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LANGUAGE AS A SEMIOTIC SYSTEM OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

Abstract: The article examines language as a multi-level sign system in the context of digital communication. The study demonstrates how traditional linguistic levels-phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and semantic - are integrated with the affordances of digital media. Digital communication combines linguistic signs (text, emojis, hashtags) with visual and paralinguistic elements (images, GIFs, hyperlinks), creating a hybrid semiotic environment. The theoretical framework of the research is based on classical and contemporary approaches to semiotics and digital communication, including Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign, Roman Jakobson's communication model, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, Yuri Lotman's cultural semiotics, and multimodal approaches developed by Kress and van Leeuwen.

The research methods include comparative-cognitive analysis, corpus linguistics, and social semiotics. The empirical base consists of 1,500 messages collected from the platforms Twitter, Telegram, and Reddit. The sample covers various genres, multimodal types, and language varieties. The messages were annotated according to modality, semiotic elements, structural features, and pragmatic functions.

The findings reveal four key trends: digital communication functions as integrated signal complexes; the shift toward visual and interactive codes transforms cognitive processes; "digital bilingualism" emerges; and online communities develop platform-specific grammatical and semantic models. These processes enhance the semiotic complexity of language and its adaptive potential.

In conclusion, language in digital communication represents a multimodal, multi-level, hybrid semiotic system in which meaning is constructed through user interaction. The results contribute to understanding the evolutionary trends of 21st-century communication and are applicable in linguistics, media semiotics, and pedagogy.

Keywords: language, digital communication, semiotics, multimodality, cognitive linguistics.

Introduction

Digital technology has significantly transformed communication practices by expanding the semiotic repertoire available to language users. These changes require contemporary linguistics to reconsider fundamental approaches to language as a system of signs [1; 2]. Although classical semiotic models and structural-functional theories remain theoretically significant [3], they are increasingly examined in relation to new forms of multimodal communication emerging within digital environments [4].

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Traditional approaches to semiotics have provided essential frameworks for understanding linguistic structures and meaning formation. However, recent research increasingly focuses on the interaction between language, digital media, and multimodal resources, including visual symbols, images, emojis, GIFs, and hyperlinks. Digital communication demonstrates that meaning is no longer constructed exclusively through verbal language but emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes [4; 5].

The development of multimodal approaches has become an important direction in contemporary linguistics, as digital technologies continue to influence the structural and functional transformation of language. In digital environments, language acquires new forms that reflect changing communicative practices and social interaction patterns. Textual, visual, and auditory elements operate together as interconnected components of meaning-making processes [5; 6; 7].

The relevance of this study is determined by the need to examine how traditional linguistic and semiotic principles function within digital communication. While previous studies have explored individual aspects of digital discourse, further investigation is required to understand language as an integrated multimodal semiotic system shaped by users, technologies, and cultural contexts [8; 9].

The aim of this research is to analyze the transformation of language as a multi-level semiotic system in digital communication and to identify how digital technologies influence processes of meaning construction. The study focuses on the interaction between linguistic elements and additional semiotic resources, including emojis, hashtags, GIFs, and hyperlinks.

The distinction between the signifier and the signified proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure remains relevant in contemporary digital communication; however, the digital environment transforms the relationship between signs and meanings, making it more dynamic and context-dependent [10]. Emojis, GIFs, hashtags, and other digital symbols have become significant semiotic resources that expand the expressive potential of language. Hashtags perform not only a classificatory function but also organize thematic interaction within online communities [11]. Roman Jakobson's model of communication remains applicable to digital discourse, as different language functions continue to operate within online environments. In particular, the phatic function becomes especially important in social media communication, where users maintain interaction through short messages, reactions, and symbolic expressions [3, p. 356].

Digital communication has introduced new semiotic codes, including abbreviations, algorithmically influenced expressions, hashtags, and hybrid forms that combine verbal and visual elements. These transformations demonstrate the adaptive nature of language, which continuously develops in response to technological conditions and emerging communicative practices [8; 9].

