

LANGUAGE ECONOMY: ABBREVIATIONS AND EMOJI IN SOCIAL MEDIA



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Andrijana Kjose, Mira Bekar

Ss Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, North Macedonia

ORCID iDs: Andrijana Kjose
Mira Bekar

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9996-9523>
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8649-6232>

Abstract. *The pervasive influence of abbreviations and emoji in social media communication is a subject of contemporary analysis, revealing insights into their multifaceted roles and implications. Abbreviations not only foster brevity and readability but also serve as linguistic markers, signaling group membership and reinforcing social identities (Thurlow and Brown 2003). Emoji enrich textual content by imbuing it with affective nuances and contextual cues, facilitating cross-cultural communication and engendering empathy in online interactions (Derks et al. 2008). Individuals navigate an interplay between linguistic and visual cues, utilizing contextual clues to infer meanings. For this qualitative study, a cohort of 15 participants, both English and Macedonian speakers, engaging in a total of 150 conversations across prominent social media platforms and 10 posts with comments on Reddit, formed a corpus for analysis. Textual data, were collected from diverse platforms including Viber, Reddit, Instagram, Telegram, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp. The findings show that 1) participants use abbreviations and emoji for the purpose of language economy and the aforementioned enrich language; 2) expressing emotional states on social media is made easier with abbreviations and emoji. We hope this research will encourage other scholars from various discipline to address this topic from different angles.*

Key words: *language economy, abbreviations, emoji, social media, chats*

1. INTRODUCTION

The effort to establish and maintain social connections, fulfilling personal and professional objectives, is primarily facilitated through online platforms. This study's significance lies in shedding light on how discourse and conversation analysis of everyday social activities,

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Corresponding author: Andrijana Kjose

Ss Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje

E-mail: andrijana.taseva.flf@gmail.com

such as online chats, contribute to a deeper understanding of our personal and professional development as individuals, highlighting language's role as a form of social action. Our motivation was to undertake a comprehensive investigation, categorizing Netspeak usage in social media across both English and Macedonian contexts, without directly comparing chatting practices between the two languages. Instead, our focus was on identifying the primary motivations behind participants' use of abbreviations and emoji in social media chats and examining how this usage influences language economy.

The concept of language economy was introduced by André Martinet in his *Économie des changements phonétiques* (1955). Martinet studied the manifestations of economy in phonology and syntax and defined it as the unstable balance between the needs of communication—which are always changing—and natural human inertia, two essential forces contributing to the optimization of the linguistic system (Vicentini 2003). Every act of communication requires clarity and precision on the one hand, and on the other hand natural inertia – that is, carefree and quick transmission of a message. The principle of least effort, which was introduced by Zipf, in 1949, significantly inspired Martinet's work (Vicentini 2003). According to this, the principle of economy means the removal or avoidance of any uneconomic change that may be an obstacle in understanding or conveying a particular message in communication. Since language communication is a dynamic process that is in a constant state of change, it is normal to take an approach of shortening and erasing which leads to a state of maximum economy that must be constantly maintained.

In this paper, we define the concepts of abbreviations, emoji, and language economy, present our research context and analyze 150 chats along with 10 long Reddit posts with extensive comments' section. Our central premise posits that online chatting constitutes a form of social action characterized by ongoing, deliberate adjustments and spontaneous adaptations of participants' communicative behaviors. This study delved into the natural evolution of our communication practices, influenced by factors such as the interlocutor's identity, as well as our desired perception by others.

2. DEFINITIONS AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The constant change in language stems from the expansion of the use of digital tools, which leads to the eruption of completely new words, genres and styles. It is evident that chats on social media affect the language we use to communicate in a way that it becomes so different at moments we need to stop and think about what the interlocutor wants to tell us. Oftentimes researchers found themselves in a conundrum of a kind: whether abbreviations and emoji enrich the vocabulary of the language or they destroy the language. Contrary to what John Humphreys claims, people who send messages using abbreviations are not vandals, and in no way "ruin the vocabulary" as he points out in his story "I h8 txt msgs: How texting is wrecking our language" (Humphrys 2007)."

