DOI : https://doi.org/10.37817/ikra-ithabdimas.v10i2
P-ISSN : 2654-5721
E-ISSN : 2654-7546

How Social Media Changes Meaning: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary Language

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Abstract

The development of social media has transformed the ways in which people use, understand, and negotiate meaning in everyday communication. Popular terms, informal language, humor, irony, memes, and various forms of digital expression demonstrate that linguistic meaning increasingly depends on the context of interaction and the communities in which users participate. This phenomenon is important to examine because changes in meaning are not only related to linguistic development but also to the formation of identity, social relations, and cultural understanding in digital spaces. This study aims to analyze how social media influences the formation, transformation, and negotiation of meaning in contemporary language use from the perspective of Philosophy of Language. This study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach to understand users' experiences and reflections in interpreting digital language. The research is designed to obtain data through in-depth interviews with approximately 15–20 social media users, observations of digital communication practices, and document analysis involving posts, comments, memes, and other relevant forms of digital expression. The data are analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, with Wittgenstein's concept of meaning as use serving as the primary theoretical perspective, supported by pragmatic theory and digital discourse studies. The findings indicate four main patterns: meaning shifts according to context; humor and irony function as spaces for meaning negotiation; language serves as a marker of identity and social membership; and tensions emerge between speakers' intentions and audience interpretations. Theoretically, this study contributes to an expanded understanding of meaning as use in the context of digital communication. Practically, it emphasizes the importance of digital literacy that is oriented not only toward technological competence but also toward the ability to understand context, intention, and the diversity of meanings in social interaction.

Keywords: Social Media, Meaning as Use, Philosophy of Language, Digital Communication, Pragmatics, Digital Literacy, Identity Formation

Introduction

The development of social media has transformed the ways in which people use, understand, and negotiate language in everyday life. For social media users, a word, expression, emoji, meme, or comment no longer necessarily carries the same meaning as it does in conventional language use. Words such as *viral*, *cancel*, *ghosting*, *flexing*, *healing*, and *toxic*, including terms that previously had particular meanings, may acquire new nuances when used in digital contexts. These changes demonstrate not only the development of vocabulary but also the fact that linguistic meaning is continually shaped through social interaction, context, communities, and communication practices taking place digitally.

P-ISSN : 2654-5721
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This phenomenon can be observed in social media users' experiences when they encounter a post, comment, or meme whose meaning cannot be understood solely on the basis of the lexical meanings of the words used. A sentence that appears simple at the literal level may convey humor, sarcasm, criticism, support, or even rejection depending on the context in which it is used. Likewise, the use of emojis, punctuation marks, hashtags, abbreviations, spelling variations, slang, and code-switching can provide additional layers of meaning in communication. Thus, social media users do not merely use language to convey information; they continuously interpret, modify, and construct meaning through interactions with other users.

From the perspective of Philosophy of Language, this phenomenon raises a fundamental question: how is the meaning of a word or expression formed when language is used in an ever-changing social media environment? This question becomes increasingly relevant when considered in relation to Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of *meaning as use*, namely the idea that linguistic meaning cannot be separated from the way language is used in the practices of life. In the context of social media, language "use" occurs in an environment that differs from face-to-face communication. Language is produced in the forms of text, images, videos, memes, emojis, reactions, reposts, and various other forms of multimodal communication. Therefore, meaning does not reside solely within words but emerges through the relationship between words, contexts, users, audiences, and the social practices in which language is employed.

Recent studies demonstrate that social media constitutes an important space for the formation of linguistic practices and social identities. Schwegler, Landschoff, and Rommel (2024), for example, demonstrate that linguistic and multimodal practices on social media can be used for self-positioning, solidarity building, the expression of group norms, and the differentiation of one community's identity from that of another. These findings demonstrate that language on social media has a considerably more complex social dimension than the mere exchange of information. Language becomes a means of constructing positions, identities, and social relationships.

Changes in meaning can also be observed in meme-based communication practices. Dynel (2024) demonstrates that memes in Twitter/X communication possess pragmatic and multimodal characteristics that enable messages to be relocated, recontextualised, and assigned new meaning functions through processes of *recontextualization* and *reprragmatisation*. This demonstrates that the meaning of a message may change when the message is reused in a different interactional context.

Research on language and misinformation also demonstrates the importance of linguistic characteristics in the dissemination of information on social media. Zhou, Li, and Lu (2021) found that particular characteristics, such as the use of persuasive words and words indicating uncertainty, may be associated with tendencies toward the dissemination of misinformation. These findings indicate that word choice is not merely a matter of communication style but may also

influence how messages are understood, accepted, and disseminated by users.

Meanwhile, recent research on social media textual variation demonstrates that digital communication generates various forms of textual variation, both intentional and unintentional. Such variation presents challenges for language processing because social media language frequently differs from the formal language used in conventional communication. Other studies also demonstrate that social media functions as a space in which individual identities are constructed through self-presentation, interaction with audiences, and social responses.

Although these studies have made important contributions to understanding digital language, significant research opportunities remain from the perspective of Philosophy of Language. Much contemporary research emphasizes linguistic, pragmatic, identity-related, language-processing, or social aspects of social media. Studies of digital language change also frequently focus on emerging linguistic forms, frequency of use, textual characteristics, or communication consequences. However, further investigation is needed into the fundamental question of what is actually meant by "meaning" when an expression moves from one social context into a different digital context. In other words, the unresolved issue is not only how language changes on social media but also how users experience, interpret, and negotiate such changes in meaning in everyday interaction.

This gap is important because linguistic meaning is fundamentally not entirely static. A word may acquire a new meaning when it is used by a particular community, in a particular situation, and for a particular communicative purpose. Social media accelerates this process because an expression can move rapidly from one community to another and undergo contextual transformation. Under such circumstances, meaning becomes both a social and philosophical issue. Meaning concerns not only the relationship between words and the objects to which they refer but also how human beings use language to perform actions, establish relationships, express attitudes, construct identities, and create shared understanding.

