

Online language: A study on referencing in memes on social media

Linguagem online: Um estudo de referenciação em memes na mídia social

Anderson Vitor dos Santos MENDES*
Universidade Federal de Lavras (UFLA)

Patricia Vasconcelos ALMEIDA**
Universidade Federal de Lavras (UFLA)

ABSTRACT: The recent technological revolution has provided new forms for communication between people and has given rise to an interactive and dynamic language called online language. Accordingly, this study investigates the use of referents in the multimodal texts that are present in online language. Its objective is to understand how people use referencing in multimodal texts to describe the referential linguistic aspects that are characteristic of the digital meme genre. Barton and Lee (2015), Cavalcante (2019), Cortez e Muniz da Silva (2020), Dudeney, Hockly and Pegrum (2016) and Ribeiro (2018) are used in the construction of the theoretical framework. Methodologically, this article offers a descriptive analysis of two “memes in Brazilian Portuguese” that have circulated on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results point to the relevant role of linguistic analysis and description in the production and reading of texts that circulate in cyberspace, which allows understanding the language in use in online environments.

KEYWORDS: Online language, Digital literacy, Multimodality, Referencing.

RESUMO: A recente revolução tecnológica proporcionou novas formas de comunicação entre as pessoas e deu origem a uma linguagem interativa e dinâmica chamada linguagem online.

* Mestre em Letras, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, DEL/FAELCH/UFLA, Lavras, Minas Gerais. E-mail: andersonvsmendes@hotmail.com

** Doutora em Linguística Aplicada pela UNICAMP/IEL. Professora do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, DEL/FAELCH/UFLA, Lavras, Minas Gerais. E-mail: almeidaufila@gmail.com

Consequentemente, este estudo investiga a utilização de referências nos textos multimodais que estão presentes na linguagem online. O seu objetivo é compreender como as pessoas utilizam referências em textos multimodais para descrever os aspectos linguísticos referenciais que são característicos do gênero meme digital. Barton e Lee (2015), Cavalcante (2019), Cortez e Muniz da Silva (2020), Dudeney, Hockly e Pegrum (2016) e Ribeiro (2018) são utilizados na construção do quadro teórico. Metodologicamente, este artigo oferece uma análise descritiva de dois "memes em português brasileiro" que circularam nas redes sociais durante a pandemia da COVID-19. Os resultados apontam para o papel relevante da análise e descrição linguística na produção e leitura de textos que circulam no ciberespaço, o que permite compreender a língua em uso em ambientes online.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Linguagem online. Letramento digital. Multimodalidade. Referenciação.

Initial considerations

The technological revolution in recent decades has fostered a contemporary change in the behavior and life of humanity, providing new forms of communication between people. Thus, it is possible to observe in everyday practices of work and education, especially in the area of computer-mediated learning (Computer Assisted Language Learning—CALL), how digital technologies influence and transform scenarios and contexts because they are part of and/or build the experiences lived by people.

In addition, digital technologies have been transforming academic practices and providing opportunities for the emergence of an interactive and dynamic language, so-called online language, not only in the daily lives of people but also in the academic area in which they are inserted, as Linguistics. In the construction of online language, people realize the possibility of associating semiotic resources in different ways (in this case, by using digital technological resources) and create and establish new relationships between language and other modes of meaning construction. In other words, online, people combine images and other visual resources with the written word (BRATON and LEE, 2015) to communicate inside and outside the online environment.

Furthermore, as the choices made by the users of digital technologies impact all aspects of contemporary life, including language and communicative practices, it is

possible to perceive a movement, or perhaps a tendency, of moving media from patina to screen, underscoring the growing need to understand communicative processes in the digital realm. Within this context, defining online language as texts and practices, in this study, we investigate the use of referents in multimodal texts that are present in online language by following functionalist theory, which concerns the referencing process.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to understand how people use the process of referencing in multimodal texts such as Brazilian *cartoon* memes to describe the referential linguistic aspects that are characteristic of the static meme digital genre. Regarding our aforementioned objective, this study and the feasibility of writing this article are based on the understanding that language changes when one goes from offline to online. Accordingly, there is a need for studies and research that engage in the analysis and linguistic description of texts that move within the online environment. This academic view of online language can provide a better understanding of the interaction of users within this digital space, which has intrigued scholars from all areas in recent years.