The generations that have grown up with technology and the social media type of communication are also considered "bilingual" generations, because they are used to the daily usage of this "new" type of English language and its various forms used in computer-mediated communication (Tuttle 2021). It is more than evident that face-to-face communication is different from communication on social media. This need to simplify communication in social media also leads to the emergence of cyber spelling which is an integral part of language economy (Al-sa'di and Hamdan 2005).

2.1. Abbreviations

An abbreviation is a shortened form of a written word or phrase. Abbreviations may be used to save space and time, to avoid repetition of long words and phrases, or simply to conform to conventional usage (Merriam-Webster n.d.). Abbreviations play a pivotal role in contemporary communication, particularly within the context of social media and digital platforms. These condensed forms of language enable users to convey messages efficiently and effectively, catering to the fast-paced nature of online interactions (Crystal 2001). Abbreviations not only aid in overcoming character limitations imposed by various communication channels but also serve as linguistic shortcuts that facilitate rapid comprehension among users (Thurlow and Brown 2003). Moreover, they contribute to the formation of online communities and subcultures, where shared knowledge of abbreviations fosters a sense of belonging and group identity. Through the strategic use of abbreviations, individuals can establish rapport and demonstrate affiliation with specific social groups or online communities, reflecting the dynamic nature of digital communication (Thurlow and Brown 2003). This phenomenon is exemplified by the widespread use of abbreviations and emoji, which serve as shorthand expressions in digital discourse (Crystal 2001).

Abbreviations condense language to facilitate rapid exchanges, while emoji add nuanced emotional cues to textual content (Miller et al, 2016). There are concerns in other fields such as medicine because medical experts have observed that excessive use of abbreviations can pose a problem, as it may lead to inaccuracies in clinical work (Hamiel et al. 2018; Soto-Arnáez et al. 2019). As digital communication platforms continue to proliferate and evolve, understanding the dynamics of language economy and the strategic use of abbreviations and emoji becomes paramount for effective communication and successful engagement online.

2.2. Emoji

The utilization of emoji has surged in popularity across various social networking platforms such as X (ex-Twitter), Instagram and Facebook, providing alternative avenues for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. The content generated within these digital spaces is dynamic and contingent upon the level of engagement from the audience. Notably, platforms like X, Reddit, and Facebook foster a collaborative environment wherein content is jointly constructed and refined through the active participation of numerous readers and writers, herein referred to as users. Our thesis posits that the economy of language extends into the realm of extra linguistic elements and the mutual sharing of individual psychological, cognitive, and existential contexts.

Emoji have become an indispensable component of online social interactions, exhibiting a transformation reminiscent of verbal language, as highlighted by Herring (2020). Scholarly inquiry has revealed a notable evolution of emoji into a distinct form of language, distinguished by its pictographic features (Ge and Herring 2018; Monti et al. 2016). Some scholars argue that due to its pictographic nature, emoji language holds the potential for universal comprehension and employment (Ai et al. 2017). One of the features of emoji is their use in sequences, which are combinations of several emoji to represent one image that the interlocutor wants to convey. As mentioned above, emoji are graphic symbols that have predefined names and code (Unicode), which can represent not only facial expressions, abstract concepts and statements/feelings, but also animals, plants, activities, gestures/parts of pictures and objects (Rodrigues et al. 2017). Although relatively nascent compared to emoticons, emoji have rapidly

ascended to the forefront of social media communication (Grannan 2022), culminating in the designation of the "Crying Tears of Joy" emoji as the Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year in 2015 and the number one emoji used in 2023 worldwide.