A qualitative approach is relevant for understanding this phenomenon because changes in meaning cannot always be adequately represented through quantitative data. The primary concerns are users' experiences, interpretations of particular expressions, contexts of use, and the social processes that enable an expression to acquire or lose a particular meaning. This approach allows researchers to understand language as a living social practice that is continuously negotiated. Accordingly, the study does not merely ask, "Which words have changed their meanings?" but also asks, "How do users understand these changes?", "In what contexts do changes in meaning occur?", and "How does social interaction contribute to the formation of new meanings?"

Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze how social media influences the formation, transformation, and negotiation of linguistic meaning in contemporary communication. Specifically, the study focuses on users' experiences and interpretations of words, expressions, memes, emojis, and other forms of digital

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language that demonstrate shifts or expansions in meaning. Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to Philosophy of Language by connecting classical concepts of meaning, language use, context, and speech acts with contemporary digital communication practices. Practically, the study is expected to increase social media users' awareness of the importance of context in understanding language and to assist educators and students in recognizing that changes in digital language constitute a socio-philosophical phenomenon that requires critical examination rather than being regarded merely as changes in vocabulary.

Research Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological design (*interpretative phenomenological approach*). This approach was selected because the study does not merely aim to identify forms of linguistic meaning change on social media but, more importantly, seeks to understand how users experience, interpret, and assign meaning to such linguistic changes in everyday life. The phenomenon of meaning change is contextual and subjective; therefore, a phenomenological approach enables the researcher to explore users' experiences in depth and to understand how meaning is constructed through social interaction.

From the perspective of Philosophy of Language, this approach is employed to connect users' empirical experiences with philosophical questions concerning meaning, language use, context, and communication practices. Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of *meaning as use* serves as one of the primary interpretive foundations, particularly the idea that the meaning of an expression can be understood through the way that expression is used in the practices of life. Austin and Searle's concept of *speech acts* and Grice's pragmatic principles are also employed as supporting perspectives for understanding how utterances and digital expressions acquire particular meanings through context and interaction.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

Participants are selected using purposive sampling, namely the selection of participants based on characteristics that correspond to the objectives of the study. If additional participants with relevant experiences are required, snowball sampling may be used as a supporting strategy.

The study is designed to involve approximately 15–20 participants or until data saturation is reached, referring to the condition in which additional interviews no longer generate substantively different themes or information. This number is flexible and may be adjusted according to the depth of the data obtained.

The inclusion criteria for participants are: (1) active social media users; (2) regular use of social media in everyday life; (3) experience using or encountering terms, expressions, memes, emojis, slang, or forms of digital communication that have undergone changes or expansions in meaning; (4) willingness to describe their experiences and interpretations concerning language use on social media; and (5) willingness to provide informed consent to participate in the study.

The research may be conducted within the social context of social media users in Indonesia, with particular attention to digital communication practices in educational environments and everyday social life. This context allows the study to examine the relationship between changes in digital language, communication culture, and user experiences within a society characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity.

Data Collection Techniques and Procedures

Research data are collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation of digital communication practices, and digital document analysis. The use of several techniques is intended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of meaning change and to facilitate data triangulation.

First, in-depth interviews are conducted individually, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes for each participant. Interviews may be conducted face-to-face or through online communication platforms depending on the circumstances and consent of the participants. The interview questions are open-ended, for example: “How did you understand a particular term when you first encountered it on social media?”, “Does the meaning of that term change when it is used within different communities or contexts?”, and “What makes you recognize that an expression has a particular meaning in a social media context?”

Second, observations are conducted of language-use practices in digital spaces that can be accessed ethically and do not involve the collection of unnecessary personal data. The observations focus on the use of slang, memes, emojis, hashtags, code-switching, abbreviations, and changes in word usage within digital communication contexts. The researcher records the context of use, forms of expression, user responses, and possible changes in the interpretation of particular expressions.

Third, document analysis is conducted on relevant digital materials, such as public posts, comments, memes, hashtags, and other forms of digital communication. Documents are selected purposively according to their relevance to the research focus. User identities, account names, profile photographs, and unnecessary personal information are removed or anonymized during documentation and reporting.

The primary research instrument is the researcher as the human instrument, supported by a semi-structured interview guide, observation sheets, a reflective journal, an audio-recording device used with participants’ consent, and interview transcripts. The data are subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate the analysis process.

Data Analysis Technique

The data are analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. This method is selected because it enables the researcher to identify patterns of meaning emerging from participants’ experiences while maintaining attention to the social and interpretative contexts of the data.

The analysis process consists of several stages. First, the researcher familiarizes themselves with the data by repeatedly reading interview transcripts, observation

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notes, and digital documents. Second, the researcher conducts initial coding of data segments related to meaning change, context of use, interpretative experiences, identity, humor, sarcasm, and meaning negotiation. Third, codes with conceptual relationships are grouped into categories and initial themes. Fourth, the themes are reviewed by comparing them with the entire dataset to ensure that each theme has adequate empirical support. Fifth, each theme is defined and named according to the characteristics of the meanings it contains. The final stage involves developing interpretations by connecting the empirical themes with concepts from Philosophy of Language, particularly *meaning as use*, context, *speech acts*, pragmatics, and meaning negotiation.

Where available, software such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti may be used to assist in organizing transcripts, assigning codes, grouping categories, and tracing relationships among themes. However, such software functions only as a data-management tool; philosophical interpretation and theme construction remain the responsibility of the researcher.

Data Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study is maintained through four major criteria of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility is strengthened through source and technique triangulation, member checking, adequate researcher engagement with the data, and peer debriefing. Participants may be given an opportunity to review summaries of interpretations of their interviews so that the researcher can ensure that the interpretations do not significantly deviate from the experiences they reported.

Transferability is maintained through thick description of participant characteristics, social contexts, types of social media, observed linguistic forms, and communication situations. Detailed descriptions enable readers to assess whether the findings may be applicable to social contexts with similar characteristics.