Since this article is a part of a larger investigative work, the methodology and/or design of the research it consists, first, of conducting a theoretical investigation that addresses issues related to online language, digital literacy, multimodality, and referencing. Barton and Lee (2015), Dudeney, Hockly and Pegrum (2016), Mondada and Dubois (2003), Neves (2006), and Ribeiro (2018), among others, are used in the construction of our theoretical framework.

Second, a search for and selection of static memes on social networks regarding the COVID-19 pandemic was conducted. Of our selections, only two are analyzed in this article due to issues regarding for the preparation of the article, such as the length of the text. Finally, we provide our analysis and description of the referential practices that are present in the two selected memes and then offer our final considerations.

1 Online language

According to Barton and Lee (2015), approaches to online language are translated in three fundamental directions that can be considered phases of linguistic development;

the authors demonstrate that those directions are connected and depend on each other to constitute themselves via the following sequence: i) structural characteristics of computer-mediated communication; ii) social variation in computer-mediated discourse; and iii) linguistic ideologies and metalanguage.

Considering these approaches, several researchers have aimed to understand the language of and in new media. To understand slightly more about each of them, it is worth mentioning that the first one (structural characteristics of computer-mediated communication) is dedicated to understanding the language strategies in online media as opposed to the existing modes of communication, i.e., to elucidate issues involving computer-mediated communication, which is basically textual, by taking into account speech characteristics.

The second direction (social variation in computer-mediated discourse) deals directly with the social factors and contexts of language use. In studies of this approach, there is constant concern with the dynamics of language and constant modification and appropriation of the forms of writing in the different modes of communication that are mediated by a computer. Finally, the third approach of the authors (linguistic ideologies and metalanguage) focuses on how the forms of communication are shaped by social ideologies and how these ideologies are discursively constructed in new media. It is concerned with understanding how language is represented both in the online environment and in society more broadly. (BARTON; LEE, 2015).

Regardless of the approach we use in our studies, technological inventions tend to modify any and all human practices over time. Since its discovery, fire has enabled the cooking of food and the manufacturing and use of various work and even communicational tools, such as smoke signals, for example—a way of communication. Hence, we can consider smoke signals a form of communication, i.e., a type of language.

Thus, in regard to language, the first major technological milestone was the development of writing, which reached its peak with the emergence of the press (RIBEIRO, 2018). After this, many other technologies were developed to boost linguistic practices—the telegraph, the radio, the telephone, the television—fostering the digital information and communication technologies (DICTs) that are currently used, which have been transformed into the "stable" concepts that language studies have adopted.

Researchers have therefore begun to identify the changes in the centrality of language that follow the moment when people's lives become directly influenced by online practices.

According to this perspective, DICTs have opened a dynamic and extremely interactive linguistic exchange environment that goes beyond the physical and tactile world and is configured in the online or cyberspace environment, as described by Lévy (2010) in the following citation:

Cyberspace (which I will also call “network”) is the new means of communication that emerges from the global interconnection of computers. The term specifies not only the material infrastructure of digital communication but also the oceanic universe of information that it houses, as well as the human beings that navigate and feed this universe (LÉVY, 2010, p. 17).

According to Lévy, this environment requires people to use another form of language that can promote fast and efficient communication within this new space of digital interaction. Thus, online language has been, as Barton and Lee (2015) present, integrated into the daily lives of people, mediating them in a process involving the reappropriation of their practices to facilitate their everyday activities they perform. This implies changes in traditional linguistic and communicative practices.

