

**EMOJI AS ILLOCUTIONARY CUES IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED
COMMUNICATION: A COMPARATIVE PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH
AND UZBEK SPEECH ACTS**

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Abstract. This article examines how emoji function as illocutionary cues in English and Uzbek digital discourse. Drawing on speech act theory and politeness pragmatics, we describe the ways emoji modulate the illocutionary force of requests, directives, evaluations, irony and humor. The analysis shows that English CMC frequently employs emoji for overt stance marking and irony signaling, whereas Uzbek CMC tends to use emoji more systematically for mitigation, face-saving, and maintaining respectful social distance, especially in asymmetrical relations.

Keywords: emoji pragmatics, speech acts, illocutionary force, computer-mediated communication, English; Uzbek, politeness, intercultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

Text-based online interaction routinely requires participants to manage affect, stance and interpersonal relations without the acoustic and visual cues available in face-to-face conversation. Over the last two decades, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has therefore developed a rich set of paralinguistic resources, including emoticons, emoji, stickers and GIFs. Among these, emoji have become especially prominent because they are highly conventionalized, quickly accessible on most devices, and capable of operating as compact visual signs inside the linear flow of text. In everyday practice, emoji do far more than ‘decorate’ messages. They can calibrate the tone of an utterance, disambiguate a potentially face-threatening move, invite alignment, or signal irony. Prior research has shown that paralinguistic markers in CMC can affect the perceived illocutionary force of an utterance and help interlocutors infer communicative intent [5]. At the same time, semiotic approaches emphasize that emoji constitute a dynamic sign system whose meanings expand through metaphor, metonymy and platform-specific conventions [4,6].

A persistent assumption in popular discourse is that emoji form a universal visual language. However, the same emoji can convey different interactional meanings across languages and cultural contexts, especially at connotative and pragmatic levels. These divergences become particularly salient in intercultural online communication, where misinterpretation may arise even when participants share a working knowledge of each other’s languages. Despite the growing literature on emoji use in major languages, comparative pragmatic analyses involving Uzbek remain scarce. Uzbek digital discourse is shaped by culturally salient norms of respect, indirectness and face-management, which may influence how emoji are used to mitigate requests, soften directives or maintain social distance. English digital discourse, by contrast, is often characterized by relatively high tolerance for overt stance marking and playful irony in informal interaction. A systematic comparison can therefore shed light on the interplay between universal affordances of emoji and culturally specific pragmatic constraints.

METHODS

The study combines a pragmatic perspective on illocutionary force [1,11] with politeness and face-work approaches [2] to describe how emoji operate as cues to communicative intent in CMC. In this view, an emoji does not simply add emotion; rather, it functions as a pragmatic operator that can (a) soften or strengthen a directive, (b) mark stance and evaluation, (c) signal irony/humor, or (d) negotiate relational alignment (solidarity vs distance).

RESULTS

Across both languages, emoji regularly function as paralinguistic cues that help interlocutors infer the speaker’s attitude and the intended illocutionary force. However, the comparative analysis reveals patterned differences linked to cultural norms of face-work and interactional expectations. Table 1 summarizes the dominant tendencies observed for major speech-act domains.

Table 1. Emoji-supported speech acts in English and Uzbek CMC

Speech act	English CMC (dominant tendency)	Uzbek CMC (dominant tendency)
Request	Often softened with emoji; optional politeness marker in informal talk	Emoji frequently supports obligatory politeness and respect strategies
Directive/command	Emoji may mask directness (playful tone) or mark stance	Emoji commonly reduces harshness and helps maintain social harmony
Evaluation	More overt and direct stance marking	More indirect and cautious evaluation, especially with status differences
Irony	Emoji widely used to make irony explicit	Emoji-marked irony is more restricted; context and relationship matter
Humor	Frequent and explicit use	More common in close circles; strongly context-dependent

Requests are a core domain in which emoji operate as mitigators. In English informal CMC, the addition of a ‘friendly’ emoji at the end of a request (e.g., ,) commonly frames the move as non-threatening and cooperative: Example (English): *Could you send it today?* . Here the emoji functions as a softener that reduces the perceived imposition and signals positive relational alignment. Importantly, in English the request can remain pragmatically acceptable without emoji, especially among peers; emoji is therefore often an optional politeness marker.

