



## THE PRAGMATICS OF EMOJI IN AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Emoji Digital communication Pragmatics Awareness campaigns	<i>This article explores the pragmatic functions of emoji in online awareness campaigns within the framework of digital communication, a key element of contemporary capitalism. Emojis, often perceived as decorative symbols, serve crucial communicative roles, such as expressing emotions, enhancing text, and shaping meaning through context. Drawing from Austin's Speech Act Theory and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, the study analyzes five English-language awareness campaigns produced between 2014 and 2024. These campaigns use emojis strategically to reinforce messages and engage audiences across social media platforms. The article aims to contextualize emoji in digital discourse, outline their communicative potential in hybrid messages (text, audio, image), and show how they function pragmatically within structured speech acts. The research contributes to the broader field of linguistic studies by highlighting emoji as significant tools in virtual communication, particularly in digital campaigns that seek to raise awareness on social issues and foster public engagement</i>

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## 1. Introduction

Digital communication is one of the bases of the current stage of Capitalism globally. This kind of communication is the structure that allows information, money, and data to circulate throughout the world, including smartphones, computers, social media, and instant messaging apps. Using these resources, people communicate in a hybrid and multimodal way, i.e., using writing, speaking, pictures, audio, video, and so on. One of the most important phenomena that stands out within this range are the emoji, which are pictograms people use with the writing in online messaging.

According to Padilla (2024, p. 53), these pictograms are not only illustrations to what people talk or communicate online, but they also have communicative functions. These functions include emotion expression, conversational uses, textual indexing, and so on, with a diverse range of pragmatic functions, i.e., creating meaning through the interaction of words, emoji, and their specific context (Pagani *et al*; 2022, p. 10). For instance, if a person types "Hello, have a nice day! 😊" to a friend, the emoji "😊" adds meaning to the utterance, like a kiss or an intimate farewell.

Using the premises above, this article analyses the pragmatic functions of emoji in a specific act of speech called "awareness campaigns". As the name suggests, these campaigns are designed to conscientize people about social and relevant issues (Cavalcanti, 2013, p. 36). In the current context, the most effective way to broadcast these campaigns is online, using social media and smart gadgets, so this research analyses these texts in a virtual context. The analysed campaigns are in English and produced within the last ten years (2014-2024).

The pragmatics theories used to analyse these texts are the Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and the Speech Acts Theory (Austin, 1962), which guide the research. Five campaigns are analysed, which signals the importance of emoji in this context and how these resources can be useful when it comes to propaganda and digital communication. The campaigns appear aside the analyses to facilitate the reading and allow the pragmatic relations using the theories mentioned above.

### 1.1. Emoji

According to Danesi (2017, p. 2), *emoji* is an English adaptation of Japanese 絵文字 – while the *e* of emoji means 'picture', the *moji* stands for 'letter' or 'character'. Basically, emoji is a 'picture-word', as it has the two elements disposed together. They have been developed since the 1990s in Japan, where it was derived from the *kaomoji*, which are pictures produced with the keyboard characters, such as "^\_^" for a smiling face (Giannoulis *et al*, 2020, p. 3). Nowadays, a smiling face can be depicted as a real picture, i.e., the emoji "😊".

Another feature that makes emoji unique is the fact that they are encoded with fonts, using a system called *Unicode*. This consortium has been developing and updating emoji since 2009, reaching approximately 3,600 emoji in 2024 (Evans, 2017, p. 15). According to the author, emoji not only depict faces ("smileys"), like "😊", but also other features of the real and virtual world, like objects ("💡"), animals ("🐸"), symbols ("🕒"), and so on, representing a range of entities. Even though the emoji is not a language, it can be used with writing texts to express different meanings, specially in a pragmatic way (DANESI, 2017, pp. 182-183). According to this author, emoji are usually applied in informal conversations, such as online messaging and instant chats, expressing different communicative functions. Padilla (2024, p. 53) lists different functions of emoji in online conversations, whose main roles are pragmatic, including speech acts, emotions, illocutionary force, conversational functions, and paralinguistic roles (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Emoji's Functions

