IMAGE AND TEXT IN X
Multimodal Discourse Analysis in Educational Accounts

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ABSTRACT

In social networks, communication is dynamic due to the different semiotic codes used. This research analyses the multimodal discourse on X when images (photos, videos, GIFs, memes, emojis, etc.) and texts are combined to create an attractive visual narrative for followers. The main objective is to identify common semiotic structures or formats in this network. The methodology is exploratory in nature and is based on the selection of a strategic non-probabilistic sample of accounts from the educational ecosystem. These accounts were randomly selected and aimed at the educational community in X. The results of the analysis support the communicative tendency to use these multimodal texts that combine visual and verbal narrative in X publications. Therefore, further study of this strategy is warranted.

1. Introduction

The Internet offers a multitude of semiotic particularities that render it an unprecedented communicative space. From the most classic studies of communication in the digital environment (Crystal, 2002; Yus, 2001) to those who began to delve into the new media and social networks (Tascón, 2012; Cassany, 2012), to more recent and innovative approaches to the new rules of language on the Internet (McCulloh, 2019) or the didactic possibilities of communication in social networks (Méndez Santos & Vela Delfa, 2023). In terms of the visual and discursive aspects, social network publications are distinguished by the capacity of users to select the most suitable visual and verbal resources for their communicative purposes, taking into account the formats available and the multimodality of the medium. The combination of images and text allows for the expansion of visual narratives and textual structures. In this way, social networks have given rise to new forms of storytelling, including the role of stories, content threads and visual sequences. In the digital universe, a process of creating semiotic structures or multimodal texts occurs, which serves as a powerful ally of these new narratives. Consequently, we are witnessing the constant experimentation of essentially collective forms of narration, which pose numerous challenges to discourse analysis (Pano Alamán, 2016, p. 195).

The advent of social networks has facilitated greater access to information for citizens, who now "play a more active and important role in the communicative process of the social network where they have an online presence" (Marcos et al., 2017, p. 27). X (formerly Twitter) is still one of the most widely known networks, in particular, it ranks third, behind Facebook and Instagram. However, it is important to note that it is one of the three social networks that have lost the greatest number of users in 2023 (33%), along with Facebook and Snapchat (IAB Spain, 2023).

In the context of the educational ecosystem, the social network space X facilitates a constant exchange of experiences, activities, teaching materials, and other forms of knowledge among users, which has led to the formation of a significant digital community of teachers and professionals interested in sharing this type of information (UNESCO, 2019). The networks constitute a meeting point open to the multiple opportunities for informal learning of teachers and the educational community. This is due to the fact that "they dedicate part of their leisure time to sharing with others, to answering questions, to joint and collaborative debate" (Mosquera, 2023, p. 13) and to comments on professional and social reality, often critical of different current issues (Mancera Rueda & Pano Alamán, 2014). It is evident that the educational sector must acknowledge the significance of emerging social phenomena, particularly given the central role of information in the educational system. As Godoy Oliveros (2024, p. 19) asserts, the educational world cannot remain unaware of these developments. However, analyses of the multimodal phenomenon in the context of this sector of educational profiles in X are still very scarce. Research has been conducted in the field of political communication, for instance, by Gallardo Paúls et al. (2018), who analysed the semiotic structure of messages published by political parties, and García-Avilés and Arias (2016), who classified journalistic publications with images according to four semiotic categories: graphic representations, infographics, videos and GIFs.

2. Communication in Social Networks

The advent of social networks has led to the creation of a novel communication context, characterised by the generation of a vast quantity of visual and textual information on a constant basis. Users have adopted and created new ways of telling stories, persuading, offering products and information. The study of publipropagandistic discourse (Robles Ávila, 2017) in social networks is a subject of interest to various communication disciplines, as well as multimodal narratives. López-Meri et al. (2017) analyse the strategies employed by journalists to construct their personal brand through their digital image on X. Their work identifies four key strategies: positioning, content curation, personalisation and specialisation.