Dependability is maintained through systematic documentation of the research process, including participant recruitment procedures, interview guidelines, data-collection processes, changes in research strategies, coding procedures, and theme development. Such documentation constitutes an audit trail through which the research process can be traced.

Confirmability is strengthened through a reflexive journal, documentation of the analysis process, triangulation, and the separation of participants' statements from the researcher's interpretations. The researcher consciously reflects upon their position, assumptions, and potential biases that may influence the interpretation of the data.

Research Ethics

This study applies the principles of qualitative research ethics. Before interviews are conducted, all participants receive explanations regarding the purpose of the study, data-collection procedures, data use, participants' rights, and their right to withdraw from participation at any time without consequences. Participation is based on informed consent.

Participants' identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms or

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participant codes in transcripts and research reports. Personal data irrelevant to the research objectives are not collected. For social media data, the study uses only materials relevant to the research focus and ethically accessible; account-identifying information is anonymized in publications to minimize the risk of identification.

All interview data and research documents are stored securely and used solely for research purposes. During publication, the researcher ensures that quotations or examples of digital communication do not cause harm, embarrassment, or enable the identification of individuals without an ethical justification and adequate consent.

Thus, the methodology of this study is designed to understand changes in linguistic meaning on social media not merely as changes in linguistic form but as a process of experience, interpretation, and meaning negotiation occurring within digital social practices. The phenomenological approach enables the study to maintain a user-experience perspective, while thematic analysis and the Philosophy of Language framework provide a basis for interpreting how meaning is formed through language use in contemporary contexts.

Theoretical Review

1. Meaning as Use

The question of meaning is one of the fundamental issues in Philosophy of Language. The question of how a word acquires meaning cannot be separated from how human beings use language in everyday life. From Ludwig Wittgenstein's perspective, the meaning of a word is not determined solely by the relationship between the word and the object to which it refers but is closely related to its use in the practices of life. In other words, to understand the meaning of an expression, it is necessary to examine how the expression is used, in what context it appears, who uses it, and what social rules make its use intelligible.

This perspective becomes increasingly relevant in the context of social media communication. Social media enables language to be used in highly diverse situations and brings together users from different social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. A word or expression may move from one community to another and acquire different functions and interpretations. Therefore, meaning change on social media cannot be sufficiently understood as lexical change alone; rather, it must be viewed as a change in language-use practices.

KhosraviNik (2022) emphasizes that digital meaning-making should be understood through the relationship between content and social practice on social media. Meaning does not reside solely in the content of a message but also in the actions accompanying that message, such as sharing, commenting, responding, quoting, and repositioning it within a different context. This perspective reinforces the relevance of the concept of *meaning as use* for understanding digital language because meaning emerges through the relationship between language and users' social activities.

Within Wittgenstein's framework, the concept of *language games* provides a further explanation of the relationship between language and social context. Each community may possess different habits

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and rules governing language use. Terms such as *viral, healing, toxic, ghosting, flexing,* and *cancel*, for example, may acquire different nuances depending on the community and situation in which they are used. Such meanings do not necessarily remain fixed because language is always embedded in changing practices of life.

The development of colloquial language on social media illustrates this dynamic. Lubis and Bahri (2022) demonstrate that colloquial words are used as part of the development of communication styles on social media. The use of such linguistic forms demonstrates that users do not merely follow formal language rules but also create forms of communication considered appropriate within their digital social environments. This is consistent with the view that language acquires meaning through use.

Nuralifa et al. (2021) also demonstrate the importance of pragmatic context in understanding language use on social media. Particular linguistic forms may serve different functions depending on communicative purposes and situations. Thus, changes in digital language cannot be understood merely by examining the form of words; the social practices accompanying them must also be considered.

Mardikantoro et al. (2023) further demonstrate that social media interactions produce distinctive forms of linguistic variation. This phenomenon has implications for language learning because digital communication forms have become part of society's linguistic experience. Accordingly, digital language variation should not be understood merely as a deviation from standard language but as a linguistic practice possessing particular functions and social contexts.

Based on this perspective, the present study positions the concept of *meaning as use* as its primary theoretical lens. The focus is not merely on identifying words or expressions that have undergone changes in meaning but on understanding how users experience, interpret, and negotiate meaning in social media communication practices.

2. Pragmatics and Meaning Negotiation

The second perspective employed is pragmatics. Pragmatics focuses on the relationship between linguistic form, context, speaker intention, and recipient interpretation. This perspective is important in research on social media because digital messages often do not explicitly convey all of their meanings.

In digital communication, humor, irony, sarcasm, implicature, emojis, memes, punctuation, and word choice may generate meanings that differ from their literal meanings. Understanding such messages depends on shared knowledge, social relationships, conversational contexts, and users' experiences.

Habibi et al. (2022) demonstrate that communication through Instagram content may contain implicatures, meaning that understanding a message requires interpretation of meanings that are not directly expressed. This demonstrates that meaning in digital communication does not always exist on the surface of language but may emerge through context and users' inferences.

The pragmatic perspective is also evident in research on emotional expression. Suganda

et al. (2022) demonstrate that emotional expressions in Instagram comments may function as markers of impoliteness. Therefore, an expression cannot be understood solely on the basis of its linguistic form because its meaning is also related to social relationships between users and the interactional situation.

Pranowo and Sari (2022) similarly demonstrate that linguistic forms and language attitudes on social media are related to communication contexts. Language choices may express particular attitudes toward an issue or another user. This demonstrates that digital language is not merely a tool for conveying information but also a means of performing social actions.

Nuralifa et al. (2021) further reinforce this understanding by demonstrating the importance of pragmatic analysis in examining social media language use. The meaning of a linguistic form may change according to communicative purposes and the context in which it is used.

Meme practices provide a more complex example of the relationship between context and meaning. Dynel (2024) demonstrates that retweeting and quote tweeting may involve processes of *recontextualisation, pragmatic entrenchment*, and *reprragmatisation*. A meme may be placed within a new context, developed through user interaction, or reused for different communicative purposes. Thus, contextual changes can produce changes in meaning even when the basic form of the message remains unchanged.

