A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED GRAPHICONS IN WHATSAPP GROUP CHATS

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Abstract

This work studied the language of stickers as non-verbal cues in communication. It was geared towards investigating how digital images help to solve visual communication problems in CMC, examine their linguistic representations, and determine how meaning is encoded and decoded in their use by WhatsApp social media users. In this investigation, the researcher adopted a multimodal and social semiotic approach in analysing six (6) stickers from WhatsApp group chats. This study used the qualitative approach which allows the interpretation of data according to use in context. The paper shows that stickers communicate on their own, though visual elements that are used to express ideas and emotions in computer-mediated communication, especially in WhatsApp as they facilitate interaction among users and enhance communication. Again, this study exposes that stickers are similar to Text not just supplementing textual information, which users must comprehend.

Key words: Language, multimodality, semiotics, graphicons

Introduction

When communicating via social network applications or sites, there are a lot of fantastic features that users can utilise to enhance their communication - 'graph icons', a set of graphemes used in online communications that includes emoticons, emojis, stickers, animated GIFs and videos. These are digital images, either static or animated, that are used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication. The use of images is also expanding within business, with brevity becoming increasingly important in view of the volume of information consumed on a daily basis. Although Nor et al (2021), assert that images

used on social platforms are utilized as replacement of words for expressions, this paper views them as more than words.

As people are now opting for simpler, faster, and more universal ways to communicate (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020), graphical icons have become one of the conventional ways of expression among social media users. Lo (2008) posits that they function basically as support to text-based interaction as facial and body expressions serve in face-to-face communication. Whereas plain text messages were the norm a decade ago, they are gradually replaced or supplemented text with visual emoticons, then emojis, GIFs and even stickers. These communicative elements are integrated on many platforms and are very easily accessible for use by all. These handy graph icons are simple and add texture, fun and variety to chat.

As computing power increased in mobile devices and as message transfer speeds increased as well, mobile users could also add in picture images called stickers or short clips of video referred to as GIFs. When this happened, especially as they are processed quicker than text, text could no longer be relied upon as the only means of communication and the issue of similarity of text to these GIFs, and stickers now has to be comprehended by social media users (Madewel, 2018). Evidently, the use of these images is becoming more socially acceptable and becoming an integral part of our everyday lives.

This integration triggered the study of GIFs and Sticker to evaluate the imperatives and challenges of using them in communication made through space (proxemics), body language (kinesics), and other non-verbal symbolic modes. The study targets to unveil the communicative relevance of GIFs and stickers as modes of communication in the written media, examine how these digital pictures and images help to solve visual communication problems and determine how meaning is encoded and decoded in the use of these by WhatsApp social media users. To achieve this, the study shall adopt social semiotics and multimodality in the investigation.

Researchers have carried out studies on graph icons to ascertain their various functions - which are easily sent with the simple act of

clicking or tapping on smart phones (Tang & Hew, 2019). In (Derks, Fischer & Bos, 2008)'s work, it is discovered that in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), these non-verbal cues are used to compensate the lack of personalization common in face to face communication such as facial expressions, body language and eye contact. The non-verbal cues offer more flexibility for participants to exchange information and stay connected.

In investigating why people use graph icons, some scholars discovered such reasons as; to express emotions (Lee, Hong, Kim, Qh, 2016); to avoid misunderstanding and to substitute textual for enjoyment, fun, and for social purposes (Zhou, Hentschel & Kumar, 2017). Tang et al (2021) examined a multiple case study of (Mis) communication through stickers in online group discussions.

A more recent work on stickers conducted by Khadija et al (2022) targeted at predicting why people use stickers on WhatsApp. The study discovered the social influences and the cognitive procedures which are present within the users' intention to use stickers specifically in WhatsApp. Nor et al (2021) concentrated on users' experiences in using GIF and stickers in their communication via social network applications. The findings revealed that most people frequently use GIF and sticker features but have a higher preference for stickers over GIF. In considering the impact of using these graph icons, the study indicated that more graph icons lead to a higher level of perceived intimacy in CMC. The use of non-verbal cues could make up for affective expressions and impact interpersonal relationships, direct the intended interpretations as well as strengthen or neutralize the intensity of verbal messages. Again, some studies have portrayed that using stickers and GIFs can help in mutual understanding of a message.