The communicative possibilities of X's publications, in accordance with the digital context of the social networks themselves, facilitate the flourishing of users' imagination and creativity. In an attempt to make their tweets more attractive and better reach their followers, users deploy a variety of original visual and linguistic resources with respect to the more traditional ways of communicating (oral language/written language/graphic code). Communication is seen to have its possibilities expanded "in order to make the most of these communicative tools" (Alcántara Plá, 2017: 18). In accordance with

their interests and objectives, each user selects pragmatic and discursive strategies to achieve their communicative intentions (Cantamutto, 2023). The discourse of social networks is designed to be persuasive. However, in recent years, social and communicative conflict has transformed the stage of social networks into a coliseum – a battlefield – rather than an agora – a field of dialogue and debate – as Ramón Salaverría's metaphor suggests.

Figure 1. A publication that is critical of the current social media landscape

Source: X, @salaverria.

2.1. Multimodal Discourse in X

In 2012, O'Halloran already referred to multimodal analysis as an emerging field of study. This field extends the study of language per se to the study of language in combination with other resources such as images" (p. 76). It offers a wealth of insights into the characterisation of a specific communicative event, such as a publication on a social network. Since that time, there has been significant interdisciplinary progress in the study of this type of discourse, particularly in the field of the Internet. Specialists in communication and audiovisual media, discourse analysts, linguists, and other scholars in the field contribute different perspectives on "multimodal phenomena," as evidenced by recent works that analyse political communication in X from the multimodal approach and the analysis of images (Oleaque Moreno, 2023) and the narrative possibilities of the threads in X (Castro-Martínez & Díaz-Morilla, 2021) within the context of what is known as "Twitteratura[1]." The authors of this study have concluded that X has a high potential for the construction of planned stories and narratives, which are often supported by an elaborate process of pre-production and audiovisual production (p. 82). Consequently, the production of a publication in X necessitates the selection of both visual and verbal elements by its author. Vela Delfa (2007) and Cantamutto (2023) identify three characteristics that influence this decision and are related to the digital style of the issuer: economy, clarity and expressiveness. It is evident that expressiveness plays a pivotal role in the selection of an image, as will be demonstrated in the subsequent section. In summary, there is a context of digital interaction that can be defined in a broad sense as "utterances (oral, written and/or multimodal) produced with technological assistance through the mediation of some interface" (Cantamutto, 2023, p. 205). In the case of posts on X, the nature of the communicative exchange is transactional. This is because although

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[1] The term "Twitterature" is used to describe a narrative modality that allows for storytelling within the constraints of the 280-character limit on the platform. It encompasses a range of creative formats, including short stories, poems, and haikus, among others.

network users can interact with these contents (for example, by commenting, liking, reposting, etc.), they correspond to monomanaged discourses.

In the context of this research, it is notable that on social network X, numerous accounts belonging to the educational community employ multimodal discourse as a semiotic representation, designed to capture the attention of followers. This is achieved through the combination of visual and verbal elements in the form of publications. Furthermore, studies have been conducted which examine the creation of humour through these connections. Blogs specialising in social networks offer lists of accounts that exploit multimodal humour (Fernández Pena, 2017). In this context, the graphic plays a pivotal role in the network, serving as a conduit for the presentation of scripts that are in opposition. In such instances, a verbal complement is often required (Simarro Vázquez, 2020, p. 207).

Within the set of visual elements in multimodal discourse, those known as graphic icons or graphics, such as emoticons, emojis, GIFs and stickers, assume a significant role. Herring (2019) proposes a three-stage framework for the study of these graphics. "SMS language, emoji universe and sticker mode" (Cantamutto, 2023, p. 207). The evolution of technology allows us to situate these developments in the years 2000, 2015 and 2021. In each of these years, one of the aforementioned characteristics was predominant: economy in SMS language, clarity in the emoji universe and expressiveness in sticker mode. In his 2020 analysis, Cantón Tébar examines the non-verbal communication of social networks, encompassing emoticons, emojis, stickers, GIFs, images, and videos. Emojis, a common feature of X publications, are highly expressive resources that, after experiencing a period of increased usage for several years, have been superseded in social networks and instant messaging applications by stickers and GIFs (Vela Delfa & Cantamutto, 2021).