Ren (2024) also explains that sharing practices on social media constitute a complex pragmatic phenomenon. Such practices are influenced by linguistic choices, social and cultural norms, technological characteristics, and user motivations. Sharing activity is therefore not merely a technical action but also a social action capable of generating particular meanings.

Pérez-Sabater (2021) demonstrates that timing, language style, and audience engagement are interconnected in social media sharing practices. The study also demonstrates that code-switching can serve as a resource for constructing solidarity within digital communities. This finding indicates that language choices on social media may perform broader social functions beyond the transmission of information.

Thus, pragmatics functions in this study as a supporting perspective for explaining how context, intention, inference, and audience responses influence the processes of meaning formation and negotiation.

3. Language, Identity, and Digital Communities

Language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a means of constructing, displaying, and negotiating identity. Social media provides a space in which individuals can select various linguistic forms to demonstrate closeness to particular groups, construct self-images, or distinguish themselves from other communities.

Jakaza (2022) demonstrates that social media may function as a space for both identity construction and identity obfuscation. The identities displayed by users may change according to the

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E-ISSN : 2654-7546
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communication context and the communities in which interaction occurs. Thus, language use on social media cannot be separated from the process of constructing social identity.

The relationship between language and identity becomes increasingly complex in multilingual environments. McEntee-Atalianis et al. (2023) demonstrate that Facebook users from Syrian refugee backgrounds employ various linguistic resources and scripts to construct and negotiate identity. The study shows that social media can function as a creative space in which users display complex and multidimensional identities through language choices and code-switching.

These findings are closely related to Wittgenstein's concept of *language games*. If meaning is formed through use in social practices, then identity can also be understood through the ways in which individuals participate in a community's linguistic practices. The use of particular terms, language styles, memes, or forms of expression may indicate that an individual understands and participates in the social rules of that community.

Pérez-Sabater (2021) demonstrates that code-switching in social media communication can be used to construct solidarity. This finding shows that language choice can function as a means of creating a sense of togetherness and closeness among community members.

In the Indonesian context, the use of colloquial language also demonstrates the relationship between language and social identity. Lubis and Bahri (2022) demonstrate that colloquial forms develop as part of social media users' communication styles. Such language use may express closeness, creativity, and social affiliation.

Thus, digital language has both inclusive and exclusive functions. Particular terms may create a sense of belonging to a group while simultaneously making it difficult for users outside that group to understand their meanings. Such differences in understanding demonstrate that meaning change is also related to the formation of social boundaries.

4. Multimodality, Memes, and Digital Meaning-Making

Changes in meaning on social media do not occur exclusively through verbal language. Digital communication also involves images, emojis, videos, symbols, typography, and various forms of multimodality. Therefore, understanding meaning change requires consideration of the relationship between verbal and visual elements.

Memes constitute one form of digital communication that clearly demonstrates this relationship. Fubara (2020) demonstrates that humor and irony in social media memes can be understood through the relationship between linguistic expression and pragmatic context. Memes do not merely convey information but may also construct humor, criticism, sarcasm, and social commentary.

Dynel's (2024) study further demonstrates the complexity of memes as multimodal communication practices. Memes shared through retweets or quote tweets may acquire new contexts and be used for different communicative purposes. This process demonstrates that the meaning of a

meme is not determined solely by its original creator but also by users who appropriate, modify, and reposition it within new contexts.

The movement of memes across languages also demonstrates that meaning can be constructed through combinations of semiotic resources. Images, written text, wordplay, cultural references, and shared knowledge may work simultaneously in producing interpretation. Thus, understanding digital communication requires attention to the relationship between language, visuality, culture, and context.

Ali and Husain (2024) demonstrate that humor in digital discourse can be constructed through combinations of linguistic and visual elements. Humor, wordplay, hyperbole, and parody function not only as entertainment but also as means of social commentary and relationship building among community members.

From a Wittgensteinian perspective, these phenomena can be understood as an extension of the form of *language games*. Language games in digital spaces consist not only of words but may also encompass images, symbols, memes, emojis, and other forms of multimodal communication. Meaning emerges from the ways in which these elements are used within particular social practices.

5. Digital Discourse and the Role of Technology in Meaning-Making

Social media constitutes a technological environment with particular characteristics that shape communication patterns. Features such as likes, comments, shares, retweets, quote tweets, mentions, and hashtags enable messages to move from one user to another and from one community to another.

KhosraviNik (2022) emphasizes that digital meaning-making needs to be examined through the relationship between *content* and *practice*. This means that the analysis of digital communication cannot focus solely on what is said but must also consider how messages are used within social practices.

Ren (2024) demonstrates that sharing practices are influenced by various factors, including linguistic choices, social and cultural norms, technological characteristics, and user motivations. This indicates that technology is not merely a neutral container for language. Platform structures and features can influence how messages are disseminated and received.

Dynel (2024) provides a concrete example through the practice of quote tweeting. This feature enables users to take an existing message, add commentary, and direct it toward a new audience. Consequently, the original message may acquire a different context and pragmatic function.

Pérez-Sabater (2021) also demonstrates that the characteristics of digital communication are related to language style and audience engagement. Graphic elements and code-switching can constitute important resources for constructing solidarity and demonstrating social relationships within online communities.

Therefore, social media can be understood as a socio-technological environment that accelerates encounters among various language practices. Messages may move rapidly, but their meanings do not

P-ISSN : 2654-5721
E-ISSN : 2654-7546
DOI : https://doi.org/10.37817/ikra-ithabdimas.v10i2

necessarily move in an identical manner. Each movement across contexts creates the possibility of new interpretations and meanings.

6. Comparison of Theoretical Perspectives

Based on previous studies, three major perspectives can be employed to understand meaning change on social media.

Perspective	Main Focus	Contribution to the Study
Wittgenstein – *Meaning as Use*	Meaning through use and *language games*	Explains meaning as a social practice
Pragmatics	Context, intention, implicature, and interpretation	Explains the processes of meaning-making and interpretation
Digital Discourse	Language, technology, identity, and social practices	Explains the environment in which meaning is produced and disseminated

Wittgenstein is positioned as the primary perspective because this study focuses on how meaning is experienced and used in social life. Pragmatics is employed to explain how context and intention influence interpretation, while digital discourse studies help explain how technology and social media practices shape the conditions of communication.