In sum, a good number of studies have been done on graph icons especially on emojis but not much on GIFs and stickers due to the fact, that GIFs and stickers have only recently become popular as WhatsApp communicative elements. Again, no scholar has delved into studying the language of GIFs and stickers, using the multimodal and social semiotic approach. What linguistic representations do GIFs and

stickers portray? How do users encode and decode messages using both images and words? And how does the integration of image, short clip of video and text add up in making meaning? It is, therefore, these begging questions that this paper seeks to unravel.

It is hoped that the findings of the paper shall not only expose the important place of visual non-verbal cues in communication but will also add to the corpus of knowledge concerning the dynamics of human communication in general; especially as it pertains to the use of GIFS and stickers. This work will no doubt contribute to knowledge especially in linguistics and communication studies in understanding the sign systems of GIFs and stickers as visual nonverbal cues. It will highlight some issues in media communication as well as serve as a guide to language analyst.

Theoretical Framework

Multimodal Social Semiotic approach focuses on meaning-making in all modes. It is a theoretical perspective that brings all socially organized resources that people use in making meaning into one descriptive and analytical domain in all modes. These resources include modes such as image, writing, gesture, gaze, speech, space, posture; and media. Given the multimodality of contemporary communication, the framework is a useful as it accounts for the social meanings of texts, images, gestures, and other modes providing a wider and more in-depth picture on language. Hodge and Kress (1988) see the limitation to verbal language and insist that, meaning resides so strongly and pervasively in other systems of meaning, in a multiplicity of visual, aural, behavioural and other codes, that a concentration on words alone is not enough.

This work appropriates Hodge and Kress (1988) Social Semiotic Theory which conceives of sign making as the expression of social processes; involving meaning makers and meaning making. It studies the media of dissemination and the modes of communication that people use and develop to represent their understanding of the world and to shape power relations with others. As stated by them, social

semiotics focuses on speakers and writers or other participants in semiotic activity as connected and interacting in a variety of ways in concrete social context. Matthiessen (2014) observes in the manner of Thibault (2004) that context could be taken as the environment of meanings in which various semiotic systems operate, including language paralanguage (gesture, facial expression, voice quality, and other systems of meaning accompanying language and expressed through the human body). This context, he insists uses modes as analytical tools to investigate the ways in which societies have shaped their semiotic resources, and the social meanings made by sign-makers' specific use of modes in multimodal texts.

Conceptual Review: Language

Language, interestingly, is synonymous with communication as it involves the sender and the receiver. Okeke et al (2022) assert that communication of ideas, signs, and symbols is possible because there are conventional means- verbal and non-verbal – available for interlocutors to use, and the effectiveness of communication, therefore, depends on the effective use of these means. However, language refers to the analysis of various and different semiotic modes, with the aim of integrating the representational, interactive, and textual meanings achieved by the various elements of the text. Previous scholars such as Ferdinand de Saussure, C.S. Peirce, and others had, however, also made reference to the semiotic quality of language.

Social Semiotics / Multimodality

Semiotics is an investigation into how meaning is created and how meaning is communicated. Its origin lie in the academic study of how signs and symbols (visual and linguistic) create meaning. Like Pragmatics, Social semiotics is concerned with meaning in context. It follows Halliday's socio- linguistic theories (2007) that view language primarily as a resource for meaning making and shifting the focus of linguistics into 'semiotic age'. It was pioneered by Bob Hodge and Gunther Kress (1988) as an approach that extends the social interpretation of language

and its meaning to the whole range of representational and communicational modes or semiotic resources for making meaning that are employed in a culture (Jewitt, 2009). It is also based on the motivated sign theory of meaning according to which the relation between the signifier (the form) and the signified (meaning) is never arbitrary (Kress, 1993).