2.3. Language economy

Language economy refers to the efficient use of linguistic resources to convey information **concisely** and effectively, often within specific communicative contexts. In essence, it involves maximizing the communicative impact while minimizing the linguistic effort expended (Aitchison 2001). This concept is particularly relevant in digital communication, where character limitations and the need for rapid exchanges necessitate succinct expression. Language economy encompasses various strategies, such as the use of abbreviations, acronyms, and emoji, to streamline communication without compromising clarity or meaning (Thurlow and Brown 2003). Additionally, it involves the judicious selection of words and phrases to convey complex ideas succinctly, often relying on shared knowledge and contextual cues to enhance comprehension (Crystal 2001).

Interactional routines play a great part in coping with day-to-day situations. Interactions may get routinized and drawn from a standard repertoire of interactions with certain people (Bekar 2015). However, the recurrent sequences which an interactant may have drawn from a pool of previously accomplished interactions, may be new for a new co-chatter. Some interactional routines become persistent due to practical reasons of efficient exchange of information (Erickson 1996), but others remain specific to the individual. Additionally, Werry (1996) showed that overlap and interruption are impossible because the chatting system is linear and presents the whole lines or utterances of the chatters line-by-line. Moreover, it was found that communities of interlocutors created their own abbreviations, and aimed at brevity, while short syntax and subject pronouns were often deleted. Even emoticons were seen as markers of brevity. By prioritizing brevity and efficiency, language economy enables effective communication in diverse settings, including social media, business correspondence, and everyday conversation.

3. CONTEXT AND METHODS

This study delves into a complex research problem that holds significant importance in understanding participants' communication strategies used in social media. The sample comprises 15 respondents aged between 21 and 31, majority of whom are employed by foreign companies and communicate exclusively in English across various social media platforms, while the remainder either study or work abroad. This aspect is particularly noteworthy since the participants' native language is Macedonian, yet they demonstrate fluency in English at the B2 level as per the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Each respondent contributed 10 chats, resulting in a total of 150 chats (each lasting 10-15 minutes). These conversations occur in a continuous time sequence via applications such as Viber, Instagram, Facebook/Messenger, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn, as well as Reddit posts, several of which exceed the number of 400 comments. After the first phase when they sent us the chats, we conducted short interviews with the participants, which were very insightful.

The main research questions analyzed and discussed in this paper are:

1. Is the economy of language the basic reason for the use of abbreviations and emoji?
2. Are emoji and abbreviations used as tools for expressing the emotional state of the participants in online communication?
3. Are abbreviations used as a new type of cryptic language or do they destroy the standard language variation?

The online discussions analyzed for the purposes of this study are quite extensive as they are open to the public and anyone who reads them can comment regardless if people know each other or not. The number of comments varies constantly in online discussions. When the analysis was done, in three discussions, the number of comments ranged from 50 to 70 comments, and for a longer discussion there were over 400 comments on Reddit.

The discussion with the largest number of comments is in English because Reddit's English-language forums have more visibility worldwide, and also English is used by participants whose native language is not English. The discussions in Macedonian are shorter because the number of Reddit users whose L1 is Macedonian is significantly smaller. In the two discussions in Macedonian as L1, examples of using phrases in English can be easily observed, sometimes entire sentences are used in English, sometimes only certain abbreviations but again in English as a foreign language. The inclusion of discussions from Reddit significantly increases the sample, which, in turn, further gives more weight to the research and the results obtained from the same.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH

As stated above, language economy, the practice of conveying information concisely and effectively, has become increasingly important in various communicative contexts, particularly within the realm of online communication (Aitchison 2001). Our research shows that the use of abbreviations and emoji has retained some of their main and primary uses such as language economy and expressing emotions through these pictographic depictions, but additionally the examples showed that participants use abbreviations and emoji for different purposes too.

