UDC 81’42+81’367
DOI https://doi.org/10.32782/2307-1222.2026-61-7

LINGUISTIC MECHANISMS OF VIRALITY IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

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This article examines the linguistic mechanisms that contribute to the virality of expressions in contemporary digital communication, focusing on how specific phonological, morphological, semantic, and pragmatic features influence the rapid spread and high replicability of online language. The study argues that virality is not a random process but is enabled by identifiable linguistic patterns that enhance memorability, cognitive salience, emotional resonance, and user engagement. The analysis highlights the role of phonological features such as alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, and sound symbolism, which create acoustic patterns that are easy to perceive, recall, and reproduce. Morphological mechanisms support virality by enabling users to generate new forms based on existing, recognizable patterns. Such formations encourage large-scale variation and adaptation, turning linguistic items into flexible units that can circulate widely within digital environments. Semantic properties of viral expressions contribute to their ability to fit multiple contexts and resonate with diverse audiences. Pragmatic factors create conditions for rapid dissemination. Beyond linguistic factors,

the article situates virality within the broader digital ecosystem. Social media algorithms, participatory culture, multimodal integration, and transnational communication patterns significantly shape the life cycle of viral expressions. The interaction between linguistic form and digital infrastructure results in a hybrid mechanism of spread, where language becomes both a cultural artifact and a technological product. The findings underscore the dynamic and adaptive nature of online language, revealing how linguistic innovation serves as both a reflection and a driver of contemporary digital culture. By identifying the structural, functional, and sociocultural foundations of virality, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of linguistic change in the digital age and offers a framework for further research into the mechanisms that shape the creation, circulation, and global diffusion of viral expressions.

Key words: *virality, digital communication, linguistic mechanisms, phonology, morphology, semantics, pragmatics, word formation.*

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У статті досліджуються лінгвістичні механізми, що сприяють віральності висловлювань у сучасній цифровій комунікації, зосереджуючись на тому, як специфічні фонологічні, морфологічні, семантичні та прагматичні ознаки впливають

на швидке поширення та високу відтворюваність мовних одиниць в онлайн-середовищі. Доведено, що віральність не є випадковим процесом, а зумовлюється лінгвістичними патернами, які підвищують запам'ятовуваність, когнітивну виразність, емоційний резонанс і залученість користувачів. Стаття висвітлює роль фонологічних характеристик, зокрема алітерації, рими, ритму та звукової символіки, які формують акустичні патерни, легкі для сприйняття, запам'ятовування та відтворення. Морфологічні механізми підтримують віральність, даючи змогу користувачам утворювати нові форми на основі вже наявних і впізнаваних моделей. Такі утворення стимулюють масштабну варіативність та адаптацію, перетворюючи мовні одиниці на гнучкі елементи, здатні широко циркулювати у цифровому просторі. Семантичні властивості віральних висловів сприяють їхній здатності функціонувати в різних контекстах серед різноманітних аудиторій. Прагматичні чинники створюють умови для їх стрімкого поширення. Окрім суто лінгвістичних аспектів, у статті розглянуто віральність у ширшому цифровому екосередовищі. Алгоритми соціальних мереж, культура участі, мультимодальна інтеграція та транснаціональні комунікативні практики істотно впливають на життєвий цикл віральних висловів.

Взаємодія між мовною формою та цифровою інфраструктурою зумовлює гібридний механізм поширення, за якого мова постає водночас культурним артефактом і технологічним продуктом. Отримані результати підкреслюють динамічний і адаптивний характер онлайн-мови, демонструючи, як лінгвістичні інновації слугують і відображенням, і рушієм сучасної цифрової культури. Визначаючи структурні, функціональні та соціокультурні засади віральності, стаття сприяє глибшому розумінню мовних змін у цифрову епоху та пропонує основу для подальших досліджень механізмів створення, циркуляції та глобального поширення віральних висловів.

Ключові слова: *віральність, цифрова комунікація, лінгвістичні механізми, фонологія, морфологія, семантика, прагматика, словотворення.*

Introduction. In the last decade, the rapid development of digital platforms has dramatically transformed the ways in which people produce, share, and interact with language. Social media environments such as TikTok, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube have become dynamic linguistic ecosystems where words, expressions, and stylistic patterns spread with unprecedented speed. In this context, the concept of *virality*, the rapid and wide dissemination of content across digital networks, has become a central phenomenon in contemporary communication. Although virality is often associated with visual content, recent research increasingly emphasizes that linguistic factors also play a crucial role in determining what phrases, captions, comments, and textual memes capture public attention.

