



Visual Linguistic Features of Small Stories in Technologically Mediated Communication on Facebook Messenger

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Abstract. This article fills a gap in narrative research by investigating how graphical communication contributes to developing small stories in Technologically Mediated Communication (TMC) environments like Facebook Messenger (FM).

Scholars examining everyday narratives have primarily concentrated on their structure and identity formation, while others have investigated the linguistic features of graphicons in digital environments. Nevertheless, there remains a gap in explicitly connecting these visual elements as essential contributors to the overall construction of narratives and identities.

The article explores how visual aspects are integrated into text-based exchanges, influencing the construction of narratives and identity. The research method is discourse analysis and the data are Facebook Messenger exchanges among a group of college students. The findings show that graphicons are critical, co-constructed narrative components that promote an interactive relationship between verbal and visual communication.

Keywords: visual linguistics, graphicons, small stories, Facebook Messenger, multimodality

1. Introduction

Contemporary narrative studies have increasingly focused on the sequential verbal structures, the microstructures of everyday storytelling. Pioneering works by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) introduced “small stories” (Georgakopoulou 2007: VII) analysis as an “antidote” (Georgakopoulou 2007: 2) to canonical narratives, exploring how brief, co-constructed narratives serve as active settings for negotiating personal and group identities.

Despite significant advances in the analysis of small stories, contemporary research must consider new aspects of storytelling, as the rise of Technologically Mediated Communication (TMC) platforms have profoundly altered the morphology and function of language used in day-to-day interactions. These digital interconnections are increasingly characterized by the widespread use of visual linguistic elements, collectively referred to by Herring and Dainas (2017) as “graphicons”, a term including emoticons, emojis, stickers, GIFs, memes, etc. Foundational research by Danesi (2017), subsequently built upon by Kiaer (2023) and Zappavigna and Logi (2024), shows that graphicons are much more than simply decorative ornaments of textual language. They function as paralanguage, changing tone, filtering emotion, and acting as social lubricants, that is, similar to the function that nonverbal cues represent in face-to-face (F2F) communication. Recent advances in multimodal modelling (e.g. Zhang et al. 2023) stress that the integration of visual and textual elements is inescapable in contemporary online interaction. Machine learning studies and computational semiotics show that such cross-modal interplay is foundational to meaning making, suggesting that multimodality is not an incidental add-on but a core aspect of contemporary digital discourse. Studies on digital visual cues by Tang and Hew (2019) have generally examined how graphicons convey emotion and modulate messages in the immediate vicinity of their utterance without taking notice of their overall narrative contributions.

Hart (2024) found that a comprehensive understanding of digital discourse required the interweaving of textual analysis with visual linguistics. He noted that in a multimodal text, for example, a metaphor may be expressed simultaneously in both verbal and visual modes, a phenomenon of “cross-modal resonance” that remains largely underexplored (2024: 138–139). Similarly, Giaxoglou and Georgakopoulou (2022: 243), as well as Freyburger (2024: 252), acknowledge the need to integrate nonverbal cues into discourse analysis. Although nonverbal cues have traditionally referred to the analysis of body language, the shift to digital multimodal communication now calls for examining how online graphicons affect narrative and identity construction. This is because, while early Internet communications relied mainly on text and basic text-based graphic elements (such as emoticons), the recent proliferation of a variety of visual elements in messaging applications has radically changed the narrative structure of communication. An updated analytical framework, which takes into account both textual and illustrative modes of treatment, is therefore necessary.

2. Analytical approach: Research questions and methodology

This study builds on heterogeneous research traditions by examining how graphicons function in and shape the co-construction of Facebook Messenger (FM) small stories. By drawing together insights from small story analysis, multimodal discourse studies, and digital linguistics, this paper proposes that graphicons are not simply adjuncts or substitutes for nonverbal cues or merely an upgrade from emoticons and that the paralinguistic layers do not only affect the immediate vicinity of the co-text, but they also provide a transformative mode of expression that reconfigures both the overall small stories construction and the process of identity articulation. Therefore, the following research questions guide the study:

- i. How do graphicons emerge and operate within FM conversations?
- ii. In what ways do these visual elements shape the narrative structure of small stories?

In addressing these questions, the paper argues that the integration of textual and visual modes enhances digital storytelling and fundamentally redefines narrative and identity co-construction in online communication. In the analysed FM environment, participants strategically employ graphicons to position themselves socially, establish their membership within groups, and express attitudes towards their narratives as well as the behaviour of others.