These three perspectives are not positioned as competing theories. Instead, they constitute complementary analytical layers. *Meaning as use* provides the philosophical foundation; pragmatics provides an explanation of the interpretative process; and digital discourse studies provide the socio-technological context in which the process occurs.

7. Theoretical Synthesis and Conceptual Framework

Based on this theoretical synthesis, meaning change on social media is understood as a dynamic and non-linear process. Meaning is formed through the relationship among language use, context, interpretation, identity, community, and technological characteristics.

The conceptual framework of the study can be formulated as follows:

Language use → interaction context → interpretation → meaning negotiation → new meaning → social practice

This sequence is not intended to represent a rigid causal relationship. Each element may influence the others. The use of a particular term may produce a certain meaning within one community, but when the term moves into another context, its interpretation may change. Such changes may then be negotiated through comments, responses, sharing, memes, or the reuse of the term.

Within Wittgenstein's framework, this process demonstrates that meaning exists within practices of life. From a pragmatic perspective, the process involves context, intention, and interpretation. From the perspective of digital discourse studies, the

process occurs within a technological environment that enables messages to circulate and acquire new contexts.

Therefore, meaning change should not be viewed as a one-way process caused by social media. Social media is more appropriately understood as a space in which various *language games* encounter and interact with one another intensively. Users consequently become actors who continuously maintain, modify, expand, or question meaning.

8. Research Position and Research Gap

Previous studies have addressed various aspects of digital communication. KhosraviNik (2022) highlights the relationship between content and practice in digital meaning-making. Pérez-Sabater (2021) demonstrates the relationship among language style, code-switching, and solidarity. McEntee-Atalianis et al. (2023) demonstrate how multilingual repertoires are used in identity construction. Dynel (2024) shows that memes may undergo *recontextualisation* and *reprragmatisation*, while Ren (2024) emphasizes the complexity of sharing practices on social media.

Local studies have also demonstrated the importance of implicature, emotional expression, colloquial language, language variation, and pragmatic context in understanding social media communication (Habibi et al., 2022; Lubis & Bahri, 2022; Mardikantoro et al., 2023; Nuralifa et al., 2021; Pranowo & Sari, 2022; Suganda et al., 2022).

However, there remains an opportunity to bring empirical studies of digital language into dialogue with philosophical questions concerning the nature of meaning. Many studies focus on linguistic forms, pragmatic functions, identity, or discourse characteristics. This study seeks to move beyond these concerns by positioning users' experiences and interpretations as essential components in understanding how meaning is formed and negotiated.

This gap provides the foundation for the present study to develop an understanding that meaning change on social media is not merely a change in vocabulary or language style. Rather, it constitutes part of a broader social process through which people use language to construct identity, establish relationships, form communities, express attitudes, and understand shared reality.

Accordingly, the theoretical question of this study is not limited to "What does a word mean?" but also asks: "How is the word used, by whom, in what context, within what kind of language game, and how do other users negotiate its meaning?"

These questions provide the philosophical foundation for understanding social media as a space in which meaning is not merely communicated but continuously produced, interpreted, debated, and negotiated.

Research Findings

The data analysis in this study generated four major themes describing how social media users experience and understand changes in linguistic meaning in digital communication. The four themes are: (1) meaning shifts according to context, (2) humor, irony, and meaning negotiation, (3) language as a marker of identity and social membership, and (4) tensions between personal meaning and community meaning.

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These four themes do not stand independently. Rather, they demonstrate an ongoing process: users encounter an expression, interpret it on the basis of context, compare their understanding with that of other users, and subsequently adjust their interpretation according to the communication practices of digital communities.

Theme 1. Meaning Shifts According to Context

The first experience emerging from the data concerns participants' awareness that a word does not always have the same meaning in every situation. Participants described how they often understand a particular term not on the basis of its formal definition but according to how the term is used by people within their social media environments.

This situation occurs particularly when terms previously familiar from everyday language acquire new uses on social media. In several cases, participants became aware of changes in meaning after observing the same term being repeatedly used in different contexts.

One participant described this experience:

> "At first, I understood the word in an ordinary way. But after frequently seeing people use it on TikTok and Instagram, I realized that what it meant had become different."
>
> (P1, [interview date])

This statement demonstrates that understanding meaning does not always occur through a definitional process. Rather, participants learn meaning through repeated experiences within contexts of use. Meaning emerges as something learned through social practice.

Interestingly, such changes are not always experienced as confusing. In some cases, participants regarded changes in meaning as something "normal" in digital life. However, there was also an awareness that excessive dependence on context could lead to misunderstanding.

> "If I do not follow the context, sometimes I really do not understand why people are laughing. The words themselves are actually ordinary."
>
> (P2, [interview date])

This experience demonstrates a gap between literal meaning and meaning understood within social practice. An expression may appear simple when read in isolation but become different when placed within a particular communication environment.

These findings demonstrate that, for participants, meaning is not something completely inherent in linguistic form. Meaning becomes intelligible when users understand "how to play" with language within a particular context. From the perspective of *meaning as use*, this experience demonstrates that meaning change is closely related to changes in language-use practices.

Theme 2. Humor, Irony, and Meaning Negotiation

While the first theme demonstrates that context influences meaning, the second theme shows that social media users often consciously play with this uncertainty of

DOI : https://doi.org/10.37817/ikra-ithabdimas.v10i2
P-ISSN : 2654-5721
E-ISSN : 2654-7546

meaning. Humor, irony, sarcasm, memes, and the use of emojis become spaces in which meaning is negotiated.

Participants do not always use words according to their literal meanings. In some situations, the difference between what is said and what is meant itself becomes a source of humor or sarcasm.

