



The Role of Semantic in Daily Conversation: How Words Construct and Convey Meaning

Risma Novalina Sagala,*¹ Bernieke Anggita Ristia Damanik²

¹²Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar

Email: pudanzrisma@gmail.com, bernieke.damanik@uhn.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to explore the role of semantics in constructing and conveying meaning in daily conversations. Using a literature review method, data were collected from primary sources such as linguistic textbooks and secondary sources including recent journal articles focusing on semantics, pragmatics, and digital communication. Findings show that semantic elements like word choice, connotation, denotation, and semantic fields interact with pragmatic aspects such as tone, pauses, and non-verbal cues to shape fluid, context-dependent communication. The analysis highlights that meaning is co-constructed between speakers and listeners, influenced by speaker intentions, listener background knowledge, cultural norms, and situational context. Overall, the study concludes that understanding semantics is essential for reducing misunderstandings and fostering more effective communication across various contexts.

Keywords: *Semantics; Meaning Construction; Daily Communication*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi peran semantik dalam membangun dan menyampaikan makna dalam percakapan sehari-hari. Dengan menggunakan metode tinjauan literatur, data dikumpulkan dari sumber-sumber primer seperti buku-buku teks linguistik dan sumber-sumber sekunder termasuk artikel-artikel jurnal terbaru yang berfokus pada semantik, pragmatik, dan komunikasi digital. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa elemen semantik seperti pilihan kata, konotasi, denotasi, dan bidang semantik berinteraksi dengan aspek pragmatik seperti nada, jeda, dan isyarat non-verbal untuk membentuk komunikasi yang cair dan bergantung pada konteks. Analisis ini menyoroti bahwa makna dikonstruksi bersama antara pembicara dan pendengar, dipengaruhi oleh niat pembicara, latar belakang pengetahuan pendengar, norma-norma budaya, dan konteks situasi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa memahami semantik sangat penting untuk mengurangi kesalahpahaman dan mendorong komunikasi yang lebih efektif di berbagai konteks.

Kata Kunci: *Semantik; Konstruksi Makna; Komunikasi Sehari-hari*

INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential tool that humans use to express thoughts, feelings, and intentions in various situations. It allows people to share experiences, build relationships, and solve problems through conversation. In both formal and informal settings, communication depends not only on grammar and vocabulary but also on how meaning is conveyed and understood. This is where semantics plays a central role. As a branch of linguistics, semantics studies how meaning is formed, interpreted, and influenced by context in everyday language use.

Semantics is not only concerned with the literal meaning of words found in dictionaries. It also explores how meaning can change depending on context, intonation, cultural background, and speaker intention. For instance, a simple word like "fine" can express satisfaction, anger, or sarcasm depending on the situation and the speaker's tone. This shows that meaning in language is dynamic, flexible, and often influenced by non-verbal elements. Understanding these subtleties is crucial for effective communication in real life.

Previous studies have emphasized how context plays a major role in shaping meaning. Research by Jurafsky and Martin (2021) and Yule (2020) has shown that meaning is not static; it shifts according to the medium of communication and the participants involved. These scholars also noted how digital communication brings new challenges to semantics, especially since non-verbal cues like tone and gestures are often missing in texts or messages. Other research highlights that cultural differences can lead to misinterpretations when words or expressions are understood differently across cultures.

In today's globalized and digital world, problems such as ambiguity, cultural misunderstanding, and lack of contextual cues are more common. For example, what seems polite in one language or culture may be seen as rude or unclear in another. In text-based conversations, the use of emojis, punctuation, or even capital letters can cause confusion if interpreted differently by each person. These issues show the importance of studying how semantics works not only in spoken but also in digital communication.

This study aims to explore how people construct, interpret, and adjust meaning in everyday conversations, both in spoken and digital contexts. It also focuses on identifying the strategies people use to reduce or avoid misunderstanding. The main problem addressed in this study is how speakers manage meaning when facing ambiguity, cultural gaps, and the limitations of non-verbal cues. By analyzing these aspects, the research hopes to offer both theoretical insights into how meaning works in different situations and practical guidance to improve communication across various settings.

METHOD

This study employs a literature review method to explore how semantics contributes to the construction and communication of meaning in daily conversations. The literature review approach was chosen to allow an in-depth analysis of various theories and previous research without collecting field data. The data in this study are drawn from two types of sources: primary and secondary. Primary sources include key books in the fields of semantics, pragmatics, and linguistics, such as works by Yule (2020), Saeed (2023), and Jurafsky and Martin (2021). Secondary sources consist of recent international journal articles, conference proceedings, and supporting reference books discussing digital communication, emoji usage, and linguistic strategies in everyday interactions.