The data used in this paper were selected using a random sampling technique from a corpus of FM interactions collected between 2019 and 2022, involving periods before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study uses a longitudinal qualitative design based exclusively on data from students at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania in Miercurea Ciuc. For confidentiality, all participant names and identifying details have been anonymized. Although a random sampling technique was used to select the messages, the overall corpus represents a non-probability sample.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. From MacroTales to TMC MicroTales

Contemporary narrative analysis can be considered multidisciplinary since it covers a wide variety of fields, including sociolinguistics, sociology, and psychology, each employing its data and methodologies. While Labov's narrative analysis study model of "Abstract", "Orientation", "Complicating action", "Evaluation", "Result or Resolution", and "Coda" (1972: 363) laid

the foundation for subsequent scholars to collect stories utilizing research or clinical methods of elicitation, it focused on non-shared, personal experiences from the past such as life stories, autobiographies, and other important events. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou challenged the idea that storytelling based on a canonical framework exhausts narrative analysis. Their pioneering approach to “atypical stories” (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008: 378) drew attention to the importance of small stories in identity development and called for further development of appropriate analytical tools specifically designed for such interactions. One of the main reasons for this consideration was that traditional narratives derived from experimental settings are biased by the point of view of the researcher and often lack the complexity of real-life experience (2008: 377–378). Presser (2005) argued that, whereas traditionally elicited narratives were considered independent accounts, the presence and intervention of the interviewer influenced how subjects constructed their accounts, thus rendering these narrative co-constructions (2005: 2069). Conversely, small stories, which consist of a multitude of narrative micro-events, including “tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, (...) allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell” (Georgakopoulou 2007: VII), represent the building blocks of identity construction (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008: 379).

Recognition of the value of these ephemeral events for narrative analysis has led to the mapping of the textual and interactive elements of these storytelling forms. Additionally, this knowledge has encouraged the consideration of how these narratives could contribute to assessing the meaning and narrative power of events and exploring how particular linguistic choices are related to the wider social roles of those involved (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008: 379–382).

The following comparison between the Fichtean curve and Freytag’s pyramid highlights the constructive differences between small stories in TMC and traditional narratives. The Fichtean curve (*Figure 1*), as outlined by Gardner, depicts narrative progression as an “abc” triangle, in which: line (a) represents the baseline, the steady course of action taken by the characters, which prioritize security and stability; line (b) represents the upward action, the course of action that is filled with conflict and challenges as the character moves up the line in the face of external forces; and line (c), “all the rest” (falling action), represents the outcome of the story’s conclusion (1985: 187–188).

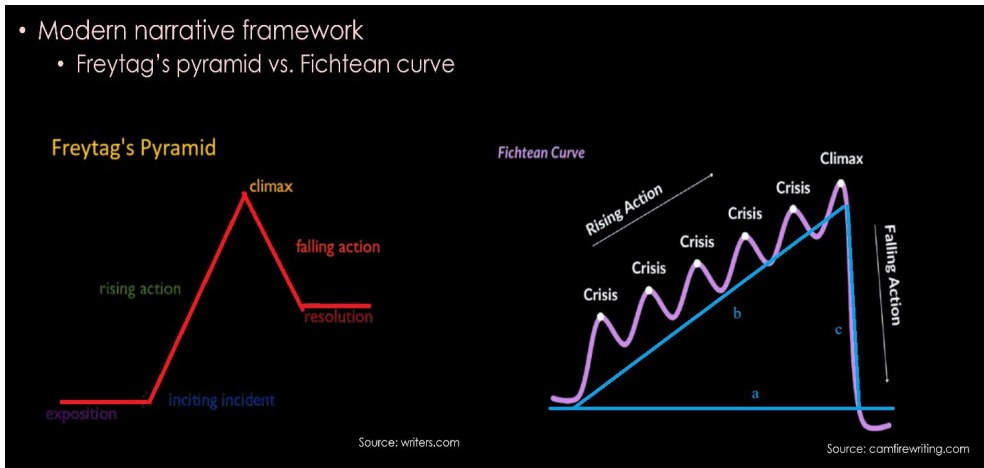


Figure 1. *Freytag's pyramid vs Fichtean curve*
(writers.com; campfirewriting.com)