The viral potential of linguistic units depends on a complex interplay of phonological, morphological, semantic, pragmatic, and sociocultural factors. At the phonological level, features such as rhythm, alliteration, and sound symbolism can make expressions

more memorable and easier to reproduce. Morphologically, productive affixes and templates enable users to generate new variations that fit emerging trends, thus supporting the diffusion of a phrase across different communities. Semantically, viral expressions tend to exhibit simplicity, polysemy, or conceptual openness, which allows them to be adapted to diverse contexts. Pragmatic factors motivate users to share and reuse certain linguistic constructions. Together, these elements demonstrate that virality is not random but structured by recognizable linguistic patterns.

Additionally, digital communication environments shape the way linguistic virality occurs. Unlike traditional forms of communication, social media rely on algorithmic curation, participatory culture, and multimodality, all of which amplify or constrain the spread of linguistic material. Viral phrases often emerge within specific subcultures before spreading to mainstream discourse. The participatory nature of digital culture encourages users not only to consume but also to remix language: they modify, reinterpret, or humorously transform existing expressions, thereby increasing their circulation. Moreover, multimodal formats such as short videos combine linguistic text with audio, images, and gestures, creating new contexts in which language becomes part of performative and visual patterns that contribute to virality.

Analysis of recent research and publications. In recent years, a growing number of scholars have investigated the impact of digital communication on language change, with a particular focus on how linguistic innovation and virality manifest in online environments. One area of interest is the formation and rapid spread of neologisms that emerge in internet discourse. For instance, L. Gaynullina [4] examines how internet platforms accelerate the creation and dissemination of new lexical forms, emphasizing morphological and semantic factors that contribute to viral language phenomena in digital communication.

Another strand of work focuses on the broader linguistic effects of social media networks. M. Sarwar, R. Ramzan, R. Memon, Z. Rehman [7] conducted a thematic review of language change in digital communication, noting that social media fosters rapid lexical growth, introduces new abbreviations and hybrid forms, and alters syntactic and pragmatic patterns in English discourse. Their analysis underscores how features such as hashtag language, informal grammar, and multimodal elements like emojis influence communicative practices and meaning-making online.

Several studies also explore language innovation beyond purely lexical change. For example, research on social media slang in Ukrainian and Polish digital contexts demonstrates the globalized influence of English abbreviations and internet expressions, which often spread virally across linguistic communities and shape youth communication practices in multiple languages. Although not focused solely on English virality, this work illustrates cross-linguistic diffusion and the prominence of digital linguistic mechanisms in social networks [1].

A notable contribution to understanding viral linguistic phenomena comes from the emerging discourse on algorithm-driven language change. A. Aleksic [2] analyzes how social media algorithms not only promote certain expressions but also drive users to

invent coded language to evade moderation, such as euphemistic forms and creative spellings.

Some scholars have also investigated specific aspects of online communication, such as persuasive language use in social media marketing. K. Stepaniuk and K. Jarosz [9] examine persuasive linguistic tricks in social media posts, analyzing how emotional cues and message framing can influence user engagement and sharing behavior as key components of virality.

Taken together, these studies indicate that viral language phenomena in digital communication are multifaceted, involving not only the rapid spread of new words and expressions but also algorithmic influences, pragmatic strategies, and multimodal communicative elements.

Despite the growing recognition of linguistic virality as a significant phenomenon, academic research on this topic remains relatively limited and fragmented. Linguists, communication scholars, and media researchers have begun investigating individual aspects of viral language, yet there is still a need for a comprehensive understanding of the specific linguistic mechanisms that drive the spread of online expressions. By examining the interplay of phonological, morphological, semantic, and pragmatic features, as well as the influence of digital platform culture, this article aims to provide a systematic analysis of how and why certain linguistic units achieve viral status.

The aim of the article is to identify and systematize the linguistic mechanisms that determine the virality of English-language expressions in digital communication, as well as to analyze how phonological, morphological, semantic, and pragmatic features contribute to the rapid spread of linguistic units across social media platforms. The object of the study is viral linguistic expressions used in contemporary digital communication. The subject of the study is the linguistic features and mechanisms (phonological, morphological, semantic, and pragmatic) that contribute to the virality of English-language expressions in digital environments.