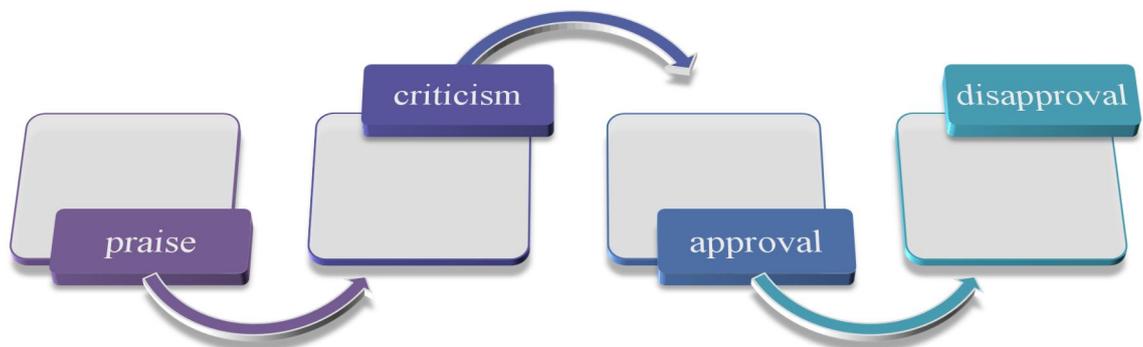
In Uzbek CMC, mitigation is also present, but it is more systematically tied to culturally salient norms of respect and indirectness. Even among peers, the speaker may prefer to add a softening emoji to maintain harmony; in asymmetrical relations (e.g., junior → senior) the use of politeness cues becomes more obligatory. Emoji such as , , or are frequent in please/thank

you sequences: Example (Uzbek): *Iltimos, bugun yubora olasizmi? * / *Rahmat **. In this configuration, emoji support not only friendliness but also a culturally expected respectful stance. The same visual sign (e.g., 🙏) may be interpreted as gratitude, apology, or a respectful request cue, depending on the context.

Directives in CMC are face-threatening by default because they impose on the addressee's autonomy. English informal discourse sometimes uses emoji to 'mask' the directness of a command by framing it as playful or light-hearted (e.g., 😊, 🙏), or by indexing friendly solidarity. For instance, an otherwise abrupt imperative (*Send it now*) becomes less confrontational with a softening cue (*Send it now 🙏*). Uzbek directives are more strongly constrained by expectations of deference and social appropriateness. Even when the communicative goal is urgent, the directive is frequently softened via lexical politeness markers (e.g., *iltimos*) and reinforced by neutral-positive emoji (🙏 / 😊) to reduce potential conflict. In practice, emoji become part of a broader strategy of lowering the temperature of the interaction, particularly when the interlocutors are not equal in status.

Evaluative speech acts (praise, criticism, approval, disapproval) provide a clear contrast between English and Uzbek emoji usage. English CMC commonly employs emoji as overt stance markers, including negative or sarcastic signs (😏, 🙄) that help encode dissatisfaction or ironic distance. Positive evaluation is likewise intensified by expressive emoji (😄, 😁). Uzbek evaluation tends to be more cautious in many contexts, especially when negative assessment could threaten the addressee's face. As a result, negative emoji are less readily used outside close relationships; instead, speakers may resort to indirect wording and mild softeners (😊, 🙏) that preserve social harmony. Praise and encouragement, by contrast, are often supported by positive emoji (😊, 🙏) that perform relational work by strengthening solidarity.

Irony in CMC is notoriously difficult because textual utterances lack prosodic cues. In English, emoji frequently serve as explicit irony signals and thereby reduce ambiguity. Conventional patterns include lexical praise + ironic emoji: Example (English): *Great idea 😏*; *Well done 🙄*. In such cases, the emoji effectively flips the literal evaluation and instructs the reader to interpret the utterance as non-literal. This makes emoji a pragmatic disambiguator and an illocutionary cue for ironic stance.