The Fichtean curve is a faithful representation of the type of narrative construction found in FM small stories, allowing for a layered narrative experience that reflects the complexity of digital storytelling where tellers often follow a natural narrative path; where narratives are episodic in nature and require continuous participant engagement, maintaining a high level of suspense that peaks participant interest throughout the narrative. It contrasts with Freytag's pyramid (Figure 1) of "introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and catastrophe" (Chandler and Munday 2011: 163), which represents canonical narrative construction. Whereas Freytag's pyramid has a single linear rising action that reaches a climax before descending towards resolution, the Fichtean curve has multiple smaller peaks and valleys that represent micro-crisis, -climax, and -falling actions throughout the narrative. This undulating pattern of the Fichtean curve reflects the up and down movement of digital storytelling, capturing the escalating conflicts and emotional discharge in a more fragmented yet intense manner. The falling action can manifest itself as either a gradual closure or an abrupt closing, providing flexibility in how the story concludes.

The shift in narrative analysis from recognizing it as a static category to viewing it as a fluid response within repeated argumentative conditions is essential for understanding the adaptability and flexibility of interpersonal processes. More so in digital storytelling, which values creativity, unpredictability, inconsistency, and fragmentation as much as coherence, framing, and completeness.

3.2. The visual language of TMC

The emergence of online communication has brought about heated discussions regarding its impact on language. At the *Language on the Internet* conference in 2005 (Baron 2008: 28), concerns were raised about whether informal digital interaction impacted formal communication required in academic or professional settings. Thurlow and Jaroski studied how enduring theories of linguistic decline have been reframed to emphasize the role of visual features, referring to the UK-based *Guardian* newspaper's "Emoji invasion: The end of language as we know it:/" headline, as an example in chiming the death knell on the "end of language as we know it" (2020: 45). They argued that in TMC the absence of nonverbal cues like facial expressions and body gestures is naturally supplemented by visual linguistics, which enhance emotion, tone, and context. Thus, the concern that emoji and other visual modes are destroying the English language is based on a "misrecognition of communication", and these worries are a reflection of a "logocentric" bias (Thurlow and Jaroski 2020: 59–62).

Recent evidence, however, suggests that the very features causing concern are indeed the key to digital communication's appeal and the source of changes in communication. A Uswitch (2024) survey revealed that the preference for texting has influenced other, more direct, communication styles, with more than 70% of 2,000 respondents between the ages 18 and 34 avoiding making or receiving phone calls (Rufo 2024). This shift indicates that beyond the time and place affordances provided by TMC, users appreciate the flexibility and emotional subtleties provided by visual linguistics like graphicons. Danesi argues that the widespread use of graphicons raises important questions about why people increasingly interact in what he terms a "comic book" form but finds that, unlike standard writing systems, they serve both pictographic and logographic functions, visually representing a critical missing aspect of written communication: nonverbal cues (Danesi 2017: 2–4). Thus, graphicons fulfil the absent verbal functions of TMC more readily by introducing variations in tone and meaning, effectively transforming writing into a "bimodal system" (Danesi 2017: 15). They can be employed to initiate or terminate a transmission, or simply to avoid silence, and beyond mere decoration, speakers and interlocutors saturate graphicons with significant emotional and cognitive functions to express desire, attitude, and mindset, and to reveal aspects of their thinking and behaviour (Danesi 2017: 18–19). Kiaer further defines graphicons as nonverbal communication analogous to gestures in spoken interactions. Just as body language and gestures provide emotional context in F2F communication, graphicons add an essential layer of meaning to TMC (2023: 12).

Expanding on Danesi's foundation, Zappavigna and Logi explore the multimodality between text and graphicons by analysing the immediate

relationship between them. Their argument centres on the idea that the impact of emoji is highly context-dependent, serving as “verbal anchorage” (as defined by Sampietro 2016: 110) by directly modifying the meaning conveyed in their immediate co-text (Zappavigna and Logi 2024: 7). That is, graphicons are not self-governing lexical items but function as an essential form of paralanguage that operates in tandem with written text. In Zappavigna and Logi’s view, these visual elements dynamically interact with the surrounding text to provide nonverbal cues similar to facial expressions or gestures in F2F communication (2024: 8). Although Danesi (2017) and Kiaer (2023) have drawn parallels between emojis and gestures, Zappavigna and Logi highlight that emojis possess unique visual affordances that distinguish them from embodied nonverbal behaviours (2024: 7–11). While they provide a pragmatic view into the immediate, context-specific impact of graphicons, their analysis primarily addresses the immediate micro-level effects of visual linguistics. Their work focuses on how emojis influence the tone and emotional valence of individual messages rather than examining their cumulative, overall impact on the construction of texts and the formation of digital identities.

