

THE BASIC COMPONENTS OF INTERNET DISCOURSE: A TAXONOMY OF STRUCTURAL, SEMANTIC, AND PRAGMATIC UNITS

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Abstract: *This thesis proposes a tripartite taxonomy for analyzing the basic components of internet discourse: Structural Components, Semantic Components, and Pragmatic Components. Structural components constitute the building blocks of the discourse environment, including platform affordances, discourse genres, and intertextual connectors. Semantic components encompass the units of meaning-making, ranging from micro-units like emoticons and hashtags to macro-units like memes and viral narratives. Pragmatic components involve the units of social action and interaction, such as speech acts, participant roles, and conversational patterns specific to digital contexts. The proposed taxonomy provides a foundational framework for researchers to systematically describe, compare, and analyze internet discourse across diverse digital environments, moving beyond platform-specific analysis towards a unified understanding of its elemental constitution.*

Keywords: *Internet Discourse, Discourse Components, Taxonomy, Structural Units, Semantic Units, Pragmatic Units, Affordances, Digital Genres, Memes, Computer-Mediated Communication*

Introduction: This thesis aims to: (1) Define and describe the core components within each category, (2) Illustrate their instantiation and interaction across major platform types, and (3) Argue for the utility of this taxonomy as a foundational framework for comparative digital discourse analysis. The central research question is: What are the basic, cross-platform components that constitute internet discourse, and how do they systematically interact to produce coherent communicative events?

Materials and Methods: This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytic methodology to develop and illustrate the proposed taxonomy. The research is grounded in a purpose-built corpus designed to capture a range of component manifestations.

From each platform, 20 discrete "discourse events" were collected. A "discourse event" was defined as a root post (a Reddit question, a tweet, an Instagram post) and its associated direct interactions (top 50 comments/replies, as sorted by platform default). This yielded 60 events for a total corpus of 60 root units and approximately 3,000 interactive units.

Analytical Procedure: The analysis proceeded in three concurrent phases, corresponding to the three component categories. Each discourse event was coded for the presence and function of components.

1. Structural Component Analysis: Coding for:

Platform Affordances-in-Use: e.g., the upvote button, the retweet function, the reply thread.

Genre Markers: Identifying recognizable digital genres (e.g., AMA, "hot take," photo caption narrative).

Intertextual Connectors: Hyperlinks, @mentions, hashtags, embedded media.

2. Semantic Component Analysis: Coding for:

Micro-Semantic Units: Emojis, emoticons, platform-specific abbreviations (e.g., IMO, TL;DR).

Meso-Semantic Units: Hashtags (as semantic bundles), image macros, GIFs used as semantic responses.

Macro-Semantic Units: Memes (understood as combinable template + content), viral narrative formats (e.g., "storytime" structures).

3. Pragmatic Component Analysis: Coding for:

Digital Speech Acts: Identifying acts like "dunking" (humiliating rebuttal), "signaling alignment" (via shared meme use), "summoning" (via @mention).

Participant Roles: Roles like Original Poster (OP), moderator, "top commenter," troll, lurker (implied by structure).

Conversational Patterns: Turn-taking structures (e.g., nested replies), patterns of amplification (retweet chains), and repair sequences (e.g., "EDIT:" notations).

The final stage of analysis focused on mapping the interaction between components from different categories within single discourse events.

Results and Discussions:

1. A Taxonomy of Basic Components

The analysis yielded the following working taxonomy of basic components:

A. Structural Components

Affordance Units: Like/Upvote, Share/Retweet, Reply Thread, Comment Field, Algorithmic Feed.

Case 1: A Viral Debate on X. A user posts a controversial claim (Pragmatic: Speech act of assertion). The tweet uses a hashtag (Structural: Connective unit; Semantic: Meso-unit). Critics employ the quote-tweet function (Structural: Affordance unit) to enact a rebuttal (Pragmatic: Speech act of dunking), often adding a laughing emoji (Semantic: Micro-unit). The algorithm (Structural: Affordance unit) amplifies high-engagement tweets, shaping the Pragmatic pattern into a "dogpile."

Case 2: An Explanation on r/AskScience. A user poses a complex question (Structural: Genre frame of Q&A; Pragmatic: Role of OP). A subject matter expert replies with a detailed answer, using hyperlinks to scientific papers (Structural: Connective unit) and a "TL;DR" summary (Semantic: Micro-unit). The community upvotes the answer (Structural & Pragmatic: Affordance unit enacting alignment), cementing the respondent's Pragmatic role as a "top contributor." The nested reply structure (Structural: Affordance unit) allows for follow-up clarification in a Pragmatic pattern of collaborative elaboration.

Case 3: A Political Meme on Instagram. An account posts an image macro criticizing a politician (Semantic: Macro-unit [Meme]). The caption poses a rhetorical question (Pragmatic: Speech act of provoking engagement). Comments are flooded with fire emojis (Semantic: Micro-unit enacting Pragmatic affiliation) and tagged friends (Structural: Connective unit for Pragmatic summoning). The Pragmatic pattern is one of collective, identity-reinforcing signaling rather than debate.

Discussion: The Component System as Grammar. This taxonomy reveals internet discourse as a component system with its own grammar. Structural components provide the syntactic rules—they dictate what can be done (e.g., you can only reply in a thread if the platform allows it). Semantic components provide the lexical items and compositional rules for meaning—they dictate what can be meant (e.g., a skull emoji 🐛 means "I'm dead from laughter" in this context). Pragmatic components describe how these forms are used to perform social actions within the constraints and resources of the system—they explain what is being done by saying/posing/posting (e.g., using a niche meme to gatekeep a community).

Conclusion: This thesis has successfully identified and organized the basic components of internet discourse into a tripartite taxonomy of Structural, Semantic, and Pragmatic units. By applying this taxonomy across platforms, the analysis demonstrates that diverse digital communications are built from a common, if variably instantiated, set of foundational elements. This component-based approach offers several key advantages: it provides a unified metalanguage for cross-platform analysis, allows for the systematic description of discourse events, and illuminates the functional interdependence of technology, meaning, and social action online.

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