Social networks function as conduits through which verbal expressions containing these semiotic structures become communicative "clichés," formulas that spread virally and enter the general lexicon, being heard in spontaneous conversations or in the media. For example, the colloquial expression "se vienen cositas" ("little things are coming") has its origins in the commercial sphere of social media marketing. This formula is employed to announce and anticipate the imminent arrival of a new product or service, thereby generating expectations about it in potential consumers. In fact, "generation Z transformed the expression into a meme in itself" (Infante, 2021), as it is a means of parodying the self-promotion that is constantly carried out on Instagram or TikTok. Figure 2 provides an illustrative example of the aforementioned phenomenon. In this instance, the hashtag and the graphic resource that constitutes the poster of the announced congress are also included.

Figure 2. Example of the viral expression "se vienen cositas" ("little things are coming").

Source: X, @Cilg2023.

2.2. The Education Community in X

In this study, the social network X was selected for its suitability as a research subject due to its social collaboration dimension. This dimension enables X to serve as a regular meeting place for teachers from different educational levels and fields of study, forming an authentic "virtual faculty[2]", a real educational

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[2] The #claustrovirtual de X is a digital space for open dialogue between teachers, who meet around the #CharlasEducativas, an outreach project promoted by Professor Ingrid Mosquera, @imgende.

community. Although there are other social networks that are more popular among younger generations (e.g., TikTok and Instagram), X is still a favourite among adult generations, including millennials and baby boomers, to which most education professionals belong (Fernández, 2023). "At present, educational debate on the Internet is still taking place on this social network (X)" (Rovira-Collado et al., 2023, p.1).

A multitude of educators espousing this philosophy disseminate and share teaching materials, reflections, and educational proposals through their accounts, thereby constituting a vast repository for the curation of educational content. These individuals are not limited to those designated as "eduinfluencers" or "educational influencers" (Bazarra and Casanova, 2019), but also encompass a multitude of anonymous teachers. The significance of the role of educational influencers on social media is evidenced by the recent initiation of a line of studies examining the content they generate on social media, with a particular focus on Instagram (Godoy Oliveros, 2024).

3. Objectives, Methodology and Sample Variables

3.1. Objectives and Hypotheses

The principal objective of this research is to identify the common semiotic structures or formats in X in which visual and verbal elements are combined. The results have enabled the identification of the principal communicative functions that images perform in these structures, according to their relationship with the verbal elements with which they co-occur.

It is hypothesised that in X (and in social networks in general) there is a tendency to use multimodal texts, with images playing a major role, to make publications more attractive to followers. This is dependent on the communicative intentions of the authors, which may include the transmission of information or a feeling, the generation of humour around a current issue, the criticism of a particular subject or entity, and so forth. In order to achieve these objectives, the following specific objectives were set:

- To select popular education ecosystem accounts in X's #claustrovirtual.
- To choose publications from these accounts that contain visual and verbal elements.
- To analyse and describe the functions of images and verbal expressions.
- To present a sample of the corpus under study shall be presented.

3.2. Methodology and Sample Variables

The research methodology employed is descriptive and qualitative, with a focus on multimodal discourse analysis in social networks. In order to conduct the research, a corpus of 650 publications from the fifteen X accounts selected was compiled, representing a period between March 2023 and March 2024. The methodology is exploratory and is based on the selection of a strategic non-probabilistic sample of accounts, chosen at random. Among the various variables that define users who create content and construct and project a personal, social, and professional image (Goffman, 1981), we focused on accounts from the educational community that are well known among X's #claustrovirtual.

The selection of these accounts commenced with the identification of the 20 most prominent educational accounts on the renowned educational blog Yo Soy Tu Profe in 2022 (Ruiz, 2022). A total of five accounts were selected. The following accounts were selected: @maestra de pueblo, @imgende, @xtianolive, @Nando_Lopez_ and @de_infantil. To complete the sample, ten other accounts from the educational ecosystem were also analysed, based on their popularity among the #claustrovirtual community: @llume38, @m_horno, @AlexvonKarma, @MaestritaM, @EnInfantil, @octavio_pr, @envozalta_libro, @elmaestrojota, @larotesmeyer, and @Juan_Naranjo_.

