https://doi.org/10.2190/B8XB-VY4R-R792-DQJG
10. Ferrari, E. (2023). The study of emoji linguistic behaviour: an examination of the thesis rised (and not raised) in the academic literature. Communication and society journal, doi: 10.15581/003.36.2.115-128.
11. Gawne, L. & McCulloch, G. (2019). Emoji as digital gestures. Language at internet, vol.17.
12. https://www.languageatinternet.org/articles/2019/gawne
13. Goldin-Meadow, S. (2003a). Hearing gesture. How our hands help us think? The Belknap Press of Harvard university Press. ISBN 0-674-01072-8.
14. Hand, Ch. Burd, K. Oliver, A. Robus, Ch. (2022). Interactions between text and emoji types determine perceptions of both massages and senders. Computer in human behaviour reports, vol. 8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2022.100242
15. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2451958822000768
16. Konrad, A; Herring, S.; Choi, D. (2020). Sticker and emoji use in facebook messanger: Implication for graphicon change. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, vol. 25, issue, 3. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmaa003
17. Memushaj, R. (2014). Hyrje nw gjuhwsi, Botimet Toena, Tiranw, Shqipwri. ISBN 978-99943-1-988-6.
18. Miller, H. Kluver, D. Thebault-Spieker, J. Terveen, L. Hecht, B. (2017). Understanding Emoji Ambiguity in Context. The Role of Text in Emoji-Related Miscommunication. Proceedings of the Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media.
19. file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/14901-Article%20Text-18420-1-2-20201228%20(1).pdf
20. Na'aman, N. Provenza, H. Montoya, O. (2017). Varying linguistic purposes of emoji in (twitter) context. Proceedings of ACL 2017, Student Research workshop, Association for computational linguistics, page 136-141, Vancouver, Canada.
21. A social semiotic perspective on emoji:
22. How emoji and language interact to make meaning in digital messages
23. A social semiotic perspective on emoji:
24. How emoji and language interact to make meaning in digital messages
25. Logi, L. & Zappavigna, M. (2021). A social semiotic perspective on emoji. How emoji and language interact to make meaning in digital messages. New media and society journal. DOI:10.1177/14614448211032965

26. Ollivier, B. (2015). Shkencat e komunikimit. Teori dhe arritje. Shtwpia botuese Papirus, Tiranw, ISBN: 978-9928-4256-4-5. (Tittle of original: Les sciences de la commucation).
27. Pierce, Ch.S. (1931-1958). Collected Papers of C.S. Peirce. Ed. By C. Hartshore, P. Wesis, & A. Burks, 8 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
28. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1331&context=si_facpub