If we observe Chat 1 (below), we can conclude that participants who wanted to express themselves in a rather economical way used abbreviations for certain words. As can be seen in the conversation, this usage of abbreviations proves that the respondent wants to maintain a

P1: Bro (23:03)¹

P1: Do you also feel like most if not all of our hardships in life and love are just bcs we perpetuate the way our parents have treated us when we were younger into our adult years (23:06)

P1: Bcs honestly the more i think about it the more it seems like that's the reason behind everything good and bad ab us (23:06)

T: Yeah (23:07)

T: They def a contributor to how we act and think (23:07)

T: Esp if they're strict (23:07)

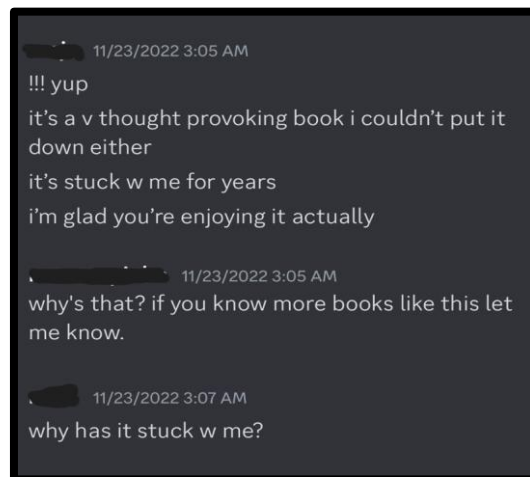
Chat 1

¹ The part in the brackets indicates the time when the message was sent.

close relationship with the person they are talking to in this chat. In this example, the first interlocutor (or P1) addresses the second interlocutor with Bro, and even though bro is an abbreviation for brother, in this case, at the beginning of the conversation, P1 used it as a greeting similar to hey, hello. Also, we can notice that P1 uses the abbreviation bcs which stands for because twice in this excerpt, but multiple times in the full conversation. From here it can be concluded that the interlocutors are familiar with what bcs means and this helps them save time and correspond faster. P1 also uses ab as a shortened version for about. We say “verson” here, because it is thought that the already accepted abbreviation for about is abt.

Regarding the second interlocutor's abbreviations (T), it can be noted that they are in bold, but since we are not analyzing the second interlocutor's discourse, we only indicate that they are used, and where exactly they are placed in the conversation. With the help of conversation analysis, we came to the conclusion that adaptation takes place in the conversation and the same is noticed in the interlocutor's responses. The interlocutor's reaction shows that they are in a close relationship with P1 and by using abbreviations they adapt to their informal conversation.

If we observe the following example, Chat 2, we can see that participant 2 (P2) uses *v* for very and *w* for *with* while explaining something about a book to the other interlocutor. The interlocutor does not use an abbreviation per se, but uses the short form *why's* for *why is*, and also, we can notice the use of all small letters, which shows that the interlocutors are in a hurry and want to communicate in a rapid way. The communication goes smoothly, both interlocutors understand the abbreviations and they expand furthermore on the topic. Something worth mentioning here is that P2 is a dynamic participant in terms of code-switching, because we can notice that he/she uses abbreviations in chats in English, but almost never in Macedonian, despite Macedonian being their L1. In a short interview, P2 explained that they communicate mostly with foreigners, and they are very proficient in English, which enables them to use abbreviations more than in Macedonian. They feel that sometimes abbreviations in Macedonian can be confusing or rather informal, while in English, P2 sees them only as means for a better and faster communication.



Chat 2

If we move on to examples concerning emoji alongside abbreviations and their use as tools for language economy, we should examine Chat 3 (below). The first interlocutor in this chat, or participant 3 (P3) uses the abbreviation *kinda* for *kind of* to explain the situation of how they feel while they are waiting for the summer to come. A valuable example on the use of emoji for language economy is seen in P1's line: *Kinda going crazy*. Here the laughing emoji is used to avoid spelling out the laughter (*hahah*). Even though the second interlocutor does not use any abbreviations or emoji, P1 continues to explain why they had been expecting the summer to come and uses the emoji to avoid spelling out the laughter. In the instance where the slightly happy emoji appears, we can say that this emoji is used instead of a period at the end of the sentence, which means that the use here is not language economy, but rather avoidance of the use of the punctuation mark period, which seems to become a regular practice in online chatting.