Data collection was carried out by systematically searching academic literature using scholarly databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and university digital libraries. The literature was selected based on specific criteria, including publication within the last 5–10 years, relevance to the research topic, and full-text accessibility. Once collected, the documents were analyzed to identify key themes, including the role of semantic components (such as word choice, connotation, and denotation), their interaction with pragmatic elements, and the application of textual devices in digital communication. Relevant studies were categorized and summarized to establish a strong theoretical foundation.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis techniques. The first step involved data reduction by organizing the literature according to main themes related to meaning construction in communication. Subsequently, the filtered data were presented descriptively in a narrative format to demonstrate how theoretical concepts relate to communication processes. Finally, systematic interpretation was conducted to draw conclusions about how words construct and convey meaning in daily interactions, both in face-to-face and digital contexts. This approach allowed the researcher to understand meaning as a contextual, adaptive, and socially influenced process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that meaning in communication whether in face-to-face conversations or digital chats is influenced by more than just words. In spoken interactions, non-verbal cues like tone, facial expression, and gestures play a crucial role in conveying the speaker's true intention. Meanwhile, in chat communication, users rely on written devices such as punctuation, emojis, capitalization, and specific word choices to express emotions, clarify meaning, or manage misunderstandings. These patterns show how semantic meaning is constructed and interpreted differently across communication modes. The following tables present the

key findings from both chat and face-to-face conversations, highlighting examples, types of meaning, and their contextual explanations.

1. Findings in Chat Conversation

<i>Sample Chat</i>	<i>Type of Meaning</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Okay.	Contextual / Ambiguous	May indicate agreement, indifference, or annoyance depending on the relationship and context.
I'M TIRED!!!	Emotive / Expressive	Use of capital letters and exclamation marks shows strong emotion—can express real exhaustion or just a complaint.
Sooo funny 😂	Emotive / Connotative	Using emojis and stretched letters emphasizes humor or closeness in a friendly way.
I mean...	Pragmatic / Clarifying	Used to clarify meaning and avoid misunderstanding.
Fine.	Ambiguous / Contextual	In chat, it can mean agreement or displeasure; often misinterpreted without tone.
K.	Pragmatic / Contextual	A very short response that may seem indifferent depending on who receives it.
Thanks 😊	Emotive / Politeness Marker	The emoji softens the message and expresses friendliness or sincerity.
LOL	Emotive / Filler	Often used not to indicate real laughter but as a conversation filler.
Whatever.	Emotive / Dismissive	Commonly used to show indifference or irritation.
?	Clarifying / Reaction	Can show confusion, curiosity, or ask for clarification.

2.Findings in Face-to-Face Conversation

Sample Utterance	Type of Meaning	Explanation
Okay. (spoken flatly)	Contextual / Pragmatic	Could mean agreement, indifference, or annoyance depending on facial expression and tone.
Fine. (spoken with a high tone)	Ambiguous / Expressive	Often used to end an argument though the speaker may still be upset.
I mean... (with eye contact)	Clarifying / Pragmatic	Used when the speaker wants to make sure the listener understands the intended meaning.
Whatever you say. (with a sigh)	Sarcastic / Ambiguous	Shows sarcasm or hidden disagreement.
I'm not mad. (with a stiff expression)	Potentially Contradictory	Might actually mean the opposite depending on body language and tone.
Thanks. (with a smile)	Emotive / Politeness	Expresses sincere gratitude, supported by body language.
Sure. (with a resigned face)	Contextual / Emotive	Can mean willing, reluctant agreement, or sarcastic consent.
I know, right? (with enthusiastic tone)	Agreement Marker	Used to show agreement or build social rapport.
OMG!!! (with a surprised expression)	Emotive / Expressive	Expresses spontaneous surprise.
Haha (with light laughter)	Emotive / Politeness	Sometimes used to ease tension, not necessarily because something is really funny.

The Influence of Non-Verbal Cues in Face-to-Face Communication

The findings from this study highlight the complex nature of meaning construction in both face-to-face and digital communication contexts. In direct human interaction, meaning is never limited to the lexical items used; instead, it is profoundly influenced by non-verbal cues such as intonation, facial expressions, body language, and even pauses in conversation. For instance, a word like "Okay" may signify agreement, sarcasm, or disinterest

based on the speaker's delivery. This reflects Yule's (2020) perspective that communication is a pragmatic and context-dependent process, where meaning extends beyond linguistic structures.

Face-to-face interactions allow for a richer conveyance of meaning due to the availability of these non-verbal cues. However, even in such settings, ambiguity still arises often intentionally, as in sarcasm, or unintentionally, due to misinterpretation. This finding underscores the importance of shared understanding and cultural norms in shaping how messages are encoded and decoded in interpersonal communication. For example, an utterance like "I'm not mad," when said with a stiff expression or cold tone, may carry a meaning entirely opposite to the literal words.

Conversely, digital communication presents unique challenges due to the absence of physical and auditory cues. In this setting, communicators often adapt by using textual devices capitalization, punctuation, letter elongation, emojis, and abbreviations—to replicate the nuances of face-to-face interactions. The analysis of chat messages in this study reveals that such devices serve not merely as decorative elements but as significant conveyors of emotional tone and speaker intention. The expression "I'M TIRED!!!" or "Sooo funny 😂" demonstrates how users encode emphasis and affect in digital texts. This is consistent with findings by Herring and Androutsopoulos (2020), who noted the evolution of digital paralinguistic markers as substitutes for non-verbal cues.