This leaves unanswered the question of how the combined use of graphicons with text might alter the flow and direction of the overall narrative structure of an interaction at a macro level. Beyond momentary tone modulation, there is a compelling argument that graphicons contribute significantly to forming digital identities. The persistent integration of emojis in online communication might lead to evolving norms of self-expression and identity, a phenomenon that neither Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) nor Danesi (2017) nor Zappavigna and Logi (2024) fully explore.

4. Visual-text fusion

4.1. Case study 1

This case study investigates how visual elements shape the construction of small stories in FM interactions by analysing a conversation among students (Rebecca, Fiona, Olivia, Ethan, Seth, Nathan, and Parker) as they wait for their online class to begin. Although the discussion centres on immediate frustrations regarding class delays, the dynamics reveal broader implications for how visual cues contribute to emotional management, social positioning, and group cohesion in digital communication. This analysis examines whether graphicons do more than express immediate emotion – precisely, how these visual elements shape the mood of the discussion, steer the narrative trajectory, and interact with textual features to construct a layered narrative that ultimately influences the outcome of the exchange.

- (1) Rebecca: *van valaki benn?* ‘anyone in?’¹
 (2) Fiona: *Nincs.* ‘No one.’
 (3) Rebecca: *szerintem a tanci elaludt* ‘Pretty sure the teacher overslept’
 (4) Olivia: 
 (5) Ethan: *Mindig késik* ‘She’s always late’
 (6) Ethan: *Ez már megszokott* ‘Kinda normal by now’
 (7) Seth: *Innen is késik* 😊 ‘Late here too 😊’
 (8) Ethan: *Jaja* ‘Yeah, yeah’
 (9) Nathan: *Én nem tudom milyen dolog ez, hogy valaki késik* 🙄 ‘I don’t get this behaviour, someone being late 🙄’ Seth 😊, Ethan 😊, Parker 😊
 (10) Ethan: *Addig is jól telik* ‘We’re having fun in the meantime’
 (11) Parker: *Mesterfokon űzi* ‘She’s a pro at it’
 (12) Fiona: *Jó, hogy mi tudunk (itt is) várni rá* 😊 ‘Good thing we can wait (even here) 😊’

(Source: FM, 18 March 2020, 4:04:53 pm – 4:11:46 pm)

Rebecca’s opening inquiry (1) and Fiona’s concise reply (2) set a factual, neutral tone, establishing the baseline context without additional visual enhancements. At this point, the tone of the conversation is matter-of-fact. While Rebecca’s comment (3) about the teacher oversleeping remains neutral, the conversation quickly takes on a negative emotional charge when a visual cue is introduced with Olivia’s Giant Blue Thumbs-up² (4), which nudges the group’s mood towards frustration. This early use of a typically positive sign shows how a visual cue can trigger emotional transformation, signalling reluctant agreement that masks passive-aggressive undertones. Ethan’s statements in turns (5) and (6) reinforce this shift by expressing his frustration over the teacher’s habitual tardiness.

A pivotal moment in the conversation occurs in turn (7) when Seth combines his negative textual remark with a “Grinning Face”³ emoji. Seth’s attitude towards the co-text can be seen as one of strategic intervention. Rather than simply reinforcing the negative interpersonal meaning of the text, Seth employs what Zappavigna and Logi (2024: 123) term as an instance of “multiply”. By introducing an alternative, positive perspective through the emoji, he subverts and repositions the original negative tone, aiming to guide the group towards a lighter, rather ironic interpretation. Seth’s approach demonstrates that he is

1 The translations from Hungarian to English are my own throughout the article.

2 A small yellow or large blue thumbs-up sign, showing approval, which in some situations might be interpreted as sarcastic or even passive-aggressive. Despite this potential interpretation, it is commonly used in a positive way to mean quick approvals. <https://emojipedia.org/thumbs-up> (Last accessed: 4 March 2025).