Chat 3

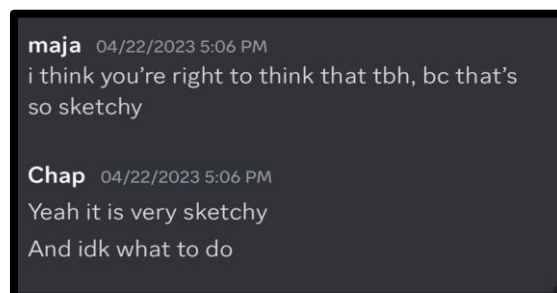
Chat 4 is an interesting example where several instances of abbreviations can be spotted. In the first line, we can see that the first interlocutor uses *lemme* - *let me*. However, our interest lies within the lines of P4. The second interlocutor (P4) uses the abbreviation *VDE* - *Vendor delivered*, which is a specialized term that they use at work. What can be concluded from this is the fact that abbreviations can be used to enrich the vocabulary of the language, since in this case it does not just save time (economy of language), but it serves a different purpose altogether such as the usage of abbreviations as a cryptic language used for business purposes. After that we can notice that the first interlocutor responds using *ok* - *all correct* and *thanx* - *thanks*. From this dialogue we can conclude that P4 is not prone to using many abbreviations in their social media chats with colleagues, but the other interlocutor seems to be comfortable with using them. Nonetheless, P4 accepted several abbreviations as normal words and decided to use them as such throughout all their chats. *VDE* was a recurring example in several chats that we examined. Also, the use of the laughing emoji at the end of P4's both lines indicate a friendly approach, and

repetitiveness since in the last line, P4 starts with *haha* - spelled out laughter, but at the end of that line, they feel the need to use the emoji to enhance the laughter. In the first instance it is used only to mark that they are not in charge of an operation at work, but they do not want to offend the interlocutor for not being aware of that information. Interlocutor 1 responds with spelled out laughter as well - *hahah* and uses the slightly happy emoji at the end to show gratitude that P4 will at least try to redirect the message to the right person. The use of the red heart replaced a whole phrase of thanking or expressing liking.



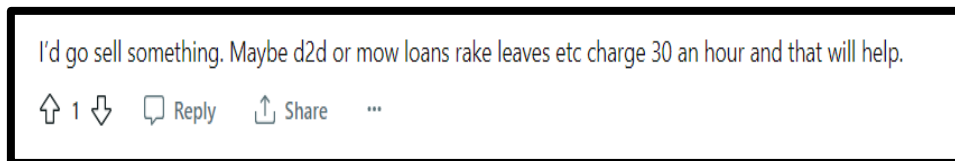
Chat 4

Additionally, with Chat 5, we present a typical exchange between two gamers. Fast responses are of the highest importance here, so we can notice that both interlocutors use a lot of abbreviations, and they are comfortable with the usage and with understanding them. The first interlocutor, P5 uses the short form for *tbh* - *to be honest*, *bc* - *because* and *that's* for *that is*. The other interlocutor answers using the abbreviation *idk* - *I do not know*. This heavy usage of abbreviations and shortened forms indicates that P5 knows the other interlocutor well, or at least knows the, so called, rules of the platform - since it is a platform for chatting while gaming. It is evident that using abbreviations is highly encouraged in these instances since speed is prerogative.