Additionally, the data highlights a shared human communicative instinct across both mediums the active use of clarification strategies. Expressions like "I mean..." or "Just to be clear..." frequently appear in both face-to-face and digital communications. This usage indicates a heightened awareness among speakers of the potential for misunderstanding, and a proactive approach to ensuring message clarity. Such strategies reflect the interactive nature of communication, emphasizing that meaning is co-constructed rather than simply transmitted.

The tendency for ambiguity in both spoken and written forms further supports the idea that meaning is fluid and often negotiated in real-time. In digital contexts, the risk of misinterpretation is heightened by the lack of non-verbal cues and the potential for delayed responses, which can alter the flow of interaction. In face-to-face communication, ambiguity can serve social purposes, such as softening criticism or expressing politeness, relying on the interlocutors' ability to pick up on subtle cues.

Another critical aspect is the role of cultural background and social context. The same expression may be understood differently across cultural groups or even among different social circles within the same culture. For example, the use of "LOL" might be perceived as genuine amusement in one context or as a dismissive remark in another. This variability underscores the

necessity of semantic awareness, particularly in a globalized world where cross-cultural interactions are frequent.

Overall, these findings confirm that effective communication is a dynamic, adaptive process that requires more than linguistic competence. It demands sensitivity to context, awareness of non-verbal and paralinguistic cues, and an understanding of how cultural and social factors influence interpretation. The ability to navigate ambiguity, employ clarification strategies, and adapt one's language to suit different mediums is crucial for maintaining meaningful and effective interactions.

Thus, this study not only validates existing theories on semantics and pragmatics but also emphasizes their practical application in everyday communication. It highlights the importance of teaching and fostering semantic awareness, especially in a digital age where traditional non-verbal cues are often absent. As communication continues to evolve with technological advancements, the insights from this research provide valuable guidance for individuals seeking to improve their interpersonal and digital communication skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, this study concludes that the process of meaning construction in daily communication is highly dynamic and influenced by various factors beyond the literal meanings of words. In face-to-face interactions, elements such as tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and situational context significantly affect how messages are interpreted. Non-verbal cues play a pivotal role in conveying the speaker's true intention and preventing misunderstandings.

In contrast, digital communication lacks these direct non-verbal elements, leading communicators to adopt alternative strategies like using emojis, capitalization, punctuation, and repeated letters to express emotions, emphasize meaning, or clarify intentions. These digital markers serve as vital tools to compensate for the absence of physical cues, yet they also carry a high potential for varied interpretation depending on the context and cultural background of the communicators.

The research also highlights a universal human tendency to actively manage meaning through clarification strategies. Expressions such as "I mean..." or "Just to be clear..." are used both in spoken and written communication as deliberate efforts to ensure the intended message is understood correctly. This behavior illustrates that effective communication is not a passive transmission of information but an interactive, negotiated process between speakers and listeners.

Furthermore, the role of ambiguity in both types of communication whether purposeful or accidental demonstrates the importance of semantic awareness. The ability to recognize potential ambiguity, adapt language use

accordingly, and anticipate possible interpretations by others is crucial for successful interaction in both personal and professional contexts.

Overall, this study underscores the essential role of semantics and pragmatics in daily conversations. It emphasizes that effective communication requires more than language proficiency; it demands context sensitivity, cultural understanding, and the ability to adapt communication strategies based on the medium and the interlocutor. As the landscape of human interaction continues to evolve, especially with the growth of digital communication, the insights from this research are expected to contribute meaningfully to both academic discourse and practical applications in interpersonal communication.

REFERENCES

- Halverson, C. M. E., Donnelly, C. E., Weiner, M., & Lee, J. L. (2023). Content analysis of emoji and emoticon use in clinical texting systems. *JAMA Network Open*, 6(6), e2318140. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.18140>
- Herring, S. C., & Androutsopoulos, J. (2020). Multimodal and digital communication. In E. O. Ustun (Ed.), *Digital interaction and semantics* (pp. 45–62). Routledge.
- Jurafsky, D., & Martin, J. H. (2021). *Speech and language processing* (3rd ed., draft).
- Kennison, S. M., Fritz, K., Hurtado Morales, M. A., & Chan-Tin, E. (2024). Emoji use in social media posts: Relationships with personality traits and word usage. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1343022. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1343022>
- McDonald, L. (2024). Making sense of emoji. *Philosophy*, 99(3), 413–435. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819123000409>
- Saeed, J. (2023). *Semantics* (5th ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Tagg, C., Seargeant, P., & Brown, J. (2022). The language of digital communication: Emoji, memes, and meaning online. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 182, 101–123.
- Tambunan, P. A. S., Endhita, K., Galen, R. N., & Sagala, R. W. (2025). The role of emoji in EFL student communication: An analytical approach. *ALTERA: Journal of Applied Linguistics, English Education, and Literature*, 1(1), 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.1234/altera.v1i1.2025>
- Yule, G. (2020). *The study of language* (7th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Zappavigna, M., & Logi, L. (2024). *Emoji and social media paralanguage*. Bloomsbury Academic.