3 A face featuring open eyes and a wide, open smile that reveals the upper teeth and tongue, which typically expresses overall amusement. <https://emojipedia.org/grinning-face> (Last accessed: 4 March 2025).

not passively accepting the developed context; instead, he actively multiplies perspectives in an effort to transform, or even reverse, the emotional charge of the conversation. His deliberate addition of irony invites others to “laugh it off”, suggesting that the group should take the situation less seriously. His effort ultimately tries to alter the overall interpersonal meaning conveyed by the linguistic context although Ethan only sees sarcasm at this point. Thus, it takes Nathan’s effort in turn (9) to de-escalate the ongoing emotions with his exaggerated, mock-indignant utterance, in which he expresses bewilderment at someone’s persistent lateness, suggesting that he finds it incomprehensible that such behaviour could ever be acceptable. His utterance, accompanied by a “Face with Steam from Nose”⁴ emoji, intensifies the emotional impact. Although his reaction appears angry, the subsequent positive reactions from Seth, Ethan, and Parker (all using “Grinning Squinting Face”⁵ emojis) indicate that the group interprets his outburst as performative rather than genuinely enraged. This interplay of text and visual signals marks the narrative climax, highlighting how the group negotiates emotional meaning collectively. Ethan’s note in turn (10) suggests that they are having fun despite the delay, while Parker’s sarcastic comment in turn (11) diffuses any lingering tension. These utterances also serve as the falling action of the story.

Fiona’s “Upside-Down Face”⁶ emoji in turn (12), following her indignant statement, however, adds a final note of ironic resignation. While it concludes the narrative, it also encapsulates both the frustration and the amusement shared by the group. The “Upside-Down Face” emoji is particularly significant here. This emoji is widely recognized as conveying passive aggression, and it challenges Seth and Nathan’s effort to ease the mood of the interaction. Unlike Seth’s emoji that introduced a contradictory layer to his text, complicating the narrative, Fiona’s emoji reinforces her textual irony, creating a unified message that circles back to the group’s genuine frustration while encapsulating the brief humorous take on the matter.

Several key patterns emerge beyond the immediate paralinguistic layering where visual elements do more than just simply mirror the text or complicate meaning: (a) Emojis act as tools for emotional management, allowing participants to express frustration in a socially acceptable way; (b) Seth’s and Nathan’s visual

4 A face with closed eyes and raised eyebrows, with two puffs of steam erupting from its nostrils, indicating frustration or anger. It can express a wide range of negative emotions, including annoyance, rage, and disdain, but in different circumstances it can also transmit sentiments of pride, dominance, and confidence. <https://emojipedia.org/face-with-steam-from-nose> (Last accessed: 4 March 2025).

5 A face with a wide-open smile and eyes squeezed into an X shape. It often indicates excitement or loud laughter. This emoji is related to the >< and xD emoticons. <https://emojipedia.org/grinning-squinting-face> (Last accessed: 4 March 2025).

6 A smiley face turned upside down, often used to express irony or sarcasm. <https://emojipedia.org/upside-down-face> (Last accessed: 4 March 2025).

cues and the visual responses of the other participants encourage social cohesion by unifying individual complaints into a collective, light-hearted stance towards shared annoyance; (c) At the same time, as demonstrated by Fiona's emoji, while positive visual cues may succeed in temporarily altering the negative path of the conversation, the "Upside-Down Face" emoji re-establishes the status quo by reinforcing the negative mood, preserving the authenticity of the group's complaint.

4.2. Case study 2

This second case study focuses on a more emotionally charged and structurally complex group conversation initiated by a student referred to as "Isla", who expresses frustration over a teacher spoiling their class presentation. Other participants include Nathan, Parker, Leah, Avery, and Zane. The analysis of the interaction focuses on how multiple forms of visual expression, both traditional graphicons such as emojis and typographical anomalies within a transmission unit, can signal actual emotions, as well as shape and project emotional meaning. Rather than simply reinforcing the linguistic content, these visual elements at times actively contradict it, revealing emotional dissonance, irony, or attempts to save face. This case study thus provides an ideal setting for evaluating how graphicons can resist rather than assist the surrounding text, in addition to how visual cues present in the language (such as misspellings or formatting) can serve comparable interpersonal and expressive purposes.

- (1) (...) Isla: *Ez mkst elmkndja a bemutatónkat. Ugyhugy rzt mrgegyszer vegig fogjatok hallgatni. Bocsi 😊* 'This one's nkw'll spoikil our presentation. Su, you'll listen to rhis all over mgain.' [This one will spoil our presentation now. So, you'll hear it all over again.] Sorry😊" Parker😊
- (2) Nathan: *mindig ezt csinálja. :D* 'She always does this. :D'
- (3) Isla: *Idegességemben írni se tudok 😊😊😊😊* 'So stressed I can't even type'
- (4) Isla: *Felment a cukrom 😊* 'My blood sugar's through the roof 😊'
- (5) Nathan: *De legalább megint tiszteletben tartja az időt. :))* 'At least she's respecting the time again. :))' Avery👊
- (6) Parker: *Reméli, hogy megemlítitek 😊* 'She's hoping you'll mention it 😊'
- (7) Nathan: *Mire oda kerülsz, hogy bemutass már mindenki a pokolba kívánja az egész órát :D* 'By the time you get to do it yourselves, everyone will wish this whole class to hell :D'
- (8) Isla: *Szolgak neki, h bocsi, de ido van? 😊* 'Should I tell her, "sorry but time's up?" 😊' Leah👊
- (9) Leah: *Kérlek* 'Please'
- (10) Parker: *Na ezt is kiemeli.* 'She'll highlight this too'