Multimodality too, as a field of research, conceives of representation and communication as relying on a multiplicity of modes, all of which have been socially developed as resources to make meaning. (Ahaotu, 2023) asserts that visual images have become significant communication tools on social media embedded with meanings. To (Adami,2016), modes such as gesture, sound, image, colour, or layout, proxemics for example, are conceived as sets of organized resources that societies have developed – each to a greater or lesser level of articulation in different social groups – to make meaning and to express and shape values, ideologies, and power relations. When in combination with speech and/or writing, they are not a mere accompaniment of, or support to verbal language, rather, each concur with a specific functional load to the meaning made by the overall text – and as such, they deserve attention.

Again, studies in computer-mediated communication acknowledge the multimodal nature of digital environments, like Herring (2010), who argues that the interpretation of visual content can benefit from methods drawn from iconography and semiotics. Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) seminal work *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* adapted Halliday's (1978) ideational, interpersonal and textual meta-functions for the description of meaning made by images and their combined use with writing.

Evidently, social semiotics and multimodality are two distinct concepts. Social semiotics is a theory of meaning and multimodality is a field of application, or perspective on resources for meaning making.

Graph icons

Herring and Dainas (2017) refer to them as online visual communicative elements in Computer- Mediated Communication, comprising of emoticons, emojis, GIFs, stickers, videos and images. . These graphic illustrations can communicate many emotions and a wide range of thoughts, much more than text could in a single action. Graph icons are becoming an increasingly popular mode of communication between individuals worldwide, with researchers claiming them to be a type of "ubiquitous language" that can span different languages due to their pictorial nature. The use of graph icons can supplement the lack of human non-verbal cues in computer mediated communication.

For the purpose of this paper, my focus is on GIFS and Stickers. GIFs are short audio-free loops of moving sequences, whose name derives from Graphic Interchange Format, an open data image format developed in June 1987 by Steve Wilhite. They are basically, moving pictures, or small videos, that capture and communicate a situation and how one feels about it. The popularity of the GIF is quite ironic, because GIFs were actually invented before the internet itself (cf. Eppink 2014). Similar to pictorial emojis, emoticons and stickers, short videos encoded in GIFs are also commonly used as emotional displays, such as animating gestures and facial expressions. The polysemic and intertextual features of GIFs make such format feasible to convey rich personalized expressions, affect and cultural knowledge, offering different meanings and interpretations to different audiences, and their meanings are often created within the context of a community. Again, they uniquely often derive from excerpts of movies or TV shows, reflecting cultural knowledge of this source material. They are a good tool for sensory appeal through the use of movement, colour and repetition (Ash, 2015). Despite their relatively long existence, GIFs have achieved new significance and scholarship attention only in recent years, as social media technologies have drastically affected the dissemination, organization, and availability of GIFs, unleashing their semiotic potential and fostering an online culture around their usage.

GIFs also express emotions, and use movement, colour, and repetition to create sensations and affect. Animated GIFs are increasingly popular in text-based communication. Like other forms of nonverbal communication, animated GIFs are susceptible to open interpretation.

Stickers, unlike other graph icons can be any graphic illustrations that communicate sentences or phrases. Presently, stickers are dominating the world of digital communication as users send stickers 16 times more than GIFs. Digital users addicted to stickers will tell you that one of the most powerful things about stickers is the concept called "Biaoqing". It is the notion that you have a collection of perfect responses for various situations- as a collection of vocabularies. You have a collection of stickers all meant to say hi, another collection to convey anger or sleepy. Although many people view these communicative elements as toys, they are actually vocabulary. As a social tool, it's not common to see users on Whatsapp chatting with each other with just stickers, no text. The use of stickers, which are new to WhatsApp, has placed a certain level of innovation and imagination. These two characteristics have never been observed in the use of other graph icons (Khadija et al 2022). Stickers, unlike emojis, are larger, static, and animated which can be added or removed at any time, and they're being sent independently of text messages. Furthermore, they are more detailed and frequently animated (Zhou et al., 2017). Correspondingly, (Lee et al., 2016) claim that users' reason for using stickers is powerful and that they send stickers not only to express emotions but also for tactical interaction (Zhou et al., 2017).

As symbolic tools, GIFS and stickers, like language, are carriers of social structures and ideologies which signs makers can assess to create meaning in CMC.