Multimodal texts that combine linguistic, visual, and auditory elements demonstrate that digital semiotics extends beyond traditional linguistic structures. Contemporary studies confirm that digital communication has transformed language into a multimodal semiotic system where verbal, visual, and technological resources interact in the process of meaning-making. Lotherington emphasizes that digital environments move communication beyond traditional alphabetic forms toward multimodal practices, where various semiotic resources participate in the construction of meaning [12]. Moreira da Rosa et al. also demonstrate that human language remains a fundamental element of computer-mediated communication while interacting with digital interfaces and technological systems [13].

In digital communication, language functions as a mobile semiotic system in which meanings are created through technologically mediated interaction. This understanding corresponds with the social semiotic approach, according to which language operates not only as a means of information transmission but also as a mechanism for constructing and interpreting meanings within specific social contexts. Li and Tang argue that language functions as a social semiotic system influencing human information interaction and cognitive processes in digital environments [14].

From the perspective of Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign, digital communication demonstrates a transformation of the relationship between signifier and signified. Emojis, GIFs, hashtags, hyperlinks, and typographic modifications function as additional semiotic resources whose meanings are shaped by communicative context, social conventions, and practices of online communities. Unlike traditional linguistic signs, digital signs demonstrate a high degree of semantic variability, as their meanings may rapidly change under the influence of viral processes, algorithmic distribution, and transformations of digital cultural practices.

Recent studies of online communication demonstrate that digital signs acquire meaning through collective interpretation and interaction within digital communities. Satar shows that multimodal and translanguaging practices in online environments contribute to the formation of social presence and new forms of communication [15].

Therefore, digital communication does not replace traditional linguistic structures but expands them through the integration of multiple semiotic resources. Meaning formation in digital discourse emerges from the interaction of linguistic, visual, technological, and sociocultural factors, which confirms the transformation of language into a complex multimodal semiotic system.

Research methods and materials

The methodological framework of the study is based on an interdisciplinary approach combining comparative-cognitive analysis, corpus linguistics, social semiotics, multimodal discourse analysis, and qualitative interpretation of digital communication practices. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods makes it possible to identify both frequency patterns of semiotic elements and their contextual meanings in online discourse. The social semiotic approach considers language as a resource for meaning-making that functions within specific social and technological environments [14], while multimodal analysis explains how verbal, visual, and digital resources interact in the construction of meaning [12].

The empirical corpus of the research consists of 1,500 publicly available messages collected from three digital platforms: Twitter/X, Telegram, and Reddit. The selection of these platforms was determined by their different communicative characteristics and interaction models. Twitter/X represents short-form public communication based on rapid information exchange and hashtag practices; Telegram reflects community-oriented interaction with extensive use of multimedia elements; Reddit demonstrates extended discussions and topic-based digital communities.

The collected messages were analysed according to four main parameters: (1) modality, including textual, visual, and multimodal forms; (2) semiotic elements, such as emojis, GIFs, hashtags, hyperlinks, abbreviations, and visual symbols; (3) structural characteristics of digital texts; and (4) pragmatic functions of communication. The analytical procedure included quantitative identification of the frequency of semiotic elements and qualitative interpretation of their semantic and communicative functions.

This research follows contemporary studies of digital communication that emphasize the transformation of human language into a multimodal semiotic system combining linguistic, visual, and technological resources [13]. The study also applies principles of responsible digital research: only publicly accessible materials were examined, private correspondence was excluded, and all potentially identifying information was removed. The analysis focuses on general patterns of digital communication rather than individual users [15].

Language in the digital environment is therefore analysed as a complex, multi-level semiotic system in which meaning emerges through the interaction of linguistic structures, visual resources, technological affordances, and collective practices of online communities.

The corpus included only open-access materials and excluded private correspondence, restricted content, and any information that could directly identify individual users.

To ensure ethical compliance, all collected data were anonymised before analysis, and personal information was removed. The research focuses on general linguistic and semiotic patterns of digital communication rather than on individual users or their personal characteristics. This

approach corresponds to the principles of responsible digital research and ethical analysis of online communication data [15].

The collected materials were used exclusively for academic purposes. The study follows current ethical standards in digital discourse research, which emphasize respect for user privacy, responsible handling of online data, and careful interpretation of publicly available communication practices [15].