<b>EMOJI'S FUNCTIONS</b>		
<b>Function</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Speech Act</b>	An utterance that performs an action, a transformation in the real world, regarding to its intentions	A person sends an important document to an office via WhatsApp and the officer answers with "ok" or an emoji "👍"
<b>Emotions</b>	The visual resources can enhance the depiction of how the speaker feels when they say or write the utterance	When a person answers a message on WhatsApp with "ok", it can be followed by an emoji to represent their feeling on it ("😊", "😡", "😞", etc.)
<b>Illocutionary Force</b>	It modulates the intentions of an utterance in a speech act	If a person asks somebody to help them, a "❤️" can show they would be grateful if the person helped them
<b>Conversational Functions</b>	Emoji can be used to open or close a conversation. Besides, it can modulate pauses and give rhythm to a dialogue	At the end of a conversation, a person texts other with "Thank you 😊". This emoji can depict a farewell, closing a conversation in an intimate way
<b>Paralinguistic Roles</b>	Paralinguistic roles are resources rather than verbal used for communication, like pictures, gestures, non-verbal sounds, facial expressions, and so on	In all the examples listed above, the emoji expresses paralinguistic roles, representing emotions and gestures

Source: Source: Developed by the Author based on Padilla (2024, p. 53).

## 1.2. Awareness Campaigns and Speech Acts

The awareness campaigns are the communicative context where the emoji is analysed in this paper, relating to the propaganda area (Cavalcanti, 2013, p. 35). According to this author, the propaganda is the process of disseminating beliefs, doctrines, and ideologies by an organization in society, so it is never a neutral process. In this specific context, awareness campaigns are campaigns with the objective to conscientize people about a topic of collective interest and developed by a group with specific interests, like governments and companies (Paula, 2017, p. 115).

Considering that these campaigns have (a) an utterance to be said in a concrete way; (b) intentions that underlie this piece, according to the interest of their developers; and (c) an objective to conscientize and make some people perform or not something, they can be considered as speech acts, based on the definitions from Austin (1962). An example that illustrates that is on Picture 1 (next page), which depicts an awareness campaign produced by the Argentine Government in 2021 to convince people not to text while driving due to the risk of car accidents.

The utterance "Manejás o Mensajeás", which in Spanish means "Drive or Text", is what the campaign really expresses altogether with the crashed car and the *WhatsApp* logo. The intention behind this utterance, a crashed car, and a *WhatsApp* logo, one of the most used instant messaging apps in the world, is to express how driving and texting can be dangerous, so people should not do both, otherwise there might be accidents. Finally, the main goal is to conscientize the Argentine drivers not to text while drive, preventing accidents and main consequences in the society.

**Picture 1.** Example of an awareness campaign



Source: Gobierno de Córdoba, Argentina (2021).

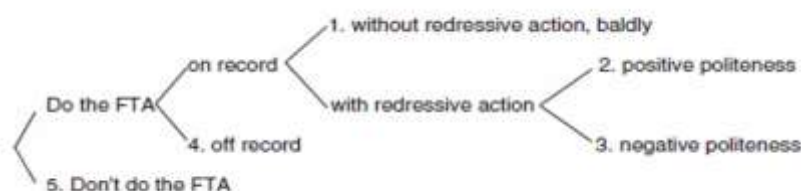
Austin (1962, p. 11) defines speech acts as statements that not only declare something, but also aims to act on something in the concrete reality of people. According to this British philosopher, speech is not merely a dimension of ideas, considering that these utterances, or speech acts, have an impact on concrete reality. Therefore, when a person driving in Argentina looks at this billboard, they will be affected by its content, even if this driver decides not to follow the campaign and keep texting while driving.