Methodology/ Design

This research was conducted using qualitative method of analysis, following the descriptive approach to analyse and interpret data. The paper has GIFs and stickers as its population. However, it made use of nine (9) randomly extracted graphicons from group

WhatsApp messages as its sample. The study allows the interpretation of data according to the context of use, as the paper examines the modes used in communicating and the accompanying which are examined within a known corpus in linguistics and semiotics. Although there are various, approaches and techniques proposed by different scholars for studying semiotics, this study adopts Peirce's tripartite categorization of icon, index, and symbol, which are the three categories of sign. Sign is anything that creates meaning. Signs can be words, sounds, photographs, paintings, and road signs etc.

Basically, an icon is a representation that directly imitates the object or concept it physically resembles. It draws a direct connection between the signifier (the icon) and the signified (the object being represented). Drawings, photographs and paintings that bear a direct resemblance to the objects or concepts being represented are examples of icons. The index utilizes what is related to the signified as its signifier. The signifier is not a direct resemblance of the object or concept but something that exists with it. For instance, smoke is an index of fire, dark clouds are index of rain. In other words, an index doesn't resemble the object or concept being represented. Knowledge of index can be acquired naturally within an environment; it can also be learnt through formal training in a particular field. Unlike icon and index, where there must be an observable connection between the signifier and the signified, a symbol holds no such connection. For instance, language, numbers, flags, traffic light etc. are symbols which must be learnt as the connection is arbitrarily assigned, mostly through conventional agreement.

Data Presentation

The title of this paper seemingly restricts the discussion to GIFs and Stickers which come in form of images/ photographs, text, and short videos. The analyses focus on the conventional linguistic expressions used, in combination with other semiotic modes that have been employed in the expression of messages. Text and images, randomly selected from social media Whatsapp group chats are used in this study. The data are presented and

analysed below based on Peirce's tripartite categorization of signs (icon, index and symbol).

Data Analysis

Sample 1: Sticker/ GIF
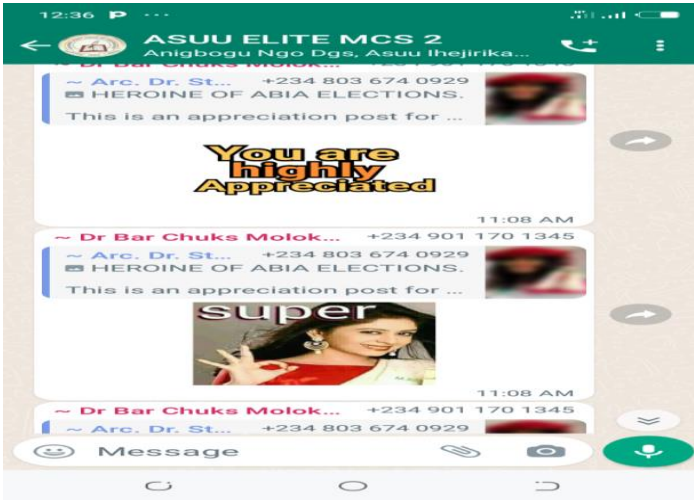
This sample captures the picture of a woman addressed as ' Heroine of Abia Elections' in her regalia as an academic. The message is expressed multimodally. First, there is the use of the linguistic expression 'You are highly Appreciated ' which comes as a sticker from a WhatsApp user in the group**.** Then, there is the use of human pictures as icons (a female showing approval with her fingers and an accompanying text on her image 'Super' showing agreement with the current discussion. There is also a symbol in the image of the woman using her finger to demonstrate approval. Another outstanding symbol is in the colour (red and white representing danger and peace). Lastly, is the use of posture and positioning of the image of the woman (positioned in front)?

Sample 2: Sticker/ GIF/ Sticker

The sample contains a message highlighting lack of peer review as a possible reason for rejection of a paper for publication. The first sticker is an indication of agreement showing two hands ready for a hand shake (showing approval or agreement). The second sticker is an image of a man doffing his cap as a show of respect. This message is contained in conventional linguistic expressions: "Respect" as well as a sticker text "Thanks for This Important Information". There is also the use of a human hand icon that is having a hand shake (suggesting approval/ agreement). Again, the use of an index and symbol in the picture of a cap (suggesting loyalty or appreciation. Also, the use of colour (blue and black) in the last write -up portrays ignorance and confusion. Thus, the overall message is that lack of peer review is a possible reason for rejection of a paper for publication.

