

Research Article

Language Philosophy and Changes in Meaning in Digital Culture

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Abstrak: This study aims to analyze the semantic shift in language within digital culture through the perspectives of linguistics and the philosophy of language. The focus of the study is directed toward the phenomenon of memes, emojis, abbreviations, and popular expressions that have rapidly developed on social media platforms and often deviate from their standard meanings. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method using content analysis combined with a philosophical literature review. Data were obtained from various digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X, as well as relevant academic sources. The results indicate that semantic shifts in digital language occur through patterns of meaning expansion, metaphorization, polysemy, and linguistic innovation. From the standpoint of the philosophy of language, these findings align with Wittgenstein's meaning is use theory and Austin's speech act theory, both of which emphasize that meaning is determined by the practical use of language and speech acts within social contexts. Thus, the changes in meaning in digital culture are not merely linguistic but also reflect the social, cultural, and technological dynamics that shape modern communication patterns.

Keywords: Digital Culture; Linguistics; Philosophy of Language; Semantic Shift; Study

1. Introduction

Language is a means of communication used by humans to interact and convey information (Mailani et al., 2022). Language plays a fundamental role in the survival of society. because it functions as the primary means of communication between individuals and as a determinant in the formation of cultural identity . Language makes it easier for humans to communicate with one another in their environment (Sabardila & Anjarwati, 2022). Along with the development of time and technology, language also experiences development and transformation. However, this transformation also presents various challenges, particularly in efforts to maintain the authenticity and quality of the Indonesian language (Ilham et al., 2025). This linguistic phenomenon shows that digital platforms not only facilitate communication, but also shape the way their users speak (Dzulfian Syafrian, 2025) According to the Language Development and Fostering Agency (BPBB), one of the main challenges arising from digitalization is a shift in communication methods characterized by the increasingly widespread use of slang, abbreviations, and foreign terms on social media. This has the potential to reduce the younger generation's ability to speak formally (Amelia et al., 2024).

The phenomenon of shifting language meanings in the digital culture era is evident in the use of memes, emojis, abbreviations, and popular terms that generally do not follow standard rules and are experiencing rapid development across various online platforms. For example, the term viral , which originally meant "spreading widely," is now more often understood as content that receives massive attention on social media. Likewise, the emoji 🍷 , which originally symbolized love, now has various interpretations depending on the context of digital conversations. These dynamics demonstrate how language constantly moves with changes in digital culture. The presence of digital language has also given rise to multimodal communication patterns, namely a combination of text, images, and symbols that together construct meaning. From a semiotic perspective, emojis and memes are not only seen

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as complements to text, but also contribute to creating a new sign system with recognized meaning based on the understanding of the community of users (Danesi, 2017).

In linguistic studies, changes in language meaning are often analyzed through semantic and pragmatic approaches (Setiawan et al., 2025). However, a philosophy of language approach offers a deeper perspective in understanding the nature of meaning. The philosophy of language, as proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, emphasizes that the meaning of a word is determined by how the word is used in everyday communication practices. This is in line with J.L. Austin's view that sees language as an action (speech act), where the use of language not only conveys information but also does something in a social context. Therefore, to understand changes in meaning in digital culture, an approach that combines linguistic studies and the philosophy of language is needed.

Several previous studies have examined changes in language meaning in a digital context. Research by Hidayatullah (2021) discusses the dynamics of language and cultural identity in the context of migration. with a focus on maintaining mother tongues among migrant generations. This research demonstrates that language functions as a cultural identity that can change along with the process of migration and social adaptation. However, this research has not specifically addressed the changing meaning of language in the context of digital culture and its influence on virtual communication. Furthermore, research by Subandi (2020) examines the spiritual meaning of the Pindapata tradition in the Buddhist community in Magelang City, highlighting how the meaning of a tradition can be understood through linguistic and cultural perspectives. However, this research does not address the changing meaning in the context of digital communication.