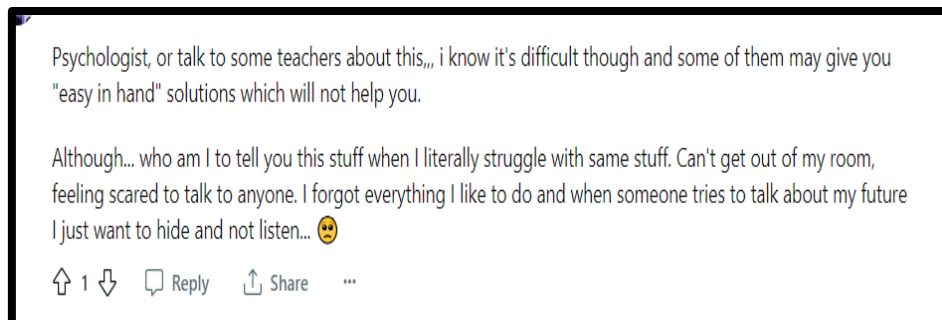
Chat 5

In the following Reddit example 1, we can notice the use of the short form *I'd - I would*, and the usage of abbreviations such as *d2d - door to door, etc. - et cetera* (which is a standardized abbreviation). Reddit is a compelling platform since there are several lists of the most commonly used terms and abbreviations available to all Reddit users such as *OP - Original Poster, SO - Significant Other, TIL = Today I Learned, OC = Original Content, TL;DR = Too long, didn't read, IMO = In My Opinion*, etc. This proves that using abbreviations is not only encouraged, but advised at this platform. Reddit users tend to check these lists to stay tuned and understand the meaning of the new abbreviations that may emerge.



Reddit example 1

Furthermore, in Reddit example 2, there are not many instances where abbreviations are used except for the two short forms *it's - it is* and *can't - cannot*. Nonetheless, this example is of great importance because of the use of the sad emoji with a frown at the end of this comment. This was one of the rare instances of the usage of emoji in Reddit posts and comments. It seems that emoji are to be avoided on this platform, whatsoever. However, here, the sad emoji at the end is used to express the mental and emotional state of the person who wrote this, but at the same time this emoji encompasses the meaning of a whole sentence which here could be - *I feel sad, or I feel lost and sad*, deriving its meaning of course, based on what the person previously stated. This is a typical example for the use of emoji for language economy, replacement of phrases describing emotions with an emoji.



Reddit example 2

There was a significant number of examples throughout all the 150 chats and the Reddit posts that we analyzed which prove the usage of abbreviations for language economy in chats on social media. We described the representative chats that were frequently seen among users. Furthermore, we showed many instances of the use of emoji for this same purpose, both in chats on social media and in posts and comments on Reddit. However,

this is not the only reason why participants used abbreviations and emoji. Expressing their emotional states or efficient communication, as well as cryptic language usage seem to be easier with the use of abbreviations and emoji, and that is shown in some of the examples presented above. Additionally, we observed a very intriguing instance of the usage of English abbreviations in chats where the interlocutors communicate in Macedonian. This cannot be further elaborated due to paper length limitations, but seems as a valuable insight that deserves to be mentioned.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There are several points of significance in this qualitative study of online chatting practices with a special focus on abbreviations and emoji. We presented the economy of language in our research as a perception of how balance should be achieved in communication because communication requires clarity and precision on the one hand, and carefree and quick transmission of a message on the other. The rapid development of technology requires adaptation in communicative practices. We further addressed the main research questions related to the sustainability of the basic use of abbreviations and emoji, about the nature of the same seen as tools for expressing the emotional state of the participants in online communication, but also we dug deeper into the idea of seeing abbreviations as a new type of cryptic language avoiding the fear of negative effect on the standard language variations or occurrence of inaccuracies in certain fields; for example, in medicine (Soto-Arnáez et al. 2019).

The novelty of the research lies in the identification, analysis and description of ways in which English-language abbreviations and Macedonian-language abbreviations are used in informal online chats. Specifically, the use of English abbreviations in Macedonian chats will contribute to the field of computer/phone mediated communication (CMC). The first research question aimed to discover whether language economy is the main reason for the use of abbreviations and emoji in communication on social media. The results of the data analysis show that the language economy remains at the center of this use as confirmed by numerous examples of the conversations we analyzed. In regard to the other two research questions, findings demonstrate that the respondents are aware of the language economy and efficiency in online communication and emphasize the same as main reasons for using abbreviations such as being concise and clear, not losing their line of thought. In addition to the economy of language, the analysis substantiated that respondents utilize abbreviations and emoji to articulate familiarity, convey emotional states, and engage in a form of cryptic communication amongst colleagues in professional settings or within gaming communities on a designated gaming platform. Furthermore, these linguistic elements serve to mirror the situation with the interlocutor, thereby fostering a sense of rapport and social cohesion.