2-picture. Evaluative speech acts in English and Uzbek emoji usage

In Uzbek digital discourse, emoji-marked irony exists but appears more restricted. Its acceptability depends more heavily on the degree of familiarity between participants and on local norms of respect. In less intimate relations, irony may be avoided or expressed more indirectly.

When used among close peers, Uzbek can employ similar patterns (e.g., *Zo‘r-da*), but the pragmatic range is narrower and more sensitive to social distance.

Humor performs important relational functions in both languages. English CMC often uses emoji to amplify humor and invite shared laughter (,), making the humorous intent explicit. Uzbek humor is frequently stronger in close circles and may rely more on shared context; emoji still supports the humorous frame, but speakers may prefer safer, less face-threatening signals. As a result, the same laughing emoji may play a more conservative role in Uzbek public or semi-formal interaction.

DISCUSSION

The results support the view that emoji are best described as pragmatic rather than purely emotional markers. In both English and Uzbek, emoji participate in the construction of illocutionary force by cueing tone, stance and interpersonal orientation. Yet the comparison highlights how culturally embedded norms shape which pragmatic roles are preferred and which are constrained. A key difference concerns the cultural threshold for explicit negativity and irony. English informal discourse shows a relatively high tolerance for overt stance marking, including playful sarcasm. In this environment, emoji such as or operate as conventional irony signals that protect interlocutors from taking the literal reading too seriously. Uzbek discourse, while fully capable of irony, is more strongly regulated by norms of respect and appropriateness. As a consequence, the same emoji may be perceived as too informal or too direct in certain relationships, particularly where age and status asymmetry is salient.

These patterns align with politeness and face-work theory. In contexts where maintaining social harmony and ‘saving face’ is a central value, speakers may be more motivated to mitigate directives and negative evaluations. Emoji then become tools for reducing face-threat and for signaling goodwill without explicit verbalization. In English contexts, where friendly informality among peers is common, emoji can more readily serve as stance amplifiers and irony markers, because the social costs of explicit evaluation are often lower.

The findings also provide an explanation for why emoji universality breaks down in intercultural communication. Denotatively, emoji are recognizable icons. Pragmatically, however, they are embedded in local expectations about what counts as polite, humorous, or appropriate. Misalignment can therefore occur when participants project their own pragmatic conventions onto a partner’s emoji use. For example, an Uzbek speaker may attach to soften disagreement, while an English interlocutor may read the same emoji as merely friendly positivity (or, in some online subcultures, as passive-aggressive).

From an applied perspective, the study has implications for digital literacy and intercultural competence. Teaching materials and workplace communication guidelines often focus on verbal politeness, but they rarely address visual paralinguistic cues. Our analysis suggests that learners and professionals benefit from explicit discussion of emoji-supported speech acts, especially high-risk signs (e.g., , , ,) whose pragmatic ranges vary widely.

The results are also relevant to NLP. Sentiment and stance detection models frequently treat emoji as universal sentiment tokens. Cross-cultural variation in pragmatic function challenges this assumption and motivates culturally adaptive modelling. Systems trained primarily on English CMC may misclassify Uzbek emoji usage if they do not account for mitigation and face-work functions. Limitations of this work include the dynamic nature of emoji

semantics, platform-specific rendering differences, and the lack of large-scale frequency claims. Future research could complement the qualitative account with corpus-based statistics across platforms, age groups and interactional genres, and could experimentally test perception of emoji-supported speech acts in bilingual participants.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that emoji function as illocutionary cues in both English and Uzbek CMC, shaping how requests, directives, evaluations and non-literal meanings are interpreted. While denotative meanings are often shared, pragmatic interpretation is culturally patterned. English discourse tends to employ emoji more freely for stance amplification and explicit irony, whereas Uzbek discourse relies more systematically on emoji for mitigation, face-saving and respectful relational management. A three-dimension model (directness, affective intensity, relational alignment) captures these tendencies and can guide future comparative and applied work in intercultural communication and language technologies.

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