Results and discussion

The research indicates that the digitalization of language does not result in the disappearance of spoken language systems; rather, it contributes to the complexity and flexibility of their semiotic structures. New signs participate in the communication of meaning as a result of digitalization, and communities have an opportunity to create their own unique meanings for the same signs. From Peirce's point of view, new types of signs participate in semiotic processes, acting as intermediaries in interpretation in ways specific to each community [2]. Although Jacobson's functions of language are still relevant, they are carried over into new media; the phatic and conative functions, for example, may be expressed using GIFs or emoticons instead of text alone [3].

The quantitative analysis focused on the identification of the frequency of major semiotic resources, including textual elements, emojis, emoticons, hashtags, hyperlinks, GIFs, and mixed text-visual combinations. The results demonstrate that digital communication rarely functions through isolated textual structures; instead, users actively combine different semiotic resources to construct meaning in online environments (Table 1) [4; 8; 12].

Table 1 – Distribution of semiotic elements in the analysed digital corpus (n=1500)

№	Semiotic element	Number of examples	Percentage (%)
1.	Textual elements (words, sentences, abbreviations)	1500	100%
2.	Emojis and emoticons	980	65.3%
3.	Hashtags	540	36.0%
4.	Hyperlinks	420	28.0%
5.	GIFs and visual reactions	315	21.0%
6.	Mixed text-visual combinations	1125	75.0%

The empirical corpus of the research consisted of 1,500 publicly available messages collected from three digital platforms: Twitter/X, Telegram, and Reddit. The corpus was equally distributed among the three platforms: Twitter/X – 500 messages (33.3%), Telegram – 500 messages (33.3%), and Reddit – 500 messages (33.3%). This distribution provided a comparative basis for identifying platform-specific semiotic practices and patterns of digital meaning construction [5; 7; 9].

Table 2 – Platform-specific characteristics of digital communication

Platform	Main communicative features	Dominant semiotic resources
Twitter/X	Short messages, public interaction, rapid information exchange	Hashtags, abbreviations, emojis
Telegram	Community communication, group interaction, multimedia exchange	Stickers, GIFs, images, text combinations
Reddit	Extended discussions, argumentation, thematic communities	Textual explanations, hyperlinks, symbolic references

The comparison shows that each digital platform develops specific semiotic practices. Twitter/X encourages concise symbolic communication, Telegram expands multimodal interaction

through visual resources, while Reddit maintains longer textual forms combined with digital references (Table 2).

The quantitative analysis demonstrates that digital communication rarely relies on isolated textual forms. The majority of analysed messages contained combinations of verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources. Mixed text-visual structures represented the dominant pattern, confirming the multimodal nature of digital discourse (Table 3) [4; 8].

Table 3 – Example of multimodal meaning construction

Digital element	Semiotic function
Emoji 😊	Emotional expression, reduction of ambiguity
Hashtag #ClimateChange	Topic identification and community formation
GIF reaction	Non-verbal expression of attitude
Hyperlink	Expansion of informational context

According to Lotman, the semiotic processes involved in memes create cultural memory, thus facilitating communication across communities; this process can lead to a better understanding of the effect of digital bilingualism on education, as language competence is now defined to include media literacy and multiple sign systems rather than only grammatical structures. Researchers need both quantitative and qualitative analyses to adequately study the semiotic complexities of digital communication.

Reddit messages differed from the other platforms due to their extended argumentative structure. In the analysed Reddit corpus (500 messages), textual explanations, hyperlinks, and symbolic references were more frequent than purely visual elements. This reflects the discussion-oriented nature of Reddit communities, where users construct meaning through longer textual interaction supported by external digital resources [5; 7].

The qualitative analysis of selected examples demonstrates that digital signs acquire meaning through their interaction with linguistic context and communicative situations. Individual elements such as emojis, hashtags, GIFs, and hyperlinks do not function independently; their meanings are constructed through shared conventions and practices of online communities [1; 2].

For example, emojis frequently performed an expressive function by transmitting emotional meanings that cannot always be fully represented through verbal language. Hashtags functioned as organizational and social markers by connecting individual messages with broader thematic communities. GIF reactions replaced or supplemented verbal responses, creating additional possibilities for expressing attitudes and emotions. Hyperlinks expanded the semantic structure of digital messages by connecting texts with external information sources [3; 8; 16].