Lévy (2010) also defines cyberspace as an environment where a large part of the ongoing social practices of humanity take place. It is a space for human interaction that is permeated by the digital and already has enormous importance, especially at the social, political, economic, and scientific levels, and this importance certainly extends to other more specific areas, such as linguistics. For, as Barton and Lee (2015) point out, the online environment has become an increasingly essential place for communication and human thought. Now, what this new space will transform in sociocultural and political terms remains completely unknown, but, certainly, it has very relevant implications for studies on language:

Understanding writing in web environments involves connecting texts and practices, both of which are essential to understanding the production and use of online language. Without looking closely at the texts, we would not understand the concrete linguistic products of online activities; without observing the life and beliefs of users about what they do with their online

writing, we would not perceive the dynamics of online language. (BARTON; LEE, 2015, p. 222-223).

This citation shows that technology itself does not automatically modify the general and daily life of society. The process is gradual, and it integrates the broader social changes that have occurred over the years. That is, as different digital technologies are created to meet the demands of society, changes occur in daily practices and activities. As language also changes over time, these demands, according to the authors, of online language can be seen as the establishment of linguistic practices within the online environment through incredibly varied digital media and multimodal texts.

In addition, online language can present itself through communication modes that are very different from those of the classic and analog languages, because in a network, all messages become more interactive, gain greater plasticity, and have the possibility of immediate metamorphosis. Moreover, from the moment they access this online language, people can become at once the producer, broadcaster, receiver and editor of the most diverse digital texts in a short period of time.

Notably, the research on online language also seems to require a study on digital literacy and multimodality because this digital language consists of multimodal texts that require network users to develop a digital literacy that is appropriate for each social demand and context in which it is inserted, as we demonstrate in the following sections.

2 Digital literacy

As discussed in the previous section, the emergence of DICTs has changed many activities in postmodern life, especially the processes and practices of communication. This fact has led education and language scholars to reflect on and research the consequences of these new digital social practices and the uses of online language in society. Dudeney, Hockly and Pegrum suggest that “Like all communication technologies of the past, new digital tools will be associated with changes in language, literacy, education and society. In fact, they already are” (DUDENEY; HOCKLY; PEGRUM, 2016, p. 17).

In this context, the increase in the people's use of and permanence in digital and/or online environments has necessitated the learning of specific behaviors, skills and reasoning for the digital/online interaction between them. For this reason, a few decades ago, a discussion on a new type, paradigm or modality of literacy, digital literacy, emerged. Today, this discussion continues and tends to generate more questions, studies and research on the subject over time.

Thus, following Ribeiro (2018), digital literacy implies performing reading and writing practices that are different from the traditional forms of literacy. Being digitally literate presupposes changes in the modes of reading and writing both verbal and nonverbal codes and signs, such as images and drawings regarding the forms of reading and writing for printed materials, especially because the support on which digital texts are based is a screen, which is also digital.

Similarly, Rojo and Barbosa (2015, p. 116) discuss the subject in question:

That the world has changed a lot in recent decades, no one will disagree. And, not only because of the emergence of new information and communication technologies (henceforth, TDICs), albeit with their "lavish" assistance. New forms of being, of behaving, of speaking, of relating, of being informed, of learning are emerging. New times, new technologies, new texts, new languages. (ROJO; BARBOSA, 2015, p. 116).

Based on the findings of these authors, digital literacy comprises the different reading and writing practices in virtual environments that mix verbal and nonverbal texts. For example, to use an instant messaging application such as WhatsApp, a person who already knows how to use his or her smartphone's operating system needs to acquire digital literacy by first recognizing the application's icon to be able to download it and then creating an account. Then, he or she needs to familiarize himself or herself with the layout and interaction commands in this application, such as adding and deleting contacts, sending and deleting messages, seeing if the recipient saw a message, configuring the application so that people do not see if a message was visualized or not, creating and/or leaving a group, interpreting the language of emoticons and GIFs, and much more.