- (11) Nathan: *Ti nem is kell beszéljeteK semmiről.* :D ‘You won’t even have to say anything. :D’
- (12) Parker: *Ha így haladunk, nem is lesz mikor* ‘At this rate, there’ll be no time left’
- (13) Isla: *Raadasul a saját tanulmánya + egyszer vegighallgattuk majden úgy ahogy írja ugyanazokkal a peldakkal, s most megegyszer elmondjuk* ‘Moreover, it’s her study + we already heard it once with the same examples, now we’ll say it again’
- (14) Isla: *Kis szereny* ‘So modest’
- (15) Isla: *S a bibliografia java resz az o kutatásait tartalmazza* 😊 ‘And most of the bibliography’s her own work 😊’
- (16) Parker: *Azért szereti ennyire* ‘That’s why she’s so into it’
- (17) Nathan: 😊😊😊 *Ismétlés a tudás anyja p.....* 😊😊😊 ‘Practice makes perfect, b.....’ Avery 😊
- (18) Parker: *3,14csa* ‘B!tch’
- (19) Parker: *Ezt akartad mondani?* 😊 ‘Is this what you meant? 😊’
- (20) Nathan: *Pediget akartam de ez sem rossz* ‘Was gonna say “by the way”, but just as good’
- (21) Nathan: *Kis vulgáris* 😊😊 ‘You naughty little thing 😊😊’
- (22) Parker: *Irodalom, a nyelv játéka* ‘Literature, the playground of words’
- (23) Zane: (...).



(Source: FM, 4 May 2020 3:05:07 pm – 3:13:18 pm)

The exchange begins with Isla’s almost incomprehensible transmission unit (1) where she accuses the teacher of interfering with their upcoming presentation. The utterances are followed by an apology to the students attending the class and a laughing emoji. Immediately, three significant features can be noticed in Isla’s “transmission unit” (Baron 2008: 54), which is a separate unit of communication, such as a single message or utterance that contributes to the overall flow and meaning of an interaction: First, there are numerous typos in the Hungarian

text – *mkst* instead of *most*, meaning ‘now’, *elmkndja* instead of *elmondja*, meaning ‘will tell’, and *rzt* instead of *ezt*, meaning ‘this’. Second, when referring to the teacher, Isla deliberately uses the demonstrative pronoun ‘Ez’ (‘this’) as a dismissive, derogatory address to undermine the teacher’s authority. Third, despite the clearly negative content expressing frustration, Isla concludes with the “Face with Tears of Joy”⁷ emoji (😄).

These three factors represent the first clue that something out of the ordinary is taking place in this outburst of anger. Here, a clear contradiction is apparent between text and graphicon. In contrast to the previous case study where the emojis deviated from the text but did not entirely negate it, here Isla is explicitly apologizing for the negative situation caused by the teacher, thus trying to save face, while she ends the utterance with an emoji associated with humour and joy. The juxtaposition becomes even more pronounced in her follow-up two messages: (3) and (4). She blames the stress caused by the teacher’s action for her typographical mistakes, and then uses hyperbole to further express her negative emotion. However, while in both utterances Isla explicitly names her negative emotional state – frustration and anger –, she simultaneously uses multiple laughing emojis. This pattern challenges somewhat Zappavigna and Logi’s framework, which suggests that emojis typically “diverge from the polarity of attitude in the linguistic co-text but do not contradict it” (2024: 124). Aside from the obvious contradiction, the typographical errors in Isla’s messages visually mark her genuine frustration. While she consistently omits diacritics in her Hungarian writing (a stable feature of her communication style), the appearance of actual typographical mistakes signals authentic emotional distress. While these mistakes could also be the consequence of the particular typing device and keyboards (e.g. the small surface of the phone keyboard, rushing, etc.), the analysis of over 300 messages attributed to Isla did not reveal another instance where she would make so many typographical mistakes in such a short time as in example (1). These mistakes are more likely due to emotional distress in line with Naegelin et al’s research conducted on multimodal emotional stress in a simulated office environment, where they found that when the number of typing errors per minute exceeds a threshold (typically around two errors per minute), there is a significant increase in the probability of negative emotional valence (2023: 11). Their findings suggest that elevated error rates serve as a reliable behavioural marker of heightened stress levels. Thus, the spike in typographical mistakes in Isla’s messages likely reflects a moment of genuine emotional turmoil, rather than merely a consequence of an awkward typing device. Therefore, in Isla’s transmission unit, there are two parallel visual linguistic features operating