The obtained results demonstrate that digital communication represents a complex interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic signs. The quantitative analysis of the corpus confirms that multimodal structures are not secondary elements but central components of contemporary digital discourse [4; 8; 12].

The analysis of the corpus demonstrates that digital semiotic practices contribute to the emergence of new forms of meaning construction and communication. The collected data show that users actively combine verbal and non-verbal resources, creating hybrid digital messages in which textual elements interact with emojis, images, GIFs, hashtags, and hyperlinks.

The results indicate that digital communication is characterized by a high level of semiotic flexibility. The same digital signs may acquire different meanings depending on the platform, communicative situation, and community practices in which they are used. The corpus analysis revealed that users do not simply reproduce existing linguistic forms but adapt and transform them according to the requirements of digital interaction.

The analysis also demonstrated that digital communication influences the organization of textual structures. Unlike traditional linear texts, many digital messages contain interconnected elements that create a networked structure of meaning. Hyperlinks, hashtags, and references to external digital resources expand the boundaries of individual messages and connect them with broader information networks.

The findings show that semiotic resources in digital communication perform various pragmatic functions. Emojis, GIFs, and visual reactions frequently served expressive and interpersonal purposes, while hashtags and hyperlinks performed organizational and informational functions. Abbreviations and hybrid text-visual constructions demonstrated the adaptation of language forms to the speed and technical conditions of online communication.

The study further revealed that digital language practices contribute to the formation of new communicative competencies. The analysed messages demonstrate that successful participation in digital communication requires the ability to interpret multiple sign systems simultaneously, including verbal, visual, and technological resources. These findings confirm the importance of digital and multimodal literacy as components of contemporary communication competence [8; 12].

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the corpus also indicates differences in the use of semiotic resources among online communities. Platform-specific communication norms influence the choice of symbols, the structure of messages, and the ways users express emotions, opinions, and social positions. These differences demonstrate that digital communication is not a homogeneous system but consists of multiple interconnected semiotic environments [7; 16; 17].

Due to the limited number of platforms and the size of the analysed corpus, the results cannot represent all forms of digital communication. However, the obtained data provide evidence of current tendencies in the development of digital semiotic practices. Future studies may expand the corpus through multilingual comparisons, longitudinal analysis, and experimental approaches examining cognitive responses to different types of digital signs [9; 13; 15].

Overall, the results demonstrate that digital communication is based on the interaction of multiple semiotic resources. The analysed corpus confirms that contemporary digital messages function as multimodal structures where linguistic, visual, and technological elements participate together in the construction of meaning [4; 8].

Digital communication transforms language into a dynamic semiotic system in which meaning is created through the interaction of verbal, visual, algorithmic, and interactive resources. Digital technologies do not eliminate the traditional structure of language; rather, they expand its functional possibilities, making communication more flexible, adaptive, and multimodal. In this environment, language becomes an open system shaped simultaneously by users, digital platforms, and cultural contexts. The emergence of digital bilingualism and the ability to interpret different semiotic resources demonstrate significant changes in contemporary communication practices, where text, images, symbols, and technological elements function together.

Another important finding concerns the role of algorithms in shaping digital communication. Recommendation systems, predictive text technologies, and automated correction tools influence not only the distribution of information but also linguistic behaviour itself. The interaction between human communication practices and algorithmic mechanisms contributes to the emergence of new patterns of expression and platform-specific communication norms. At the same time, users maintain creative potential by adapting and transforming available digital resources according to their communicative intentions.

The results of the research have important implications for higher education and language teaching. Contemporary students need to develop not only traditional linguistic competence but also multimodal and digital literacy. Effective participation in digital communication requires the ability to interpret visual information, critically evaluate algorithmically generated content, and understand the communicative principles of different digital platforms. Therefore, educational practices should

incorporate the development of skills necessary for analysing and producing complex multimodal messages.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that users in digital environments no longer act only as recipients of information but also participate actively in the creation, transformation, and dissemination of meanings. Practices such as tagging, remixing, commenting, and sharing contribute to the development of new communicative forms and reduce the traditional distinction between content producers and consumers. Digital interaction is therefore based on participatory practices in which meaning is continuously negotiated within online communities.