The methodological foundation of this article is based on an interdisciplinary approach that combines qualitative linguistic analysis with elements of digital discourse studies. Firstly, the study employs descriptive and analytical linguistic methods to examine phonological, morphological, semantic, and pragmatic features characteristic of viral English expressions. Secondly, the article relies on discourse analysis, particularly focused on digital discourse, to explore how viral expressions function within real online environments. Thirdly, the study incorporates elements of corpus-informed analysis. Although this article does not employ a full-scale quantitative corpus methodology, it draws on lexical examples sourced from recent empirical research, scholarly publications, and documented viral trends. Additionally, comparative analysis is used to relate linguistic findings from English-language digital spaces to broader trends observed in international research. This comparative perspective enables the study to situate English viral expressions within global digital communication patterns.

Presentation of the main research material. Virality in digital communication is not a random process, but rather a complex interplay of linguistic characteristics that

make certain expressions memorable, adaptable, and socially engaging. Viral expressions often become part of large-scale communication because they contain specific features that resonate cognitively, culturally, and socially with users across platforms. In this section, we analyze four major linguistic domains

– Phonological (1),
– Morphological (2),
– Semantic (3),
– Pragmatic (4).

1. Phonological features contribute significantly to how easily a phrase is remembered, repeated, and shared. Sounds are inherently attention-grabbing; they help transform language into a sort of auditory hook that draws attention even before meaning is fully processed.

One foundational idea related to phonological distinctiveness is that word forms tend to be optimized for efficient communication and recognition. S. Meylan and T. Griffiths [6] argue that phonological distinctiveness is a crucial predictor of word frequency and recognizability, suggesting that phonological properties influence how easily listeners process and recall linguistic items.

In the context of digital language, such distinctiveness helps certain expressions capture users' attention and be reproduced widely.

The concept of memes and viral content in digital culture, as articulated by L. Shifman [8], provides a useful framework for linking phonological appeal with communicative spread. While Shifman's work primarily focuses on memes as cultural units sharing content, form, and stance, she emphasizes that form contributes to recognizability and repeatability in communication. Although Shifman does not analyse specific phonological factors in depth, her definition underscores the importance of form-based features in digital virality.

In viral expressions, phonological appeal can be maximized through techniques such as:

Alliteration – repetition of initial consonant sounds increases recall and catchy-ness, e.g., *Girl Math* – alliteration of /g/ and a simple two-word pattern make it catchy; *Big Brain Energy* – repetition of voiced consonants (/b/, /g/) and a flowing rhythm lend confidence to the phrase.

Rhyme – end sounds that match make phrases more rhythmic, e.g., *No Cap* – the short «no cap» (meaning «no lie») uses a simple consonant-vowel pattern and strong ending consonant, making it punchy and memorable; *Go With the Flow* – rhyme and rhythm create a soothing, sing-song quality that mirrors the meaning.

Rhythm and Beat – patterned stress that mimics musical or dance rhythms aids memorability, especially in short-form videos.

Sound Symbolism – certain sounds connote energy, softness, urgency, or humor, e.g., *slay* sounds sharp and impactful.

These phonological features enhance phonetic simplicity, making expressions easier to repeat and share across contexts and platforms, for example, *Hot Girl Walk* – repetition

of the /w/-sound and balanced stress pattern produce a rhythmic cadence; *Fit Check* – consonant clusters and back-to-back plosives (/t/, /ch/) give a punchy, stylistic rhythm; *snack* – though a single word, its short, sharp sound conveys attractiveness or desirability.

In sociolinguistic analyses of internet memes, researchers note that familiar sound patterns or cadence help users quickly identify, repeat, and produce linguistic units in various contexts. For example, expressions with alliteration or rhythmic repetition leverage phonological patterns that make them catchy and easy to imitate – a key factor in their propensity to spread across platforms. Phonological familiarity and simplicity reduce cognitive load during processing, making these expressions more likely to be adopted by broad user groups.

2. Morphology (the way words are constructed) plays a central role in virality. As M. Aronoff [3] emphasizes, morphological productivity is fundamentally tied to the ability of speakers to generate new forms from existing patterns, which directly supports the spontaneous, user-driven creation typical of internet discourse.

One reason morphology contributes to virality is its predictability and recognizability. According to R. Jackendoff [5], morphological rules and templates act as «cognitive schemas» that allow speakers to quickly interpret and produce novel structures. In digital environments, such schemas become powerful tools for memetic spread, as users can instantly adapt a viral template for humorous, expressive, or socially meaningful purposes.