Table 1. Data of the accounts analysed

User name	Account name	Educational activity	Number of followers
@maestradepueblo	village teacher	teacher	121'K
@imgende	Ingrid Mosquera	University Prof.	43.897
@xtianolive	Cristian Olivé	teacher and writer	33.004
@Nando_Lopez_	Nando López	writer	48.922
@de_infantil	Lola Cabrillana	teacher and writer	39.858
@llume38	Luis de Mena	teacher and pedagogical director	7138
@m_horno	Mamen Horno Chéliz	University Prof	9807
@AlexvonKarma	Álex Herrero	editor, proofreader and disseminator	9665
@MaestritaM	Mrs M.J.	teacher	17.192
@InChildren	A teacher in the Infant School	teacher	11.994
@octavio_pr	Octavio Prieto	secondary education teacher	20.563
@envozalta_libro	At home I knew it	book humour account	53.217
@elmaestrojota	Master Jota	teacher	11.110
@larotesmeyer	Miss Rotesmeyer	teacher	44.286
@Juan_Naranjo_	Juan Naranjo	translator	38.286

Source: Own elaboration.

The procedure that was followed in this research is as follows:

a) Field observation in X to select the accounts under investigation.
b) Selection of publications that contain the semiotic formats under study, i.e. that combine images and textual resources.
c) Analysis of the communicative functions of the images and description of the texts and semiotic structures.
d) Presentation of examples of publications from the corpus under analysis. Finally, the conclusions and discussion derived from the research are presented.

In order to conduct this research, we have developed our own content analysis sheet, which takes into account previous research on the analysis of web pages, specifically photographs of social network profiles and headers (López-Marcos & Vicente-Fernández, 2023; Tarazona-Belenguer et al., 2020).

4. Analysis Results

This section presents the principal findings of the sample under investigation, illustrated by a selection of examples of the semiotic structures or formats identified. Upon analysis of the publications, three general types of semiotic structures were identified, which depend essentially on the function that the image has with respect to the text.

1. The image is necessary to understand the text.
2. The image is not necessary to understand the text.
3. The image is employed in lieu of the text.

With regard to the first semiotic structure, the image is necessary to understand the text. The analysis reveals that in a large number of the publications analysed, the image is essential for the followers to be able to grasp the meaning of the text. Therefore, without the image, the message would not be understood. The corpus analysed revealed that publications with this structure were the most numerous. In essence, the author employs the image to pique the reader's interest in the text, thus facilitating comprehension of the message. With regard to this structure, two distinct types of

publications can be identified: a) Publications that combine text and image. b) Publications that combine two texts and their respective images.

The following publications exemplify the combination of text and image. Figure 3 illustrates the text "A day at the office," which references the author, editor, and proofreader's typical professional tasks, as depicted in the image of cats resting on the desk. Conversely, in Figure 4, it is not immediately evident what is meant by the expression "They're very clear" until the accompanying photograph is viewed. This reveals that the individuals in charge of the kiosk café are aware of the necessity for customers and are not required to adhere to any specific requirements. Instead, they are simply expected to consume and enjoy the products and services on offer. In Figure 5, the text explicitly references the image, underscoring the necessity of the image for the comprehension of the text's ironic message.

Figure 3. Example of an image that is needed to understand the text

Source: X, @AlexvonKarma.

Figure 4. Example of an image that is needed to understand the text

Source: X, @de_infantil.

Figure 5. Example of an image that is needed to understand the text

Source: X, @MaestritaM.