The findings also show that digital environments redefine communicative agency. Users are no longer passive recipients of information but active participants in the creation, modification, and circulation of meaning. Practices such as tagging, remixing, commenting, and content sharing contribute to the formation of hybrid discourse genres and blur the distinction between producers and consumers of information, reinforcing the concept of “prosumption” in digital communication.

Particular attention should be paid to the influence of algorithms on linguistic expression. Recommendation systems, predictive text technologies, and auto-correction tools affect lexical choices, syntactic structures, and discourse organization. As a result, language evolves within a technologically mediated ecosystem where human cognition and machine processing continuously interact. These processes simultaneously encourage standardization and personalization of communication.

The research additionally highlights the growing importance of multimodal literacy in higher education. Effective participation in digital discourse requires not only linguistic competence but also visual literacy, critical digital thinking, and an understanding of platform-specific communication norms. Integrating these competencies into educational programs can improve students’ ability to interpret and produce complex multimodal texts responsibly and effectively.

At the sociocultural level, digital communication influences identity construction, inclusivity, and power relations. Language practices in online environments reflect social identities and may either reinforce or challenge existing hierarchies through mechanisms such as visibility algorithms and moderation systems. Therefore, studying language as a semiotic system of digital communication requires both linguistic and critical sociocultural perspectives.

Another important dimension of digital communication is the acceleration of linguistic innovation. Internet platforms create conditions in which new lexical units, abbreviations, memes, and symbolic expressions emerge and spread significantly faster than in traditional communication environments. This rapid circulation of linguistic forms contributes to the continuous renewal of vocabulary and demonstrates the high adaptability of language to changing technological and cultural contexts.

Digital communication also influences social identity and relations of power. The linguistic choices of users, including the use of specific symbols, memes, emojis, and forms of expression, reflect group membership, cultural affiliation, and social positioning. At the same time, algorithms, moderation systems, and platform structures influence visibility and participation within digital spaces. Therefore, the analysis of digital language requires consideration of both linguistic features and broader technological and cultural contexts.

Despite the growing number of studies in digital communication, further research is needed to examine long-term transformations of online language practices. Future investigations should include multilingual and cross-platform comparisons, longitudinal studies of digital discourse development, and experimental approaches such as eye-tracking and cognitive response analysis. Such research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital environments influence language evolution and meaning-making processes.

A significant characteristic of digital discourse is its emotional and expressive potential. Emojis, GIFs, stickers, hashtags, and other non-verbal resources compensate for the absence of

face-to-face interaction and provide additional ways to express emotions, attitudes, and intentions. These multimodal elements expand the possibilities of language and contribute to the formation of new communicative strategies.

Finally, the transformation of digital communication also raises important ethical and methodological questions. Digital inequality, misinformation, anonymity, and data privacy influence communication practices and require interdisciplinary approaches that combine linguistics, media studies, sociology, psychology, and digital humanities. Understanding digital language development therefore requires attention not only to technological innovation but also to social and ethical dimensions.

Overall, digital discourse is changing not only because of technological development but also because users continuously adapt language practices to new media environments. Digital communication represents a new stage in the evolution of language as a semiotic system, where meaning emerges through the interaction of human creativity, technological structures, and cultural processes.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Statement

The study used only publicly available digital communication materials from open online platforms. No private correspondence was analysed, no personal identifying information was collected, and all potentially identifying data were removed before analysis.

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Цифрлық коммуникациядағы тілдің семиотикалық жүйе ретінде қызмет етуі

Андатпа. Мақалада тіл цифрлық коммуникациялар жағдайында көпдеңгейлі таңбалық жүйе ретінде қарастырылады. Зерттеу тілдің дәстүрлі деңгейлері – фонетикалық, морфологиялық, синтаксистік және семантикалық – цифрлық медианың мүмкіндіктерімен қалай интеграцияланатынын көрсетеді. Цифрлық коммуникациялар мәтіндік белгілерді (мәтін, модзилер, хштегтер) визуалды және паралингвистикалық элементтермен (суреттер, GIF, сілтемелер) үйлестіре отырып, жаңа гибридік семиотикалық кеңістікті қалыптастырады. Мақалада Ф. де Соссюрдың белгі мен мән арасындағы айырмашылығы, Р. Якобсонның тілдік функциялары, Пирстің триадалық семиотикасы және Ю. Лотманның мәдени семиотикасы, сондай-ақ Г. Кресс пен Т. ван Леувеннің мультимодальдылық теориясы негізге алынған.