One participant explained:

> "Sometimes when I say 'very good' in a comment, I do not actually mean that it is good. My friends already understand from the context that it is sarcasm."
>
> (P3, [interview date])

A paradox emerges here. Literally, the word used expresses appreciation, but in communication practice it may instead function as criticism. Such meaning cannot be understood solely through sentence structure. Readers need to understand the social relationship, the situation, and the shared knowledge possessed by the community.

Memes further reinforce this complexity. A meme may acquire a particular meaning because users recognize the cultural reference embedded within it. When the meme is reshared in a different context, its meaning may shift.

> "Sometimes I see the same meme in two places, but the intention feels different. The image is the same, but the comments and context make me understand the message differently."
>
> (P4, [interview date])

This experience demonstrates that meaning change does not necessarily require a change in linguistic form. The same form can produce different interpretations when its social context changes.

At this point, users are not merely recipients of meaning. They also become actors who participate in producing and negotiating meaning. They respond, reuse terms, modify contexts, and introduce new interpretations.

Thus, humor and irony function not merely as language styles but also as social mechanisms through which a community can construct shared understanding.

Theme 3. Language as a Marker of Identity and Social Membership

The third theme demonstrates that particular forms of language use can serve as markers of social identity. Participants described terms or language styles that felt as though they "belonged" to particular communities. Someone who understands such terms is considered to possess knowledge of that group's communication culture.

One participant stated:

> "When there is a particular term frequently used by young people on social media, it feels as if we are falling behind if we do not know the term."
>
> (P5, [interview date])

This statement demonstrates that understanding digital language is not merely a matter of understanding words. Linguistic understanding is also associated with a sense of belonging to a group.

P-ISSN : 2654-5721
E-ISSN : 2654-7546
DOI : https://doi.org/10.37817/ikra-ithabdimas.v10i2

Language can function as a form of social boundary. People who understand a particular context can immediately grasp humor or hidden intentions, whereas people outside the community may interpret the expression differently or fail to understand it altogether.

This experience demonstrates that meaning change occurs simultaneously with identity formation. When a community consistently uses a term in a particular way, that usage may become a characteristic distinguishing the community from other groups.

However, digital identity is not completely stable. Participants also demonstrated that they use different language styles across different platforms or groups.

> "I do not use the same language when talking with close friends, in a family group, and when writing comments on social media."
>
> (P6, [interview date])

This difference demonstrates that users possess the ability to adapt language to audiences and contexts. Linguistic identity is therefore not singular but negotiated across different communication situations.

Theme 4. Tension between Personal Meaning and Community Meaning

The final theme demonstrates a tension between what an individual intends and what other people understand. Although users may feel that they have used language with a particular intention, social media audiences may assign a different interpretation.

Such situations may arise because digital communication often lacks some of the cues available in face-to-face communication, such as intonation, facial expressions, or gestures.

One participant described the experience:

> "Once I intended to make a joke, but someone else thought I was being serious. After that, I became more careful about choosing my words."
>
> (P7, [interview date])

This experience demonstrates that meaning change does not always produce linguistic creativity or innovation. Under certain circumstances, changes and instability in meaning can also generate uncertainty.

Participants subsequently developed strategies to reduce ambiguity, such as using emojis, punctuation, additional explanations, or choosing words considered safer.

> "If I am afraid of being misunderstood, I usually add an emoji or explain what I mean."
>
> (P8, [interview date])

However, a paradox emerges in this practice. Elements used to clarify a message, such as emojis or punctuation, may themselves have different meanings for different users. Thus, an attempt to eliminate ambiguity may instead generate new forms of interpretation.

These findings demonstrate that meaning on social media is always in the process of negotiation. Users do not completely control how their messages are interpreted by others. Meaning is formed through the

relationship among intention, expression, context of use, and audience interpretation.

Relationships among Themes

The four themes demonstrate a continuity of experience. Users initially encounter changes in the contexts in which language is used. These changes subsequently create opportunities for humor, irony, and forms of meaning negotiation. In the broader process, such practices contribute to identity formation and a sense of community membership. At the same time, differences in backgrounds and interpretations may create tension between intended meaning and received meaning.

Main Theme	Emerging Experience	Conceptual Meaning
Meaning shifts according to context	The same word is understood differently in different situations	Meaning is formed through use
Humor, irony, and negotiation	Literal meaning differs from communicative intention	Meaning depends on context and practice
Language and social identity	Terms become markers of groups	Language constructs social membership
Personal meaning vs. community meaning	Messages may be interpreted differently from their original intention	Meaning is negotiated between speaker and audience

Overall, the findings demonstrate that users' experiences of social media language cannot be understood merely as changes in vocabulary. These changes occur through practices of use, interaction, interpretation, and social negotiation. Users experience language as something living: meaning can develop through use, acquire new functions when entering a particular community, and change again when used in a different context.

Within the framework of *meaning as use*, participants' experiences demonstrate that meaning change is part of changes in language practices themselves. Social media provides a communication space that accelerates encounters among different *language games*, allowing words, expressions, and symbols to move from one community to another and acquire new meanings.

Thus, the findings do not indicate that social media simply "damages" or "changes" language. Instead, social media constitutes a space in which people continuously produce, interpret, question, and negotiate meaning.

Discussion

Meaning in Motion: From Fixed Meaning to Practiced Meaning

The findings demonstrate that social media users do not understand linguistic meaning solely through the lexical meaning of a word. Rather, meaning is understood through the context of use, previous experience, community, and communication situation in which an expression appears. These findings demonstrate that meaning change on social media is more appropriately understood as

P-ISSN : 2654-5721
E-ISSN : 2654-7546
DOI : https://doi.org/10.37817/ikra-ithabdimas.v10i2

a change in language-use practices than merely as a change in the definition of a word.

These findings are consistent with Wittgenstein's perspective on *meaning as use*. Within this framework, the question of meaning is not primarily directed toward "What does this word mean in the abstract?" but toward "How is this word used within a language practice?" This perspective acquires renewed relevance in digital environments. Biletzki demonstrates that digital transformation constitutes a conceptual change that allows the *meaning as use* approach to remain productive for interpreting the use of terms and concepts within digital culture.