Furthermore, Austin (1962, p. 79) states that the speech acts have three dimensions: a) the locutionary, which is the awareness campaign in Picture 1 itself, the utterance; b) the illocutionary, its intention: to prevent car accidents due to the use of phones; and c) the perlocutionary, which is the transformation that this piece can perform in the Argentine society, which is a fact that escapes the control of whoever organizes the statement, depending on the interaction between the interlocutors and representing its main goal of promoting awareness of a topic or issue.

### 1.3. Politeness

According to Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 60), politeness includes a range of strategies used in human communication to keep the interlocutor's face. The basic idea is that people can respect or threaten the public image, i.e., the projected face of the people they are speaking to, varying in a spectrum of less or more polite strategies in their approach (Picture 2, below).

**Picture 2.** Face-threatening acts (fta's) and politeness



Source: Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 60).

To understand the scenario, a situation in which someone is annoyed by a noisy neighbour is analysed. According to the model, there are five ways to face the situation, starting with number 5, which is not telling them about the nuisance. Asking a person to turn the music volume down or off can be threatening to their face, so it is considered a Face-Threatening Act (FTA in the chart). Therefore, not performing this act is the first among the five options.

If the annoyed neighbour decides to perform the act, there is a second scenario that unfolds

into four subscenarios, including an on-record act with three options and an off-record act with a single option. This classification including on and off-record acts considers how direct the utterance is, when there is a direct strategy (on-record act) or there is an indirect utterance that implies it (off-record act).

The off-record act is the number 4 scenario, when the annoyed neighbour can knock the annoying one and say something like “I have a strong headache today”. This utterance has an implicature that is “If you turn your music off or at least down, perhaps my headache might be mitigated”. Therefore, they are not asking it directly, but in an indirect way (off-record FTA).

The on-record act splits out into three different scenarios (1, 2, and 3 in the chart). The first option is asking the neighbour directly to turn their music off or down. Therefore, the annoyed one can knock their door and baldly says: “Turn off/ down the music”, which makes the communication rude or too directive depending on the context the speakers are in (their proximity, hierarchy, culture, and so on).

Finally, the scenarios 2 and 3 include politeness strategies, which might be positive or negative. The positive politeness is used to reinforce the interlocutor’s face, including compliments, promises, optimism, or agreement. On the other hand, the negative politeness is used to show respect or deference to the interlocutor, trying not to invade their personal space, which includes apologizing, impersonal questions, pessimism, or generalisation.

For instance, approaching the noisy neighbour with “I love your music, but it’s a little bit late. Is it possible to turn it down a little bit?” shows positive politeness. Alternately, using an utterance like “I’m so sorry for asking, but can you turn down your music a little bit? Tomorrow I am waking up early” signals a negative politeness strategy.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 102 and 131), there are some strategies that might show positive (15) or negative (10) politeness (Table 2, on the next page):

**Table 2.** Politeness Strategies (On Record FTA’s)

<b>POLITENESS STRATEGIES (ON-RECORD FTA’S)</b>	
<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
(1) Notice, attend to H <sup>1</sup>	(1) Be conventionally indirect
(2) Exaggerate attention to H (e.g.: compliments)	(2) Question, hedge
(3) Intensify interest to H	(3) Be pessimistic
(4) Use in-group identity markers	(4) Minimize the imposition
(5) Seek agreement	(5) Give deference
(6) Avoid disagreement	(6) Apologize
(7) Presuppose/raise/assert common ground	(7) Impersonalize S and H: avoid the pronouns ‘I and ‘you’
(8) Joke	(8) State the FTA as a general rule
(9) Assert or presuppose S <sup>2</sup> ’s knowledge of and concern for H’s wants	(9) Normalize
(10) Offer, promise	(10) Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H
(11) Be optimistic-	
(12) Include both S and H in the activity	
(13) Give or ask for reasons-	
(14) Assume or assert reciprocity	
(15) Give gifts to H	
<sup>1</sup> H – Hearer / <sup>2</sup> S – Speaker	

Source: Developed by the Author based on Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 102 and 131).