Sample 3: GIFS

In this sample, the images presented are GIFS. From the above presentation, we notice that many semiotic forms have been integrated into the expression of the message of the chat. First, there is the linguistic expression of ' New salary chat' sent in by a group member. Then the picture of two men, one raising a cane (semiotic icon) to flog while the other is on the floor. The cane here is also an index representing an intention to scold or to express displeasure. Here also, the colours of the attire of the persons in the picture (black and grey) are associated with anger and frustration for the black and grey indicating gloomy condition. Lastly, placing the picture of the two men at the centre and the space between them shows spatial foregrounding.

Sample 4: Stickers
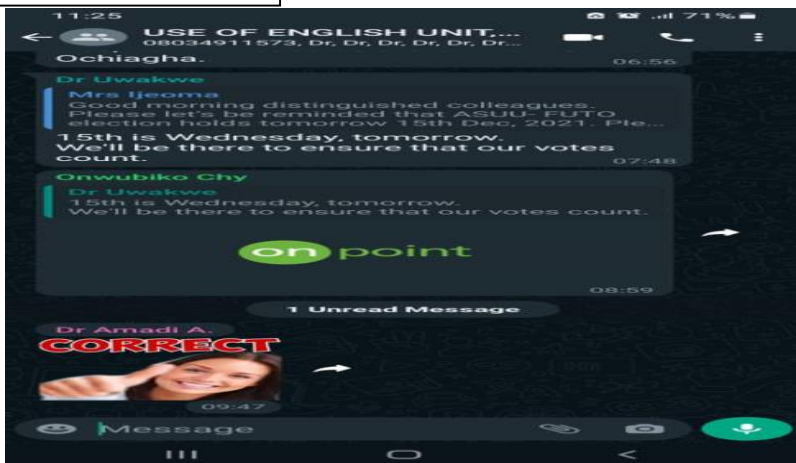
This sample contains the need to participate in ASUU election and to ensure that vote count. The chat has two stickers from users who chose not to use text but stickers to express themselves. First, is the conventional linguistic expression "On Point" showing agreement with the message? There is the human icon (a woman) smiling and showing a thumbs up as well as a text ' Correct" Again, 'thumbs up' is an image symbol (showing approval). Colours (green and red) on the stickers portray both danger and life. Obviously, the outcome of the election will either indicate progress or failure of the union.

Sample 5: Stickers
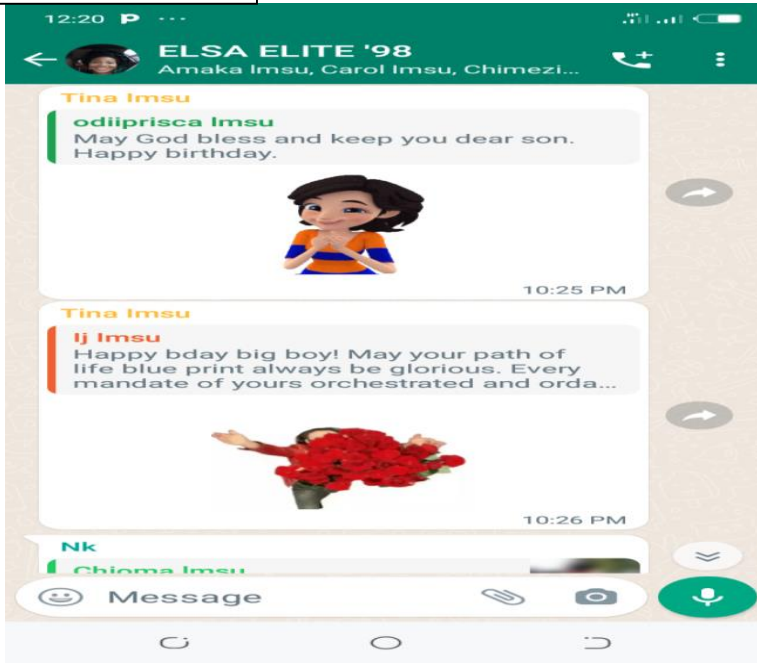
This sample captures birthday wishes for a group member's son. The image of a woman holding her heart is an expression of love and the red rose in the second sticker portrays the use of indexes. Again, image of a woman indicates human icon as women are known to be embodiment of love. Lastly, the colour symbols picture in the sample (blue, orange on the human image, and red on the rose) are used to indicate love.