Thus, participants' experiences of initially not understanding a particular term and subsequently understanding its meaning after repeatedly observing its use demonstrate a process of social learning. Users do not receive meaning as already completed information; they learn to recognize the rules of use through participation in digital communities.

These findings enrich the understanding of Wittgenstein in two respects. First, *language games* in contemporary contexts occur not only through face-to-face conversation but also through comments, posts, reposts, memes, emojis, and other forms of digital communication. Second, social media accelerates the movement of an expression from one *language game* to another. Consequently, meaning change may occur when a word or symbol enters a new social environment.

In this sense, meaning change should not immediately be viewed as a "deviation" from the original meaning. Such change may indicate that language is performing a new function. Meaning remains alive because human beings continuously use language within changing situations.

Humor, Irony, and Non-Literal Meaning

The second theme demonstrates that social media creates a highly productive space for humor, irony, memes, and non-literal language use. Participants described situations in which an expression appears positive literally but functions as sarcasm in a particular context. Here, the philosophical question concerning the relationship between what is said and what is meant becomes important.

From a pragmatic perspective, these findings demonstrate that interpretation cannot be separated from context and communicative action. An expression acquires a particular function because users and audiences share knowledge about its context of use. Thus, communicative meaning may extend beyond literal meaning.

These findings receive strong support from Dynel (2024) in the *Journal of Pragmatics*. Through an analysis of 893 memes shared through Twitter/X, Dynel demonstrates that retweets and quote tweets enable processes of *recontextualisation*, *pragmatic entrenchment*, and *reprragmatisation*. This means that the same content may be repositioned within a different context and acquire a new communicative purpose.

This is important for the present study because it demonstrates that meaning change does not always require a change in linguistic form. The same image, sentence,

or meme may produce different meanings when its interactional context changes.

In other words, change occurs within the relationship between an expression and the practice in which it is used. From Wittgenstein's perspective, this phenomenon can be understood as the movement or transformation of a *language game*. From a pragmatic perspective, the same phenomenon can be interpreted as a change in communicative function through context. These approaches do not need to be treated as contradictory. Rather, both demonstrate that meaning is relational.

However, the findings of this study also reveal a more complex dimension. When meaning is highly dependent on context, communication becomes vulnerable to misunderstanding. What one user regards as humor may be perceived as an insult by another user. Thus, the flexibility of meaning is simultaneously a strength and a vulnerability of digital communication.

Language, Identity, and the Sense of Belonging to a Community

The third theme demonstrates that meaning change is related not only to language but also to social identity. Mastery of particular terms may give individuals a sense that they understand the culture of a group. Conversely, unfamiliarity with particular terms or references may create an experience of being an "outsider."

These findings are consistent with recent studies of sharing practices and digital communication. Ren (2024) emphasizes that sharing practices on social media are related not only to information dissemination but also to identity construction and social cohesion. Such practices are influenced by sociocultural norms, technological characteristics, and individual motivations.

From the perspective of Philosophy of Language, these findings expand the understanding of *language games*. Following Wittgenstein, understanding an expression means possessing a particular ability to participate in the practice in which that expression is used. Therefore, understanding a digital term does not merely mean knowing its definition but also knowing when, to whom, and for what purpose the term is used.

In this context, language becomes a kind of "membership marker." Users who understand particular humor, memes, or terms can participate more easily in group conversations. Conversely, users who lack the same cultural knowledge may experience social distance.

These findings also offer a more critical perspective on the idea that language change on social media is always free and egalitarian. Not all users have equal access to digital cultural knowledge. Meaning may function as a source of both inclusion and exclusion. Those who understand the "rules of the game" can participate more smoothly, whereas those who do not understand them may experience confusion or alienation.

Thus, social media is not merely a space for disseminating new language but also a space in which social boundaries are constructed through language.

Tension between Speaker Intention and Audience Interpretation

The fourth theme most clearly demonstrates the complexity of users'

P-ISSN : 2654-5721
E-ISSN : 2654-7546
DOI : https://doi.org/10.37817/ikra-ithabdimas.v10i2

experiences. Participants showed that they are not always able to control how their messages are understood. A person may intend to make a joke, but the audience may interpret it as criticism. A person may use an emoji to clarify an intention, but the same emoji may be interpreted differently by another person.

These findings demonstrate that digital communication involves a deeper issue than merely "choosing the right words." Meaning emerges from the relationship among the speaker, expression, context, audience, and medium of communication.

This condition is consistent with Ren's (2024) view that communication and sharing practices on social media are influenced by interactions among pragmatic choices, social norms, technology, and individual motivations. In other words, technology is not merely a neutral channel for language. Platform features contribute to shaping the conditions under which messages are produced and interpreted.

These findings make an important contribution to *meaning as use*. If meaning is determined by use, then such use is never entirely under an individual's control. Language use always takes place within a community and within particular social situations. Meaning is therefore something that is **partially shared but never completely controlled**.

Here lies the paradox of digital communication. Social media enables users to express themselves more freely, but at the same time it increases the possibility that expressions will be read by highly diverse audiences. The broader the reach of a message, the greater the possibility that different interpretative contexts will emerge.

This issue is particularly evident in meme culture. Dynel (2024) demonstrates that when memes are reshared and positioned within new contexts, users may retain, develop, or modify their communicative purposes. Thus, once an expression enters the public digital sphere, its meaning may continue to move through the actions of other users.

From Meaning Change to Meaning Negotiation

When the four themes are considered as a whole, this study demonstrates that meaning change on social media is not a one-way process. It is not simply social media that "changes" meaning, nor do individual users independently create new meanings. Rather, what occurs is a continuous process of negotiation among language use, social context, technology, communities, and user interpretations.

These findings enrich previous studies that have examined digital communication from linguistic, pragmatic, or discourse studies perspectives. KhosraviNik (2022), for example, emphasizes the importance of understanding digital meaning-making through the relationship between content and practice in social media discourse studies. This study moves further by placing this issue within the philosophical question of the nature of meaning.