Specifically, no one is born knowing how to use WhatsApp, just as no one is born knowing how to speak, read or write. However, the moment we come in contact with this application and begin to use it, we create social reading and writing skills that are typical

of this digital environment; that is, we learn and acquire the literacy necessary to communicate via this medium.

Therefore, digital literacy reflects the social practices that are performed in the online environment where there are interactions with both written texts and images, icons, sounds and audio. Soares (2002, p. 152) defines literacy in a digital context as “a certain state or condition acquired by those who appropriate the new digital technology and practice reading and writing on the screen.”

Conversely, Barton and Lee (2015) discuss a form of digital literacy that enables the use of new languages in a digital environment according to the needs of each user, so-called virtualities. In turn, for Dudeney, Hockly and Pegrum (2016, p. 17), digital literacy comprises the “individual and social skills necessary to interpret, manage, share and create meaning effectively in the growing scope of digital communication channels.” Considering the issues specifically involving skill, the authors highlight the “ability to engage with digital technologies, something that requires a mastery of the digital literacy necessary to efficiently use these technologies, locate resources, communicate ideas and build collaborations that go beyond personal, social, economic, political and cultural limits” (DUDENEY; HOCKLY; PEGRUM, 2016, p. 17).

To understand these issues, the authors state that there are four foci of digital literacy, which have increasing complexity. The first focus is on language, the second one on information, the third on connections and the last one on (re)drawing. Each one addresses different types of literacy according to the activities/practices at their different levels and contexts. As the aim of this article is not to discuss digital literacy in its essence, it is sufficient to note only that when there is a focus of analysis in research, it is usually the first focus, which deals with language, and thus on printed and multimedia literacy.

The first focus, according to the authors, deals with the “ability to understand and create a variety of written texts, which at once encompasses the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and discourse characteristics and reading and writing skills” (DUDENEY; HOCKLY; PEGRUM; 2016, p. 23). The second one concerns the “ability to interpret and effectively create texts in multiple media, especially using images, sounds and videos” (p. 27).

Following these definitions, any type of literacy enhances the development of the critical and reflective capacity of an individual as a social being and opens the way for him or her to learn new types of literacy because language and literacy are interconnected; literacy is based on language and all literacy is connected with the communication of meaning, whether through language or the other often complementary channels that are found in the digital world. This shows that the practices of reading and writing in cyberspace bring with them new cognitive processes and new forms of knowledge; i.e., the intense use of DICTs has led to the emergence of online language, and with it, genres never before seen—the so-called digital genres that are constituted in their essence by multimodality, a concept we discuss below.

3 Multimodality in online language

According to Kresch, Coscarelli and Cani (2016, p. 82), multimodality is configured on the “recent diversity of semiotic resources to compose printed or digital texts,” and it “inserts itself in interactions through oral or written language.” From this perspective, the advent of DICTs, various technological devices that can be used in incredibly different contexts with numerous intentions, calls into question language scholars’ need to understand the complexity of how modal texts are organized.

Thus, it is worth mentioning the importance of works such as those by Gunter Kress, Theo van Leeuwen and Robert Hodge, the authors of the two books that are considered the initial milestones for multimodal research. In 1996, *Reading Image: The Grammar of Visual Design* by Kress and van Leeuwen was published, and in 1998, *Social Semiotics* was published by Hodge and Kress. The pioneering nature of these authors stems from their proposal to develop the main notions of systemic-functional linguistics, conceived by the British linguist M. Halliday, who initially focused on a linguistic system and other modes of communication and language.

However, the concept of a language that is composed of elements that are not words and/or texts is not fundamentally new or revolutionary. In fact, this concept is an evolution of the ideas and practices that ancient peoples used to leave records and tell stories, e.g., cave paintings. In recent decades, DICTs have enabled only alternative

modes of communication, which interfere in our lives instantaneously and more powerfully, changing our linguistic and social practices.