Sample 6: GIFS
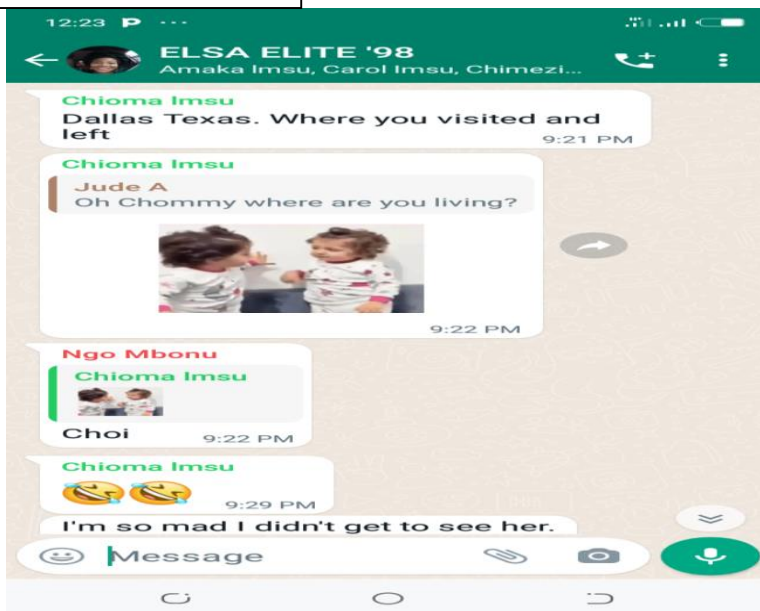
The message is about two friends, one lives in the USA and the other visited USA, made a stop at Dallas (her classmates' city) and left without informing/ visiting the friend. The chat makes use of both linguistic and other semiotic representations. The linguistic expression says: "I'm so mad l didn't get to see you". There is also the use of human icons to demonstrate her annoyance (a kid, playfully, pulling another child's hair in an attempt to give her a knock on the head). The use of two kids of the same age, on same attire shows that they are mates. Then, the use of colour (white-) signifies innocence of kids. Finally, there is the use of spatial foregrounding in the space between two individuals in the picture.

Sample 7: GIFS

This sample is from a group chat where a user jokingly expressed lack of interest in a guy's attempt to woe her. Here, we could see the linguistic expression "She tried everything and it didn't work. The image of a human icon (woman laughing loudly) serves as an accompaniment to the text. The second human index (a child, holding out his two thumbs up) is another accompaniment to the linguistic expression in a broken English" I won hold him for Rose cos Oby eye red for KK body" His raised hands, showing approval, is used as an image indicating agreement or support.

Sample 8: GIFS

The sample contains the message of Imo workers jubilating as the governor approves 13th month salary. Both images on the sample are GIFS. First is the image of a dog with a linguistic expression "idi Sure? (A combination of Igbo and English. The facial expression of the dog is used as an index to capture the linguistic expression. Second, is the human icon, a man peeping at the message of the sample and lastly, the mathematical expression "100% sure" as a response to the question, ' idi sure'? There is also the use of image symbol of a dog (aggression)

shown with a combination of verbal and non-verbal expressions. Then the colour symbol used (red can symbolize danger or attack) and the body position of the man is used to indicate uncertainty.