Зерттеу әдістеріне салыстырмалы когнитивтік талдау, корпустық лингвистика және социосемиотика жатады. Эмпирикалық дерекқорға Twitter, Telegram және Reddit платформаларынан алынған 1 500 хабарлама кірген. Мәтіндер түрлі жанрларды, мультимодальды типтерді және тілдік варианттарды қамтиды. Деректер модзи, мемдер, GIF, қысқартулар және синтаксистік ерекшеліктер бойынша аннотацияланған.

Нәтижелер төрт негізгі тұжырымды көрсетті: цифрлық коммуникациялар интеграцияланған сигналдық кешендер ретінде жұмыс істейді; визуалды және интерактивті кодтарға көшу когнитивтік өңдеуді өзгерттеді; «цифрлық екітілділік» пайда болады; онлайн қауымдастықтар платформалық грамматикалық және семантикалық модельдерді қалыптастырады. Бұл үрдістер тілдің семиотикалық күрделілігін арттырады және жаңа бейімделгіш әлеуетін көрсетеді.

Қорытындылай келе, цифрлық коммуникациядағы тіл – мультимодальды, көпдеңгейлі, гибридік семиотикалық жүйе, онда мән қолданушылардың өзара әрекеттесуі арқылы қалыптасады. Бұл зерттеу ХХІ ғасырдағы тілдік практика мен мәдени динамиканы түсінуге, сонымен қатар лингвистика, медиасемиотика және педагогика саласында қолдануға негіз береді.

Кілт сөздер: тіл, цифрлық коммуникация, семиотика, мультимодальділік, когнитивтік лингвистика.

Язык как семиотическая система цифровой коммуникации

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается язык как многоуровневая знаковая система в условиях цифровой коммуникации. Исследование показывает, как традиционные языковые уровни – фонетический, морфологический, синтаксический и семантический – интегрируются с функциональными возможностями цифровых медиа. Цифровая коммуникация сочетает лингвистические знаки (текстовые сообщения, эмодзи и хештеги) с визуальными и паралингвистическими элементами (изображениями, GIF-анимацией и гиперссылками), создавая гибридную семиотическую среду. Теоретическую основу исследования составляют классические и современные подходы к семиотике и цифровой коммуникации: теория языкового знака Ф. де Соссюра, модель коммуникации Р. Якобсона, семиотическая теория Ч. С. Пирса и культурная семиотика Ю. Лотмана, а также мультимодальные подходы, разработанные Г. Крессом и Т. ван Леувенем.

В исследовании использованы сравнительный когнитивный анализ, методы корпусной лингвистики и социосемиотический анализ. Эмпирическая база включает 1 500 сообщений, собранных на платформах Twitter, Telegram и Reddit. Выборка включает различные жанры, типы мультимодальных сообщений и языковые разновидности. Сообщения аннотированы по типам модальности, семиотическим элементам, структурным особенностям и прагматическим функциям.

В результате анализа выявлены четыре ключевые тенденции: цифровая коммуникация функционирует как интегрированные знаковые комплексы; переход к визуальным и интерактивным кодам трансформирует когнитивные процессы; формируется "цифровой билингвизм"; онлайн-сообщества формируют специфичные для отдельных платформ грамматические и семантические модели. Эти процессы повышают семиотическую сложность языка и его адаптивный потенциал.

Таким образом, язык в цифровой коммуникации представляет собой мультимодальную, многоуровневую, гибридную семиотическую систему, в которой значение конструируется в процессе взаимодействия пользователей. Результаты исследования способствуют пониманию эволюционных тенденций коммуникации XXI века и могут быть использованы в лингвистических и в медиасемиотических исследованиях, а также в педагогической практике.

Ключевые слова: язык, цифровая коммуникация, семиотика, мультимодальность, когнитивная лингвистика.

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