Thus, previous research indicates that there are not many studies that specifically combine the philosophy of language and linguistics approaches to analyze changes in meaning in digital culture. Therefore, this article aims to fill this gap by examining how digital phenomena such as memes, emojis, and popular terms influence changes in language meaning, and how the philosophy of language can provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of meaning in virtual communication.

2. Research Method

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a content analysis method combined with a philosophical literature review. According to Krippendorff in Alber (2018:57-58), the content analysis method is a method used to reveal large-scale studies of the press, sociological and linguistic research, especially in modern media. Content analysis research is fundamentally empirically oriented, explanatory, related to real phenomena, and has a predictive purpose. The primary data is obtained from digital platforms in the form of memes, emojis, abbreviations, and popular terms that develop on social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X which indicates a shift in the meaning of language. Secondary data comes from relevant scientific literature related to linguistics and the philosophy of language. Data collection was carried out using documentation techniques, namely tracing, recording, and classifying examples of digital language use that have undergone changes in meaning. Next, the data were analyzed through three stages. First, semantic analysis to examine the shift in the meaning of words and symbols. Second, pragmatic analysis to understand meaning in the context of digital communication. Third, philosophical analysis using Wittgenstein's theory of meaning is use. and speech act from Austin to reveal the true meaning behind changes in digital language.

3. Result and Discussion

Based on data obtained from several social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Twitter/X, terms were found to exhibit a shift in meaning. The following table presents the results.

Tabel 1. Meaning Shift Analysis

Example	Initial Meaning	Meaning in Digital Culture
<i>Viral</i>	Widespread	Popular content or trends that are being talked about
❤️	Symbol of love	Support, approval, signs of affection
<i>Receh</i>	small coins	Light jokes, simple jokes
<i>Gas</i>	Fuel	An invitation or encouragement to do something immediately or another term (<i>Gaskeun!</i>)
<i>Baper</i>	Bring feelings	Sensitive or overly emotional
<i>Caper</i>	looking for attention	Behavior that is deliberate in order to get the attention of others
<i>Halu</i>	Hallucinations	Excessive imagination or daydreaming
<i>Mager</i>	Lazy to move	Reluctance to do activities or prefer to lie down
<i>Gabut</i>	Blind salary (initial meaning)	No work or bored
<i>Kepo</i>	Want to know	Attitude of wanting to interfere in other people's affairs
<i>Bestie</i>	Friend (original English meaning)	A familiar greeting on social media and synonymous with the communication style of young people
<i>Ghosting</i>	Ghost	Suddenly disappearing from communication
<i>Glow up</i>	Shine	Physical changes or better appearance
<i>Cringe</i>	Feeling of discomfort	Something embarrassing, strange, or uncomfortable
<i>Wkwk</i>	Comes from gw (w) and ketawa (k)	The typical laughter of Indonesian netizens, with a different nuance to <i>LOL</i> or <i>haha</i>
OOTD	<i>Outfit of the day</i>	Daily fashion trends, popular on Instagram
FOMO	<i>Fear of missing out</i>	Fear of missing out on social trends
YOLO	<i>You only live once</i>	The principle of hedonistic life: enjoying life without fear of risk
Flexing	Showing off muscles	Showing off wealth or a luxurious lifestyle on social media
Santuy	Relax	Calm, indifferent attitude, typical of youth slang

The data demonstrates the phenomenon of changes in the meaning of language in digital culture, a logical consequence of the development of communication technology and social media. The table shows that words, abbreviations, emojis, and popular terms have undergone significant shifts in meaning. For example, the word "viral," which originally meant "spread widely" in a media context, is now understood as popular content on social media. A similar finding was found in Jusovic's (2022) research, which compared the definitions of "viral" in pre-internet and post-internet dictionaries and concluded that the word has undergone semantic extension, specifically referring to digital phenomena.