Sample 9: GIFS
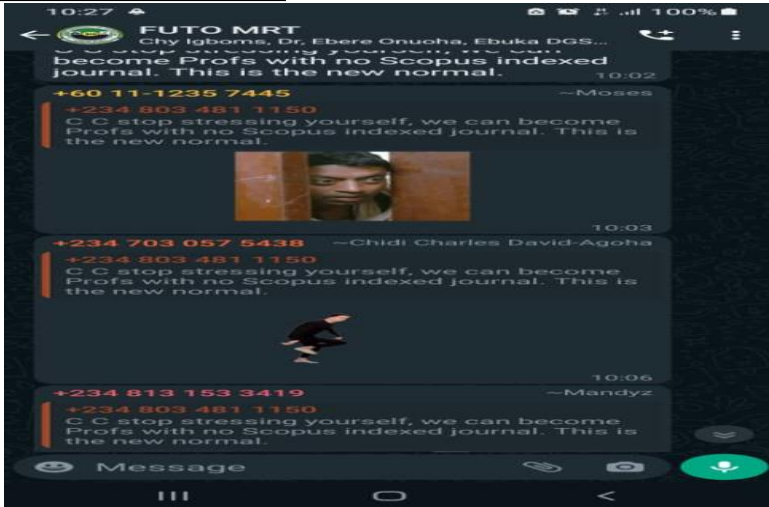
The message of this sample is about becoming professors without Scopus indexed journal. Apart from the message, the sample made use of GIFs only to express feelings and emotions. The sample captured two human icons; one peeping through walls to indicate doubt/ uncertainty and the other dancing to show excitement. Obviously, the message created mixed feelings from other users. There is also the use of spatial foregrounding in the space between the first individual in picture and the wall. The colour image (Black and brown) captures uncertainty, doubt, and danger.

Discussion of Findings

The group of nine (9) WhatsApp chats analysed in this research were focused on GIFs and stickers. From the analyses so far, evidence abound on the use of not only the conventional linguistic mode of

communication but also visual communicative elements by WhatsApp users to express themselves. Multiple modes were used, involving the linguistic and other semiotic modes (icons, indexes, and symbols), as well as spatial foregrounding or proxemics, borrowed from Pierce's tripartite.

The chats under study are unequivocally targeted at showcasing how social media users encode and decode meaning from text as well as other semiotic resources. The features of multimodality identified in the study include a combination of verbal and visual texts, gestures, human images, the colouring of both verbal and visual elements, positioning and posture as well as the use of space. A glaring advantage of this approach dwells on its accessibility to both the educated and non-educated people from different social class and backgrounds Again, the multiple modes of these graph icons is able to initiate interaction between the different senses; sight, cognitive, and so on. In addition, the use of colour symbols not only helps in the expression of messages but also adds significantly to the creative appeal of the chats. This identification provides answers to the first objective of this study which is to examine the linguistic representations of GIFS and stickers.

The verbal texts in the chats clarify the meaning of the concrete images while also making the message to be more detailed. At the same time, the image or signs (icons, index and symbol) bring the meaning of the verbal text to life. In doing this, the paper provided positive answers to the second objective of the work which is to ascertain how meaning is encoded and decoded using GIFS and stickers by WhatsApp users. Although there are certain connections between language and image, the image is independent of linguistic explanations because it has its own pattern and order (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). In fact, the interpretation of the image and short clip of video is somewhat arbitrary, and it could mean different things in various social context. This explains the third objective of the study which seeks to understand how the integration of picture image, short clip of video and text add up in making meaning.

Consequently, the social semiotic properties of non-verbal cues and visual texts combined to convey meaning more accurately and effectively. To this effect, social semiotics resources were utilized to create meaning that works well together to capture the relevance of these social media visual elements.

Conclusion

This paper sets out to study the language of GIFS and stickers as aspects of graph icons. The communicative relevance of visual text as well as non-verbal elements has been demonstrated in this study as interlocutors assess meaning. This researcher views them not as replacement of words for expressions in social platforms but as more than words.

In conclusion, the intended purpose of graph icons is not to replace written words, but to facilitate communication in chat conversations to reach the level of a face-to-face conversation. The popularity of using (GIFs and stickers) currently in CMC has attracted the attention of many scholars and topics have been explored although not as much as studies on other graph icons such as emoticon and emoji which developed before GIFs and stickers. However, there are other fertile areas of study to explore on graph icons especially in the dissemination of information through the use of videos.

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