According to Barton and Lee (2015, p. 48), “Multimodal texts in many printed media are relatively static and created by a single author.” In the online environment, this characteristic changes because a text can be edited by several users, i.e., created collectively and thus constructed from various perspectives and social influences; that is, the verbal and nonverbal language of such a text is constituted through various influences.

Thus, when using *online* language, we create meanings from multimodal forms that are based on a set of digital linguistic resources that mix writing, speech, sounds, colors, music, static or moving images, angles etc. This is because the materiality of texts changed when they were moved from paper to screen following the emergence of cinema and television and even more so with the emergence of DICTs, specifically, the internet and its interactional role, which was never seen before its emergence. Hence, within the digital environment, texts acquired surprising multimodal resources, rendering multimodality an integral and fundamental part of the existence and use of texts in cyberspace.

Accordingly, when studying online language, it is also necessary to take into account how the virtualities of semiotic modes are perceived when they are combined in different ways. They can offer multiple meanings to different readers and, therefore, determine different possibilities of understanding and action (FERREIRA, ALMEIDA e DIAS, 2017). This issue becomes very clear when one has the object of analysis the process of referencing in multimodal texts such as Brazilian *cartoon* memes.

Thus, for decades, our history as digitally literate individuals has shown that we have been inserted into this multimodal universe whose linguistic system composes only one of the modes of the constitution of texts that materialize our social actions. A text is, therefore, an “event constructed in a multisystem orientation, that is, it involves both linguistic and nonlinguistic aspects in its processing” (MARCUSCHI, 2008, p. 80).

Thus, what renders a linguistic mode multimodal are its combinations with other modes to create meanings. That is, what makes a text multimodal are the choices and possibilities of arrangements that are established with the various modes of language that we make to create meanings in textual productions. Therefore, the various existing

languages provide material ways of understanding how people exchange meanings, regardless of the means by which they do so, e.g., a drawing, a sound, a speech, a gesture, an emoticon, a hashtag, or a meme.

In contemporary society, we find a diversity of rhetorical arrangements in writing, often nonstandard, which require new ways of reading and writing on a screen. This is a result of the influence of the rapid technological development of digital media. Given this scenario, it seems reasonable, not only among linguists, to suggest that our reading habits and processes are being reworked, since our references as readers are constantly expanding in an increasingly interactive and informational world.

In the next section, we offer a general discussion on the process of referencing in the multimodal texts that circulate in the online environment.

4 Referencing in online language

Questions about textual references have long been studied by textual linguistics. First, such research focused on the materiality of a text and the established relationship between its phrasal constituents based on formal theories, such as structuralism and generativism. In these theories, a reference was seen as a mere property or characteristic of a text and as a resource for describing the categories and rules of combinations among the elements of a text.

However, with the emergence of functionalist-based studies, a text came to be seen as a complex activity within communicative contexts and no longer as something finished in itself. Thus, for the functionalist linguist, a reference is linked to the interaction and sharing of knowledge between people in different communicative contexts based on the inferential processes that interlocutors perform in texts to produce meaning via their worldview.

The term referencing came into vogue following the research of Mondada and Dubois (2003), who have questioned the theoretical model that considers words an exact reproduction of the world, a reflection of the sign and its signifier in the mirror. For them, the exact opposite happens. Instead of stability between words and their portrayed object,

many referential instabilities may appear in a text that vary according to the act of enunciation that involves the context and the discursive interpersonal relationships.

Corroborating Mondada and Dubois (2003), Neves (2006) presents a different definition of referencing—a process that takes place in discourse and not only as a representation of the world. In addition, so that we can better understand this difference, the authors make the following distinction:

- Reference = language as a mirror of the world.
- Referencing = language in use, world constructed by discourse.