Focusing on the awareness campaigns, they have somehow a face-threatening component for their audience, considering that they try to make them think about a collective issue and change their attitude towards it. Therefore, the emoji can be used as a powerful resource to make their appeal more polite in a positive or negative way. These concepts guide the analysis of the selected campaigns.

## **2. Objectives**

The general objective of the research is to analyse in a pragmatic perspective emoji in online awareness campaigns in English within the last decade (2014 to 2024). The main concepts that guide the analysis are the Austin's Speech Act Theory and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. In a more specific outlook, the objectives include:

- Contextualize emoji in the universe of digital communication;
- Outline the communicative functions of emoji in a hybrid context;
- Situate the speech act within the awareness campaigns according to Austin (1962) in their relationship with emoji;
- Analyse pragmatically five online awareness campaigns in English that contain emoji produced between 2014 and 2024, using the Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987).
- Contribute to the linguistic research on emoji and its articulation with digital communication.

## **3. Methods**

This research is guided using a qualitative methodology (Leffa, 2006, p. 2). Therefore, it gives an interpretative treatment to the chosen awareness campaigns, through a pragmatic perspective based on Austin (1962) and Brown and Levinson (1987). Regarding its level of research, this article presents an explanatory type, since it aims to analyse the pragmatic character of emoji in the context of awareness campaigns and digital communication.

The research procedures include a documentary approach (Gil, 2002, pp. 45-46). Different awareness campaigns that use emoji pictograms and produced in English were collected from the internet and different social media, considering their range. Finally, the field of application of the results collected is mainly the Linguistics. Furthermore, the project can also contribute to the areas of Digital Communication and Non-Formal Education, considering the specific context of the awareness campaigns.

## **4. Discussion**

In the first analysed campaign, produced in 2014 by a French organization called “Innocence en Danger”, there is a picture of a male individual with a face that resembles a popular emoji (“😓”), such as depicted in Picture 3 (on the left side), which is below. Besides the picture, there is an utterance that asks the audience “Who’s really chatting online with your child?”, whose main objective is to alert parents about the risks of online interactions between their children and potential paedophiles (on the right side).

Considering the use of the photo, the emoji, and the question, this campaign uses an off-record FTA strategy, asking indirectly the parental audience about the risks of the online interactions among children and their “friends”. Thus, the “😓” in the picture dialogues with the utterance approaching this sensitive topic in a mild way, aiming the attention and a conscientization of their target audience, which includes a parental population.



Picture 3. Awareness campaign #1



Source: <https://acortar.link/kcKcnu> (2014).

Following this pattern of indirect approaches, the campaign expressed on **Picture 4**, below, uses another off-record FTA strategy to approach another sensitive topic: drug addiction among children and teenagers, focusing on the used emoji. These icons try to establish communication with the target audience: kids and teens, who generally are more into emoji usage. The utterance that follows the emoji says: “not everyone gets it”. Therefore, it is clearly an off-record utterance, assuming it is a message directed to a specific audience.

Picture 4. Awareness campaign #2



Source: <https://drugfree.org/print/page.php?id=52581> (2015)

The campaign above is included in a series of different pieces directed to children and teenagers struggling to drug addiction. It was developed and published by an American organization called “The Partnership for Drug-Free Kids”, in 2015. As it tries to overcome the traditional bald utterance “Don’t take drugs, kids!”, it uses emoji and an indirect approach to catch their audience’s interest.

Some examples of on-record FTA strategies using emoji in awareness campaigns include the 2018 UNHCR’s piece showed on the next page (Picture 5). UNHCR is an acronym for “Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees”, which is an organization within the UN (United Nations) to protect and promote awareness on refugees around the world, who suffer in different countries with bigotry and xenophobia.