7 A face featuring a broad smile, raised eyebrows, and eyes that are smiling while shedding tears from intense laughter, commonly used to indicate that something is humorous. <https://emojipedia.org/face-with-tears-of-joy> (Last accessed: 4 March 2025).

simultaneously: a) the typos conveying genuine frustration and b) the emojis presenting a juxtaposition of emotional display.

The next sequence of the analysis involved the observance of how the group responds to this complex communicative situation, that is, their response triggered by the unusual cues in Isla's transmission unit. First, Parker reacts with a laughing emoji that acknowledges Isla's face-saving attempt and gives the signal for others to intervene. But it takes Nathan's contribution (5), by which the teacher at least is keeping the proposed schedule on track, to set the rest of the interaction on a new path. Nathan's statement is saturated with irony. The phrase directly contradicts what is happening in reality: the teacher is not honouring the time set by herself (again); moreover, she is spoiling the upcoming presentation. The smiling Laughing Face emoticon at the end of the sentence is not there to emphasize the statement or "harmonize" (Zappavigna and Logi 2024: 117) with the utterance, it rather acts as a "rebound" (Zappavigna and Logi 2024: 122) that complicates, even amplifies the irony, serving as a visual signal that Nathan's statement is not meant to be taken at face value.

Parker's immediate response (6) clarifies the meaning of Nathan's utterance. It displays that the participants are in tune with each other, while this subtle interplay illuminates the group's shared stance taking and their implicit critique of the teacher's behaviour. The visual language reinforces the narrative's ironic as well as critical edge rather than confusing the group. To other members of the in-group who also hold this critical viewpoint, these serve as a kind of "wink" that drives Nathan to tease Isla (7) while cautioning her to take some sort of action to stop the teacher's soliloquy. Nathan's statement also foreshadows the beginning of an "open season" of bashing the teacher (10)–(18), which will ultimately lead to Parker's vulgarity and the climax of the narrative: Nathan leaves parts of his comment incomplete (17) (e.g. "p....." and "b....."). His incomplete utterance suggests a familiar phrase, but it invites participants to fill in the blanks imaginatively. In this transmission unit (17), Nathan opens his message with a series of faces with tears of joy emojis (😄😄😄), laying the groundwork for interpreting his response in the context of the previous exchange. According to Danesi's main phatic functions of graphicons (utterance opener, utterance ending, and silence avoidance), these emojis act as a kind of visual "small talk" that pave the way for maintaining positive social bonds between interlocutors (2017: 19). However, as Nathan's utterance openers, the laughing emoticons do more than simply convey amusement; they also assure the other participants that, although his utterance is a truncated expression reminiscent of familiar aphorisms (such as "practice makes perfect..."), its underlying intent is humorous rather than evasive, inviting the others to complete the utterance.

Following Isla's ironic comment on the repetitive, self-referential nature of the teacher's presentation (15), criticizing her meta-research approach, and Parker's

sarcastic pun about the teacher's self-interest in her research (16), Nathan's use of laughing emojis serves to disambiguate the tone of his response. Because text alone can often be ambiguous in these exchanges, and other participants may not always be sure whether a speaker's statement is serious, sarcastic, or humorous, by adding laughing emojis at the beginning, Nathan signals that his response is meant to be taken ironically rather than as a critical comment. The multiple positive emojis create a paralinguistic layer that softens the impact of his fragmented text and aligns his message with the ongoing, good-humoured rapport established by the group. In this way, Nathan ensures that his post reinforces the collective mood of innocent mockery rather than escalating into genuine negativity. As a consequence, Nathan's use of emojis refines Danesi's theory by showing that graphicons can operate on multiple levels simultaneously, fulfilling both phatic and more interpretative, context-driven roles.