According to Neves (2006),

The capture of a reference involves the discursive universe, born from a negotiation between the interlocutors to establish the entities that should exist in it, and an important component of this process is the interaction that the speaker uses to refer to some individual (NEVES, 2006, p. 80).

Through this theoretical bias, a referent is not always given but rather is constructed in an interaction. Therefore, the choice is to call this process referencing to emphasize its procedural character. In the view of Mondada and Dubois (2003) and Neves (2006), enunciative context creates referential categories, which are molded and transformed in the progression of a text and then resumed and reclassified during the process of textual production, constructing the so-called object of discourse.

For example, a post on social media with the words “Use a mask!” in 2019 would have had a completely different meaning than in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, this post could be understood, for example, as “will there be a fantasy party?” or “this person is philosophizing and saying that we should hide our true self,” or even, if it was a post by a beautician, “Do these masks truly rejuvenate...?” In 2020 and early 2021, however, this post would be easily interpreted as a request that people continue wearing a mask when traveling through public places. Hence, the interpretation of the discourse object in this post becomes completely different both after 2020 and in the same space/time/event due to different contexts, as in the case of the beautician. Therefore, different reference categories occur.

According to Cavalcante (2012),

The referencing process can be understood as the set of dynamic, sociocognitively motivated operations performed by subjects as a discourse develops in order to elaborate their lived and perceived experiences from the shared construction of the discourse objects that will ensure the construction of meanings. (CAVALCANTE, 2012, p. 113).

In terms of the object of analysis of this article, the static digital meme genre, this is the referencing issue that interests. Functionalism works with the term referencing because it suggests that the relationships between a text and its interlocutors extend beyond the identifying act of a term in the world to the process of the interaction and intention of these interlocutors in a discourse.

In this context, Guimarães (2020) proposes a reflection about the research referencing in Brazil, which is consolidated as a state of the art in constant branching and in rapid development. With the appearance of linguistic phenomena arising from online language, for example meme, the referencing process “takes place in the linguistic materiality, even if the first mention has been made by other semiosis or in other contexts” (GUIMARÃES, 2020, p.17).

Corroborating with Guimarães’ ideas, Cortez e Muniz da Silva (2020) state that

In recent decades, with the popularization of the internet and especially the sites/tools of social networks, texts with new and diverse configurations have emerged. Some of them, commonly named memes, have aroused interest in communication researchers and especially language scholars, concerned with interactions, textual production and the construction of meaning in these spaces. (CORTEZ; MUNIZ DA SILVA, 2020, p. 388).

Also in this context, for Cavalcante e Oliveira (2019, p. 17), “it is necessary to think of the meme not as a text only, but as a set of texts (in different discursive genres) that has as its origin a source text, the one that initiates the viralization”, and it is this source text (verbal or imagetic) that, through intertextuality, produces the phenomenon of referencing in the meme. Knowing this, it is important to reflect that the linguistic construction of the meme genre uses referential elements, integrating them with image resources that compose meaning and express contexts of enunciation with the digital environment.

In this sense, the notion of reference in memes, addressed in our work, is not the traditionally known one, linked only to the fact that language refers the world, but an

activity of sociocognitive and functionalist nature, used by social actors who construct objects of discourse, activating, deactivating and reactivating in operations that are internally related to the knowledge shared among the participants of the linguistic event. According to Cortez and Muniz da Silva (2020), referencing distances itself from a referentialist and vericonditional view of language, which understands it only as a designations and denotation tool of world objects arranged in an objective/empirical reality.

However, to discuss the conceptions of referencing more deeply, we would have to elaborate on several related concepts, such as discursive object, referential type (generic or individual), labeling, nominalization, coreferencing, associative anaphor, and inferencing. However, we have focused our analysis on the referential concepts of discourse object and associative anaphor, which we more clearly define in the following analytical descriptions.