Picture 5. Awareness campaign #3



Source: <https://acortar.link/Xi7wil> (2018).

The campaign on Picture 5 shows a positive politeness on-record strategy since it uses at least six of the fifteen listed positive strategies in Table 2. At first, it seeks the audience attention by using different emoji (Strategy “#3: Intensify interest to H”). Besides, it highlights the diversity of refugees, fighting against prejudice and stereotypes on them (Strategies “#4: Use in-group identity markers” and “#12: Include both S and H in the activity”), once their big diversity might make different people relate to some of them. Finally, it has an optimistic approach of the topic (Strategy “#11), looking for agreement (Strategy #5) and discouraging disagreements (Strategy #6).

Next, Picture 6 shows a 2015 environmental campaign organized by the global “World Wildlife Foundation” (WWF) on the endangered animals. It claims that 17 of the existing emoji animals are endangered, asking for donations to help them. This campaign also uses a negative politeness on-record strategy, showing a pessimistic view on it (Strategy #3) and approaching the issue with a general rule (Strategy #8).

Picture 6. Awareness campaign #4



Source: <https://acortar.link/wWR01D> (2015)

Finally, the last analysed campaign mixes a direct on-record approach and some politeness features, as it is showed on the next page (Picture 7). It was developed in 2022 by a British organization called “Fumble”, which focus on sexual education and awareness campaigns regarding to this content. It has a specific motto that claims, “Don’t google it, fumble it!”, directing the audience in a specific way.

Considering that the internet has spread a lot of online information, some of them are reliable and some are not. So that is the reason why Fumble claims their audience to look for reliable sexual information on the platform, using social media to promote it. Since this topic is considered a taboo for most people, it is quite common for children and teenagers to look for information on Google, sometimes getting instructions from unreliable sources.

Picture 7. Awareness campaign #5



Source: [www.rapp.com/case-studies/don-t-google-it-fumble-it/](http://www.rapp.com/case-studies/don-t-google-it-fumble-it/) (2022)

The example on Picture 7 shows a sequence of a story involving a sexual intercourse and a



negative result including the suspicion of a STI (Sexual Transmitted Infection), which panics sexually inexperienced people. The campaign shows some negative politeness strategies in the utterance “Most STIs don’t have symptoms”, as it is conventionally indirect (Strategy #1), but at the same time it has a baldly utterance, claiming for people to test regularly to check whether there is an infection.

## 5. Conclusion

Emoji are a valuable resource when it comes to digital communication, expressing a range of pragmatic functions in their relationship with writing. Having noticed that, the organisations which promote awareness campaigns are often using these resources to potentialize their conscientisation. As these campaigns are naturally speech acts, the emoji contribute to them as politeness strategies aside the written utterances.

The main result includes that emoji are used in the campaigns to give them a friendlier approach, interacting with pictures and other resources. They are carefully selected to attract their audience’s attention, making them aware of their social issues and trying to persuade them to a change on their attitude towards these challenges. Therefore, it is intrinsic that these campaigns bear an ideological component.

Also, the emoji can be used as politeness strategies, including on and off-record strategies. When it comes to off-record strategies, it is usually employed to deal with controversial or sensitive topics, trying to approach it in a lighter way. As an on-record strategy, it can vary among positive and negative politeness contexts. As a positive politeness feature, the emoji are used to make people interested in the topic of the campaigns, especially their target audience. As a negative politeness feature, these icons can be used to mitigate the controversial effects of polemic or sensitive content, aiming the attention of people who can have conflicts or issues with the campaign’s subject.

In the end, these research results can be useful to amplify the linguistic discussions on digital communication, multimodality, and the use of emoji in the context of awareness campaigns in a pragmatic approach. Most of the research on the emoji are concentrated in areas such as Design or Communication, while it is more concentrated in Education and Health when it comes to awareness campaigns, which broadens this discussion towards the language scope in a hybrid fashion.

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