Building social cohesion and maintaining relationships was an essential element of previous studies in applied linguistics, sociology and psychology. To our best knowledge no studies explored the code-mixing of English and Macedonian when abbreviations were used, and we hope our study will provide a better understanding of the impact of economy of language adjustment on the social interaction. Previous research mainly investigated how emoji are only used to replace the missing gestures or emotions in online environments and ignored the issue related to the various manifestations of adjustments to new

technological advances and faster life-styles. Abbreviations and emoji should not be only seen as substitutes for the absence of physical cues, but also as tools for maintaining social relationships and for adapting to the rapid progress of science and technology because it appears that the technology development is the driving factor behind the widespread adoption of abbreviations and replacement of linguistic elements with extra-linguistic ones (emoji).

As new inventions and perceptions of communication emerge, a need for shorter, and more concise communication often arises. To effectively cater to users' needs in this context, it is vital to consider three key aspects: the experience with online chatting, the knowledge of “rules” of the platforms used, and the real-life language usage scenarios people are expected to participate in for an efficient communication avoiding misunderstandings. We would like to encourage current and future researchers to approach the same topic from different angles. We are aware that within communication, not only the expedient nature of interaction should be considered but also whether the sent messages are clear and appropriate for the recipient. Every situation in communication is specific and only an active approach to evaluation of the informational value of abbreviations and emoji proves that the selected and used abbreviations and emoji function as tools for efficiency and not as inhibitors of communication, which may cause inaccuracies.

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JEZIČKA EKONOMIJA: SKRAĆENICE I EMODŽIJI U DRUŠTVENIM MEDIJIMA

Veliki uticaj skraćenica i emodžija na komunikaciju na društvenim mrežama je predmet savremenih istraživanja, koja daju uvid u njihove višestruke uloge i implikacije. Skraćenice ne samo da doprinose sažetosti i čitljivosti, već služe i kao lingvistički markeri, signalizirajući pripadnost grupi i jačajući društvene identitete (Turlou i Braun 2003). Istovremeno, emodžiji obogaćuju tekstualni sadržaj afektivnim tonom i kontekstualnim markerima, olakšavajući međukulturalnu komunikaciju i izazivajući empatiju u onlajn interakciji (Derks i dr. 2008). Pojedinač koristi nijansiranu kombinaciju jezičkih i vizuelnih znakova, uz kontekstualne markere, kako bi iskazao nameravano značenje. Za potrebe ove kvalitativne studije analizirano je 15 učesnika, odnosno njihovih 150 razgovora i 10 dugih objava sa komentarima na Reditu. Istraživanje je obuhvatilo onlajn konverzaciju (četove) govornika i engleskog i makedonskog jezika na popularnim platformama društvenih mreža. Obimni tekstualni podaci, koji se sastoje od dugih dijaloških razmena bez prekida, prikupljeni su sa platformi Viber, Redit, Instagram, Telegram, Fejbuk, Mesindžer i Vacap. Rezultati pokazuju da: 1) učesnici koriste skraćenice i emodžije u svrhu jezičke ekonomije i obogaćivanja jezika; 2) izražavanje emocionalnih stanja na društvenim mrežama je olakšano upotrebom skraćenica i emodžija. Ovo istraživanje može podstaći i druge istraživače iz sličnih naučnoistraživačkih oblasti da se pozabave ovom temom, možda čak i iz drugačijeg ugla.

Ključne reči: jezička ekonomija, skraćenice, emodžiji, društvene mreže, četovi