5 Analysis of selected memes

As mentioned above, our object of study is the multimodal static meme genre; it encompasses the most diverse themes and ideas in its constitution, ranging from the comical to severe political and social criticism. Memes are characterized by the repetition of a basic formal model, manifested through the mutuality of images, phrases, hashtags, photos, captions, comics, etc. According to Horta (2015), the majority of memes are produced in an amateur way by web users without much technical resources. However, they have the propensity to include within their digital culture the marks of the thoughts and positions shared by people who have common tastes and themes. These include, for example, professions, popular films, and especially lived situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which began at the beginning of 2020 and to which the memes we have selected refer.

In the two selected images, only by following the research that we have discussed can we reveal the relationships that can be established between a text and its interlocutors via the process of intention, interaction and interpretation among the subjects involved (author and reader).

The two images portray how Brazilian Portuguese users interact, within the online environment, with the production and circulation of the digital static meme genre as a starting point. Following the definition of online language of Barton and Lee (2015), mentioned above, we demonstrate that in the two images there is an intention to integrate online language into the daily life of people, to mediate them via a process of the reappropriation of their daily practices.

In image 1, presented below, in the first box, there is an allusion to the process of life and social behavior of people when they leave the house for any daily activity. In such moments prior to the pandemic, they were usually concerned with their keys (house and/or car), as well as their documents and money (wallet). With the advent of mobile telephones, human beings began to worry about taking care of themselves by not forgetting their cell phone at home. On the second box, the character returns to the house because he has forgotten a mask, a basic and important item to use when someone gets out of home.

In other words, there is an evident reference to the pandemic context that everyone is experiencing. Following this line of interpretive reasoning, there is an online language reflecting not only a social behavior but also the language in use.

Image 1



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fpt.dopl3r.com%2Fmemes%2Fengra%C3%A7ado%2Fgabreu-f-atgabreu-chave-ok-celular-ok-pqp-a-mascara-carteira-ok%2F992584>

Translation of verbal elements in images from figure 1: *chaves ok* = Keys ok; *celular ok* = cell phone ok; *carteira ok* = wallet ok; *pqp a mascara* = omg the mask.

In linguistic terms, our analysis addresses such a text, a “meme,” where referencing manifests itself via an exophoric element (outside the text), the term “mask,” which points to another element outside the text, in this case, to the quarantine situation experienced by people due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have, therefore, an indirect associative anaphor that is performed by the element given within the text through labeling “mask” is constituted as an anaphoric phrase that refers to the fact that people can only circulate in public environments by using masks during the pandemic.

In addition, observing the text again only in its first part, we can find a meaningful relationship between the noun phrases “key,” “cell phone,” and “wallet,” which refer to the act of leaving the house to go somewhere, and the image reaffirms this relationship. We have, in this case, an instance of endophoric meaning within the text between the aforementioned syntagmas and the image of the little mouse (Winslow T. Oodfellow is the deuteragonist and occasionally an antagonist of American animated television *CatDog*) exiting through the doorway. Thus, the meaning between the object of discourse, “leaving home,” is evocated by “keys ok... cell phone ok... wallet ok...” and the image of the character exiting the house.

By extrapolating the analysis of referencing and considering the theoretical issues presented above that involve online language, digital literacy and multimodality, by analyzing Figure 1, it is possible to produce hypotheses that connect the three areas of knowledge. It is clear that to understand the implicit message in the image, there is a multimodal relationship between language and image that determines the need for the development of a particular digital literacy. Furthermore, the fact that the image is divided into two sides offers it a movement that can be understood via the precepts of the second approach to online language mentioned by Barton and Lee (2015), which concerns understanding language by considering the contextual and social factors that contribute to a linguistic characterization.