Viral expressions often leverage productive affixes or word templates that allow users to generate variations quickly and flexibly. These include:

Suffixes such as «-core»: borrowed from aesthetic and classification languages. For example, *Cottage-core* – combines root + «-core», creating an aesthetic trend that spawned numerous variants (farm-core, mushroom-core); *Dark-academia-core* – a three-part morphological blend that signals a niche cultural identity.

Platform-tag affixes like «-tok»: identifying origin or association, e.g., *Study-tok* – morphological fusion of study + tok, reflecting a community built around study content on TikTok; *Fit-tok* – analogous formation indicating fitness content communities.

Transformative suffixes like «-ify», which convert nouns/adjectives to verbs with playful impact, e.g., *Adultify* – adjectival root + «-ify»; a creative verb meaning «to make something seem more adult».

Derivational patterns like «-gate»: used to label scandals or controversies, e.g., *Cancel-gate* – combines cancel + -gate to label perceived controversies, borrowed from political scandal morphology; *Soft-girl* – root + classifier pattern; users can analogously form soft-boy, hard-girl; *Main-character energy* – compound expression that became a template for personal empowerment memes.

Such morphological tools act as productive word-building templates that facilitate linguistic creativity, allowing trends to spread through user participation and remixing. used humorously.

3. Semantic Features

Semantic features greatly influence virality because they determine how easily an expression is understood, reused, and adapted. Viral language tends to exhibit:

Semantic simplicity – clear, accessible meaning that doesn't require specialized knowledge.

Polysemy – words with multiple related meanings provide flexible interpretation.

Openness to context – phrases that can be adapted to multiple situations retain longevity.

These semantic characteristics allow expressions to travel beyond their original context and gain life in unexpected communicative domains. Expressions that evoke emotion, identity, or shared cultural understanding are more likely to spread. Emotional resonance (humor, empathy, pride) and cultural resonance (shared memes or lifestyle trends) make phrases relatable and shareable. For example, *Main-character energy* – simple metaphor; semantically refers to seeing oneself as protagonist, resonating with personal identity; *No cap* – polysemous in casual speech; literally «no hat» but semantically means «no lie» – interpreted easily across contexts; *GOAT* – acronym for «Greatest of All Time»; simple yet semantically rich, recognized across cultural domains; *Simp* – initially slang; now widely used to describe excessive affection or devotion, adaptable; *Bread-tube* – semantic blending indicating political/educational commentary genre; *Periodt* – semantic intensifier of period; denotes finality, with cultural roots in Black American English; *Vibe check* – the term's semantic openness lets users apply it to people, music, or moments; *Cancel culture* – semantic combination capturing social practice with wide interpretive resonance. These examples show how semantic properties – clarity, flexibility, emotional impact – make expressions more likely to be understood, reused, and remixed.

4. Pragmatic Features

Pragmatic features refer to the use and function of language in communicative contexts – why people choose certain expressions and how they influence interaction. Viral language often leverages:

Humor – playful usage that elicits laughter or amusement.

Irony – saying one thing while meaning another, often reflecting cultural or social commentary.

Relatability – expressions that articulate shared experiences.

Persuasive appeal – linguistic cues that motivate engagement (likes, shares, comments).

Pragmatic virality emerges when language does something – makes people feel recognized, amused, or understood – which motivates repetition. User contexts such as memes, challenges, livestream interaction, and captioning practices shape pragmatic virality. In social media environments, users often co-construct meaning by adding comments, remixing templates, or applying trends to personal narratives.

For example, *Vibe check* – used both humorously and earnestly to judge emotional or situational quality; *It's the ___ for me* – template invites personalization, making

it highly participatory; *Sheesh* – expresses emphatic exclamation; used humorously across contexts; *We move* – pragmatically signals acceptance and resilience; widely relatable; *CEO of* ___ – humorously designates authority in trivial domains (e.g., «CEO of naps»); *Sending me* – internet slang indicating humor so strong it sends the viewer emotionally; Hits different – pragmatic evaluative phrase indicating unique emotional impact; Bet – pragmatic marker of agreement or confirmation; simple yet interactive; *No tea, no shade* – pragmatic hedging phrase indicating honesty without offense. These instances illustrate how pragmatics drives virality by aligning expressions with user intentions, emotions, and social norms.