In response to Nathan's open-ended challenge, Parker adds a (18) vulgar linguistic twist. By choosing a provocative word like "B!tch",⁸ but in the form of a logogram, Parker adds an extra layer of irony. Nathan's response and addition (20–21) of the "Winking Face with Tongue"⁹ (👉) emoticon acknowledges the overt tone while still keeping the exchange light. The emoticons here function as both self-aware markers and indicators that the language, while edgy, is part of a familiar, friendly tease among the participants. Parker's logogram also establishes the gender of the teacher, which in Hungarian was not apparent up to this point.

Parker and Nathan's final exchange represents the falling action within the narrative, ending with Parker's sophisticated observation of his own wittiness. Zane concludes the narrative abruptly with his only contribution (23), a Meme GIF (looping animated image that incorporates text, enabling it to function as both a meme and a GIF by communicating humorous, often satirical content) of a man sitting in a car eating a sandwich with the caption "I'm just there to read the comments." With his contribution, Zane positions himself as the fourth wall to the unfolding drama and reframes the preceding conversation for the participants to consider it through a meta-commentary lens.

This case study is especially relevant because it expands on pre-existing theoretical frameworks regarding the interaction of visual and textual components

8 (18) 3,14csa "B!tch" The translation here is not a literal, word-for-word rendering but a substitution designed to capture the full effect of Parker's original expression. Although the Hungarian expression has an equivalent meaning to its English counterpart in context, certain elements, such as the specific logogram used, are altered. This choice was made to ensure that the same emotional and stylistic impact is conveyed in English, in keeping with the principles of functional equivalence in translation.

9 A face with its tongue sticking out and a wink, having the right eye closed and the left eye wide open, which expresses excitement, goofiness, or joking around. <https://emojipedia.org/winking-face-with-tongue> (Last accessed: 4 March 2025).

in digital communication. Several key insights emerged during the analysis: Emojis can completely contradict – not just complicate – the emotional polarity of text while still functioning effectively as communication tools. Isla’s consistent use of laughing emojis alongside explicit expressions of frustration creates a complex emotional display that her peers nevertheless seem to understand. Additionally, different types of visual linguistic cues can operate simultaneously to convey distinct aspects of identity and emotion. Isla’s typos signal genuine emotional distress, while her use of contradictory emojis maintains social cohesion by projecting a positive face to the group. Furthermore, despite the apparent emotional dissonance, the group maintains cohesion through recognizing the underlying situation and each other’s communication styles. The co-constructed group narrative and stance taking are facilitated by the parallel conversation threads of Isla’s annoyance, Nathan’s taunting, and Parker’s mediation.

5. Conclusions

The present study explores the interplay between visual linguistics and text in small stories on FM, highlighting their significance in storytelling and the evolution of TMC. The findings revealed that the use of visual elements does much more than operate as cosmetic embellishments: they function as deliberate interactive devices through which participants co-construct meaning and maintain social equilibrium. These elements develop organically within the conversation, more or less mimicking F2F visual cues that help ease disagreements, express irony, or strengthen bonds, sometimes even reshaping the surrounding text. Graphicons also influence the narrative structure of small stories by signalling turning points in the phases of the interaction, such as openings, climaxes, and closures, and by affecting the emotional pace of the conversation. They assist in organizing the story’s progression, smoothing transitions in tone, and preserving group cohesion even in moments of tension. Data from the FM interactions show that small stories in cyberspace retain traditional narrative elements while largely relying on multimodal layering for the co-construction of identity and the maintenance of relationships.

Fluency in these complex interactions requires a collective “visual literacy” (Tsakona 2009: 1186) that suggests the ability to use visual symbols according to socially accepted, generational, and culturally defined norms (see also Kress and van Leeuwen 2021: 21–43). As Gee (2003: 19) notes, in today’s world, being able to read and write is no longer enough, as individuals must also be proficient in multiple systems of signs and symbols. Members of certain generations (Gen Z, Gen Alpha) with similar cultural backgrounds often possess this competence intuitively, allowing them to integrate visual and textual elements seamlessly.

For earlier generations, outside these age groups, or intercultural communicators, this ease may not come naturally, highlighting the generational aspect of multimodal communication. Novak et al. (2015) suggest, “[w]e consider the interplay between emojis and text to be one of the most promising directions for future work. Not only the position of an emoji but its textual context is also important in determining the role of the emoji as an amplifier and modifier of the meaning” (2015: 12). In other words, the interplay between text and visual elements is indispensable for future narrative research.

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