Shifting to our analysis of image 2, we recall the same larger background context, the pandemic, but with a character who is already known in the media, Lisa Simpson, an extremely intelligent and insightful girl. Lisa Simpson is a fictional character in the

animated television series *The Simpsons*. She is the middle child and most accomplished of the Simpson family. The fans of the character claim that she expresses spirituality and a commitment to noble causes; therefore, she represents a new way of illustrating philosophy and ethical and moral debates. The second selected meme thus portrays the character, Lisa Simpson, who is also considered an intellectual and advocate of science, giving a lecture on the coronavirus.

Image 2



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/memedalisa>

The following sentence appears on the projection screen in Image 2: “Coronavirus will not last long because it was made in China...” To trigger the intended object of discourse in this meme, the reader needs to perform a process of shared knowledge / common ground about China to arrive at the sense that because the coronavirus is “made in China,” it should not last long – the products that are manufactured in the same country have the reputation of being nondurable, at least in the Brazilian context, because they are seen as having low quality. Once again, the final interpretation of the text occurs via an exophoric element, the prejudice against Chinese products because the referent is not given within the text but outside it through inferences.

However, the meaning interpretation of that meme also depends on knowing Lisa Simpson, the protagonist in a cartoon who has determined and unique characteristics and on the relevant paradigm in the Brazilian context, i.e., the products manufactured in China do not last long. Furthermore, if we consider a Chinese person reading this meme, perhaps he or she would not understand the text, or perhaps he or she reading it again would cause

the term “China” to be classified in a different way and thus the humor in the text would change its meaning and might become offensive.

It is, then, clear how relevant it is to understand the use of referents in the multimodal texts that are present in online language. We have performed a linguistic analysis of this illustration and described the relevant texts circulating in cyberspace to show how language is used within the online environment. Again, there is a connection between online language, digital literacy and multimodality because referencing is determined in the scope of online language that is shown in the second image. In addition, through an author’s choices to determine this online language, he or she creates meaning from the multimodal forms (images, colors, writing). This sense can only be perceived when a reader has already developed a digital literacy that allows him or her to control the changes in how he or she reads the verbal and nonverbal codes and signals that are inserted in these digital reading practices.

Moreover, taking into account the precepts of multimedia literacy, all elements of the image are notably combined into a single communicative act, and thus their roles need to be analyzed together. In other words, multimedia messages, which integrate texts and images, must suit a variety of communicative purposes to reach their target audience.

Final considerations

In this article, we have sought to understand how the reference process occurs in multimodal texts within the online environment, specifically, in static memes. For this, we had to construct a theoretical framework that could explain the relationships between the concepts of online language, digital literacy, multimodality and referencing to perform our linguistic analysis and provide the description that we initially proposed.

Based on the two texts analyzed, we noticed that the construction of the referents happened in a non-linear way, since the memes were not restricted to a specific referential expression, but by the constitution of several elements, verbal and imagetic, besides the inferences made by the reader.

Accordingly, we have found that the extant theories facilitate analyzing the production and reading of the digital static meme genre as a multimodal text and, above

all, achieving our goal—to understand how people use referencing in multimodal texts to describe the referential linguistic aspects that are characteristic of the digital meme genre.

Following our descriptive analysis of two memes that circulated in the media during the pandemic, it is clear that the scope of our analysis, although lacking a greater quantity of more suited data for such analysis, has allowed us to determine how the multimodal practices present in online language reflect the language in use and to describe the referential linguistic aspects that are characteristic of the digital meme genre.

Our final results point to the relevant role of linguistic analysis and description in the texts that circulate in cyberspace, which allows exploring the language in use in online environments and opens space for new research in the very near future. According to Barton and Lee (2015, p. 19), studies in the field of online language are already beginning to envision a fourth approach/phase “in which the traditional concepts of linguistics are discarded in favor of new frameworks in which concepts such as superdiversity and supermobility reveal a new understanding of online language and contemporary changes.” Accordingly, we expect that research on online language will extrapolate structural and linguistic issues, broadening the horizons for conducting additional investigative studies that extend to a cultural and social dimension that relates to the context in which language—the focus of the research—is inserted and constituted.

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