The second type of combination identified in this first format is that of two images, each accompanied by a corresponding text. The publication presents a contrast between the two, and meaning is constructed precisely through this comparison. It is noteworthy that, from a thematic and communicative standpoint, these publications tend to share a critical perspective on some controversial aspect of the educational ecosystem, presented in a humorous manner. In most cases, two distinct perspectives on the same reality are presented for comparison. One is the idealised vision of the educational system as perceived by teachers, and the other is the reality they encounter in their day-to-day work. Figure 6 illustrates the contrast between an idealised classroom, which corresponds to the vision of the LOMLOE (Ley Orgánica por la que se Modifica la Ley Orgánica de Educación/ Organic Law Amending the Organic Law on Education) "What the LOMLOE says", and a real classroom, representing the reality of classroom practice "What you do in the classroom". A similar visual and textual comparison can be observed in Figure 7, which depicts the effects of teaching on the classroom environment.

Figure 6. Example of the contrast between two images and two texts.

Source: X, @maestradepueblo.

Figure 7. Example of the contrast between two images and two texts.


Source: X, @MaestritaM.

The second semiotic structure identified is characterised by the images not being indispensable for understanding the meaning of the text. Instead, they serve a communicative function of complementing or reinforcing the content of the verbal elements. This is analogous to the case of verbal affirmation accompanied by a nod of the head, which serves to reinforce the verbal affirmation. In Figure 8, the author of the publication, a language and literature teacher, reports on an interesting aspect of digital communication among young people: the use of coloured heart emojis assigned to special friends. The text is sufficiently clear in its own right; the image serves to reinforce the message, but would not be necessary for the understanding of the message in its absence. In Figure 9, the message makes a direct appeal to readers about a frequent discursive aspect in digital communication, namely the use of a second language as a pragmatic attenuation mechanism. As we can see, the image accompanying the text reproduces a fragment of a WhatsApp conversation in which an example of this mechanism appears. This serves to complement and clarify the explanation. In Figure 10, the image is a GIF, which serves to reinforce the text and generate a humorous effect. The author of the publication, a university professor,

has employed a linguistic cliché that is pervasive in social networks and beyond. The phrase "to open a melon" (it comes from the Spanish "abrir un melón" and the equivalent in English is "to open a can of worms") (Ballesteros, 2022) is used to describe the act of eating a melon. In the GIF, a dog can be observed engaging in the act of consuming a melon, a food item that is somewhat unconventional within the context of a dog's diet.

Figure 11 illustrates the author's (a teacher and writer) sentiments regarding the joy derived from savouring a hotel breakfast buffet. In this instance, the photograph serves to reinforce the verbal element, establishing a connection with the readers who have experienced a similar sensation in a comparable situation.

Figure 8. Example of an image that reinforces understanding of the text
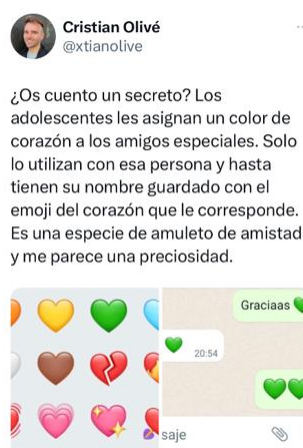
Source: X, @xtianolive.

Figure 9. Example of an image that reinforces understanding of the text

Source: X, @AlexvonKarma.

Figure 10. Example of an image that reinforces understanding of the text

Source: X, @m_horno.

Figure 11. Example of an image that reinforces understanding of the text

Source: X, @de_infantil.

The third type of semiotic format identified corresponds to that in which the visual resource (photograph, video, emoji, etc.) replaces the text, i.e. it appears in its place, achieving functional prominence in the publication. This is typically observed when an emoji is employed in lieu of the word or expression it represents or iconises (Vela Delfa & Cantamutto, 2021). In such instances, emojis frequently serve a playful function, offering readers a more creative and attractive narrative mode. Figure 12 illustrates the manner in which emojis of country flags are positioned in lieu of country names. The intention of the publication, created by a teacher, is to critique the approach of Spanish parents when teachers reprimand their children for certain behaviours, in comparison to the attitudes of parents from other European countries. In Figure 13, the author, a teacher and pedagogical director at a school, presents a publication constructed with emojis that replace linguistic expressions (school, world, applause, steps, "wink of complicity", hug). This is presented in the purest style of children's stories with pictograms[3].