Thus, the primary contribution of this study is not the discovery that social media causes language change—a phenomenon that has already been widely observed—but rather the demonstration of how such changes are

experienced as interpretative experiences by users.

Social media can be understood as a space in which *language games* meet and intersect. A word developed within one community may enter another community; a meme may be used for a different purpose; and an expression may shift from humor to criticism or vice versa. Such movement makes meaning increasingly dependent on users' ability to read context.

Researcher Reflexivity and Sociocultural Context

The interpretation of these findings must be situated within an awareness that qualitative research is not completely free from the researcher's position. Researchers bring linguistic and cultural backgrounds, digital experiences, and particular forms of knowledge when interpreting participants' experiences.

This is highly relevant in the Indonesian context, which is characterized by linguistic, cultural, generational, and communicative diversity. A term may have different meanings across local communities, student communities, professional communities, and particular digital communities. Therefore, researchers must exercise caution and avoid treating the interpretation of one group as a universal meaning.

This reflexive position also encourages researchers not to immediately categorize a particular language use as "wrong," "non-standard," or "damaged." From the perspective of *meaning as use*, forms of use that appear formally unconventional may nevertheless possess particular rules and functions within the *language game* of a community.

Accordingly, the task of the researcher is not to determine which meaning is the most correct but to understand how a particular meaning becomes intelligible to those who use it.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Theoretically, this study offers an interpretation of the concept of *meaning as use* within the context of contemporary digital communication. Social media demonstrates that language use may occur within spaces that are rapidly changing, multimodal, and layered. Therefore, meaning needs to be understood as a social process that continually moves through practices of use.

Practically, the findings demonstrate the importance of pragmatic and digital literacy, rather than language literacy alone. Users need the ability to understand context, recognize irony, interpret shared cultural knowledge, and recognize that personal intention does not always correspond to audience interpretation.

In education, these findings can be utilized to develop language learning that teaches not only structure and vocabulary but also contexts of use, implicature, speech acts, community variation, and processes of meaning negotiation.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the question "What does this word mean?" is not always sufficient for understanding social media language. A deeper question is: "How is this word used, by whom, to whom, in what situation, and what social practice makes its use intelligible?" This

P-ISSN : 2654-5721
E-ISSN : 2654-7546
DOI : https://doi.org/10.37817/ikra-ithabdimas.v10i2

question returns digital language studies to a fundamental concern of Philosophy of Language: that in order to understand meaning, we need to understand the life in which language is used.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that meaning change in social media communication cannot be understood merely as a linguistic change in the meanings of words but as a social and contextual process occurring through language-use practices. Meaning shifts according to context, communicative purposes, relationships among users, community norms, and the characteristics of digital media. Humor, irony, memes, popular terms, and multimodal expressions demonstrate that a linguistic form may acquire different meanings when used within different social spaces. Thus, social media is not merely a channel for transmitting language but also a space in which meaning is continuously produced, interpreted, exchanged, and negotiated.

A deeper understanding offered by this study is that meaning change in the digital era is more appropriately viewed as meaning negotiation rather than simply meaning change. Users do not always accept meanings that are already available; instead, they actively construct and adjust meanings through interactions with digital communities. This perspective reinforces Wittgenstein's argument that the meaning of an expression is closely related to its use within a form of life and a *language game*. In the context of social media, *language games* become increasingly dynamic because an expression may move from one community to another, undergo *recontextualisation*, and acquire new interpretations. Therefore, philosophical questions concerning language in the digital era cannot stop at "What does a word mean?" but must move toward the questions "How, by whom, in what context, and for what social purpose is the word used?"

Conceptually, this study contributes by extending the application of the *meaning as use* perspective to digital communication environments. Meaning is not positioned as something entirely fixed and inherent in linguistic form but as something emerging from the relationship among expression, context, users, communities, and communication practices. This perspective also helps explain why differences in interpretation, misunderstood humor, conflicts resulting from comments, and changes in popular terminology constitute parts of the dynamics of language use rather than merely problems of linguistic correctness or incorrectness.

Practically, the findings have several implications. For policymakers and educational institutions, digital literacy needs to include the ability to understand context, intention, irony, humor, implicature, and variations in language use in digital spaces, rather than focusing solely on technological competence. For curriculum development, language learning may incorporate analyses of memes, comments, digital conversations, and slang phenomena as materials for developing critical interpretative abilities. In social life, awareness that a single expression may be interpreted differently by different communities can help reduce misunderstandings and encourage more reflective digital communication. Social media users need to develop the ability to

consider context before judging the intention behind an utterance.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations that need to be considered. The limited focus on particular social and cultural contexts means that the findings cannot yet represent the entire diversity of social media users' experiences. A relatively homogeneous participant composition may also limit the emergence of perspectives from different age groups, cultural backgrounds, geographical regions, and digital communities. In addition, the rapid dynamics of social media mean that some of the language forms and terms observed may change within a short period. These limitations indicate that considerable opportunities remain for examining how experience, identity, power, and cultural differences influence meaning-making processes in digital spaces.

Future research may expand the geographical and demographic contexts by involving more diverse digital communities. A phenomenological approach may be combined with digital ethnography, critical discourse analysis, or pragmatic analysis to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship among language, technology, and social practices. Cross-cultural comparative research is also important for revealing how the same digital terms, symbols, humor, and expressions may produce different meanings across different communities. Future studies may also pay greater attention to underrepresented groups in digital spaces, including how social positions and power relations influence who has the authority to determine meaning.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes that language change on social media is not merely a sign that language is becoming "damaged" or more informal. Rather, such changes reflect transformations in how human beings interact, construct identities, form communities, and understand shared reality. Digital language demonstrates that meaning is always in the process of becoming: it is formed through use, questioned through interaction, and renegotiated when social contexts change. By critically understanding this process, Philosophy of Language can make a more relevant contribution to questions of human communication in the digital era—not by seeking a completely fixed meaning but by understanding how human beings continuously create meaningful worlds through language.

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