The change in meaning is also very obvious in the use of emojis. The emoji ❤️ is not just a visual symbol, but also forms autonomous meaning based on the communication context. Bai et al. (2019) emphasized that emojis function not only as a complement to text,

but also have their own semantic, emotional, and social dimensions. Caspi's (2025) study even proved that emojis can change the interpretation of messages, so that initially neutral messages can be interpreted emotionally when accompanied by certain emojis. This finding is reinforced by Minich et al.'s (2025) research among teenagers, which showed that emojis function as a pragmatic tool to soften the tone of communication and build intimacy. Thus, the use of emojis on social media aligns with Austin's (1962) view of speech acts, that language not only conveys messages but also performs social actions.

Besides emojis, digital abbreviations and slang are also hallmarks of modern communication. For example, *wkwk*, *LOL*, *OOTD*, *FOMO*, and others are examples of linguistic innovations born from the need for short, fast, and expressive communication. Research by Di Marco et al. (2024) found patterns of linguistic simplification on social media, such as comments and posts becoming increasingly shorter and relying heavily on abbreviations or non-standard forms. Similar findings emerged in research by Shehzadi et al. (2025), which emphasized that social media accelerates lexical change through the spread of new terms that are then widely accepted by the community.

A similar phenomenon has been studied by Bajuri et al. (2023), who showed that popular terms on social media, such as *kece* (cool), *ngab* (cool), and *ngegas* (cool), reflect the linguistic creativity of the younger generation as well as group identity. Damayanti's (2019) research on meme texts on Instagram confirms that memes not only convey humorous messages but also function pragmatically as satire, expressions of sympathy, and even a medium for social criticism. Meanwhile, Amalia et al. (2025) found that slang used by Generation Z on TikTok contains both denotative and connotative meanings, with various forms such as abbreviations, shortenings, and interjections. These findings from Indonesia strengthen the evidence that changes in meaning in digital culture are not only a global phenomenon but are also very real in the Indonesian context.

Thus, changes in the meaning of digital language exhibit several patterns. First, semantic extension, as in the word *viral*. Second, metaphorization of meaning, as in the word "*receh*," which shifts from "small coin" to "light joke." Third, polysemy, as in the emoji 🤍 which can mean love, support, or approval depending on the context. Fourth, linguistic innovations, such as the abbreviations *wkwk* or *LOL*, create unique expressions of laughter within a community. These patterns demonstrate that language is dynamic and constantly adapts to its communication needs.

From a philosophical perspective, this phenomenon is highly relevant to Wittgenstein's (1953) idea that the meaning of a word is determined by its use (meaning is use). In other words, digital terms or symbols acquire new meanings not because of dictionary definitions, but because of the practice of using them in virtual communities. This is also in line with Austin's (1962) speech act theory, where utterances (or symbols) not only convey information but also perform actions. For example, when someone writes "*Go!*", they are not only conveying words but also encouraging collective action. By combining linguistic analysis (semantics and pragmatics) with philosophical perspectives, it can be understood that changes in meaning in digital culture are clear evidence that language is a living entity that is constantly moving, shaped by technology, culture, and the community of its users.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that the shift in language meaning in a digital context is a direct impact of developments in communication technology and social media. This phenomenon is clearly visible through the use of emojis, memes, abbreviations, and popular vocabulary, which have given rise to new communication patterns in the virtual space. The analysis reveals several forms of meaning change, including the expansion of meaning, the use of metaphors, the emergence of polysemy, and innovations in linguistic expression. Viewed from the perspective of the philosophy of language, this finding reinforces Wittgenstein's idea that meaning is determined by the practice of its use (meaning is use) and aligns with Austin's speech act theory, which emphasizes that language also functions as a social act. Thus, changes in meaning in digital culture are not only related to linguistic aspects but also reflect the ever-changing social, cultural, and technological dynamics. This confirms that language is dynamic, alive, and continually adapting to the communication needs of modern society.

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