The virality of linguistic expressions in digital communication is not determined solely by their structural or functional characteristics. Equally important are the digital and sociocultural contexts in which these expressions emerge, spread, and evolve. These factors shape not only the visibility of language online but also its adaptability and social resonance.

Social media platforms serve as both the environment and mechanism for linguistic virality. Each platform (TikTok, Instagram, X, YouTube) has its unique affordances, including algorithms that prioritize content based on engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and watch time. These algorithmic systems act as gatekeepers of visibility, amplifying certain expressions while suppressing others. As a result, linguistic expressions that align with algorithmic optimization, short, catchy, easily understood, or visually compatible, have a higher likelihood of spreading widely.

Furthermore, participatory culture plays a critical role. Users are not passive consumers but active co-creators of content. Memes, challenges, viral phrases, and templates are constantly remixed, adapted, and contextualized, fostering a cycle of co-construction that accelerates the propagation of language. For example, a template like *It's the* ___ *for me* can be adapted thousands of times, each iteration reinforcing the phrase's visibility and viral potential. This participatory nature of social media ensures that linguistic virality is socially negotiated and community-driven rather than purely top-down.

Viral expressions rarely exist as isolated text; they are often combined with images, short videos, GIFs, emojis, audio snippets, or music. This integration enhances cognitive salience and emotional engagement, making phrases more memorable and shareable. For instance, TikTok videos frequently pair a catchphrase with a trending song or visual motif, creating a synergistic effect in which the linguistic unit is reinforced by auditory and visual cues. Similarly, Instagram captions often combine viral hashtags with relevant imagery, increasing the likelihood of user engagement. Multimodality thus transforms language into a performative, interactive medium, where meaning is co-constructed through multiple sensory channels.

Our analysis of viral English expressions in digital communication demonstrates that linguistic and digital mechanisms operate in a tightly interdependent system. Phonological, morphological, semantic, and pragmatic features provide the structural and functional basis for virality, making expressions catchy, adaptable, and socially engaging.

However, these intrinsic linguistic properties gain maximal impact only when situated within digital environments characterized by algorithmic amplification, participatory culture, and multimodality. For example, phonologically appealing phrases such as «Girl Math» or «Big Brain Energy» become viral not merely because of their sound patterns but because they are easily incorporated into TikTok videos, Instagram captions, or meme templates. Similarly, morphologically productive structures like «-core» and «-tok» allow users to generate countless variations, a process accelerated by platform-specific engagement mechanisms. Semantic simplicity and cultural resonance facilitate comprehension and emotional connection, while pragmatic features – humor, irony, and relatability – encourage sharing and remixing.

This synthesis highlights that virality cannot be fully understood by examining linguistic features in isolation. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between language and digital affordances, where human cognitive tendencies, social motivations, and platform algorithms coalesce to determine which expressions propagate widely.

Conclusions. This study has examined the complex interplay of linguistic and digital mechanisms that contribute to the virality of English-language expressions in online communication. The analysis demonstrates that phonological, morphological, semantic, and pragmatic features collectively enhance the memorability, adaptability, and shareability of viral expressions. Phonological patterns such as alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm capture attention and aid repetition, while morphological templates like -core, -tok, -ify, and -gate facilitate creativity and rapid lexical innovation. Semantic simplicity, polysemy, and cultural resonance allow expressions to be understood and adapted across contexts, and pragmatic features, including humor, irony, relatability, and persuasive appeal, motivate users to participate, remix, and disseminate content widely.

Furthermore, this research underscores the critical role of digital and sociocultural factors in shaping virality. Social media algorithms determine visibility, participatory culture encourages co-creation and adaptation, multimodal integration enhances engagement, and cross-cultural diffusion allows English expressions to spread globally. Linguistic virality, therefore, emerges from the interaction between inherent linguistic properties and the affordances of digital platforms, rather than from language features alone. Understanding the mechanisms of linguistic virality offers a framework for analyzing not only the spread of words and phrases but also the broader interaction between language, technology, and society. Future research could expand on this study by incorporating quantitative corpus analyses, cross-linguistic comparisons, and platform-specific investigations to further illuminate how viral language continues to evolve in the digital era.

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Дата першого надходження статті до видання: 06.01.2026
Дата прийняття статті до друку після рецензування: 29.01.2026
Дата публікації (оприлюднення) статті: 10.04.2026