Figure 12. Example of images (emojis) instead of text

Source: X, @MaestritaM.

Figure 13. Example of images (emojis) in place of text

Source: X, @llume38.

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[3] Pictograms are visual resources consisting of drawings, usually simple, that represent referents, instead of using verbal elements. They are very common in children's literature and introductory reading materials.

Figure 14 provides an illustrative example of a publication in which the author, a literary translator, employs two of the emojis of gestures, commonly referred to as "smileys". These are specifically 😐 in place of an expression such as "I feel apathetic, neutral or sceptical", and 😊 in place of "I feel happy". It can be observed that smileys remain the most prevalent emojis in digital interactions, both within social networks and instant messaging applications (Méndez Santos & Vela Delfa, 2023).

Figure 14. Example of images (emojis) in place of text

Source: X, Juan_Naranjo.

In relation to this type of semiotic structure in which the image is in place of the text, it is notable that emojis are used alone in reactive utterances, that is, in responses to publications, in a relatively common manner in X. Moreover, studies have demonstrated that the presence of emojis in the initial post is associated with a higher likelihood of reactive interventions containing emojis (Vela Delfa & Cantamutto, 2021). This is exemplified in figures 15 and 16, where the latter is the response.

Figure 15. Example of the use of emojis without text

Source: X, @larotesmeyer.

Figure 16. Example of the use of emojis without text

Source: X, @Nando_Lopez_ and @imgende.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this research, which focused on the identification of semiotic structures in X publications, demonstrate that the evolution of multimodal discourse involving non-verbal and verbal codes in social networks has been transforming the communicative dynamics and interactions between users and followers. Network publications provide a context conducive to the transmission and sharing of information and content among members of the educational community, representing a novel form of informal learning. This paper analyses publications from this ecosystem, which combine visual (photographs, GIFs, videos, etc.) and verbal (lexical units and propositions) symbolic elements. The aim is to identify, describe and exemplify some of the most widespread semiotic structures or formats in the social network X.

According to the function of the images in the publications analysed, three basic types have been identified: 1) A semiotic format in which the image is essential to the comprehension of the text. 2) A semiotics format in which the image is not a necessary component for the comprehension of the message, but rather serves to complement or reinforce it. 3) A semiotics format in which the image is employed in lieu of the text, effectively replacing it. The presence of images in the three types of structures identified serves to validate the initial hypothesis that in multimodal texts on social networks in general, and on X in particular, there is a clear and growing tendency to use images in order to achieve more attractive and impactful publications.

The most numerous among the samples analysed are multimodal structures whose images are necessary to understand the message of the publications. This is in accordance with the communicative trend of giving prominence to visual elements, as evidenced in previous works such as López-Meri et al., 2017; Gallardo-Paúls et al., 2018; Oleaque Moreno, 2023; or López-Marcos & Vicente-Fernández, 2023; among others. The use of meaningful images in posts is an effective method of increasing the engagement of followers. Moreover, in the educational community in X, there is a prevalent use of humour, generated by the combination of the visual and the verbal, as a communicative mechanism of attraction towards greater interactivity in publications. In his study on multimodal humorous text on Twitter, Simarro Vázquez (2020) observed that in the past, the sole option for including a joke on this social network was to include a verbal joke in the publication, without any accompanying image. Nevertheless, he notes that in recent years there has been a tendency to include a variety of graphic resources in publications, not only the verbal element. This trend is corroborated by the results of the corpus analysed.

The study has revealed that the combination of visual and verbal resources generates multimodal formats that create communicative trends in X. Among the visual elements, emojis, GIFs, photographs, videos, etc. are used, while the verbal is usually manifested in the form of linguistic clichés that go viral on other social networks and even in general language, such as "se vienen cositas" ("little things are coming") or "abrir un melón" ("to open a can of worms"). Multimodal discourse represents a current object of study in which the convergence of visual and verbal approaches opens the way for an interdisciplinary approach, as exemplified by the exploratory and descriptive research conducted here.

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