

Discursive practices in digital media: An introduction to the special issue

Editorial

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It is no longer news that technological advancements and the growing interdependence between our material and virtual lives have enabled new interactive and compositional possibilities that have decisively changed the ways we communicate with each other, defend and contest points of view, share our experiences and narrate events, as well as show who we are (or want to be).

It is a unique scenario in which different modalities, such as language, sound, image, video, and gesture, can be systematically combined, in many possible ways, through the use of smartphones, tablets or computers (Bateman et al. 2017). It is, thus, a social and historical context that affords the development of new ways of representing, (inter)acting and being (Fairclough 2003), which, in turn, provide symbolic resources for diversifying how we live, how we understand the world and how we change our environment. At the same time, it is a scenario in which the struggle for controlling these possibilities is even harsher, since knowledge about how we think and act is a fundamental source of economic and political power, and reducing diversity through discursive strategies that generate controlled fragmentation and ideological bubbles is an important means for consolidating hegemonies.

This special (and bilingual) issue of *Linguistic Frontiers* is primarily devoted to publishing the latest results of research on discursive practices in digital media and, secondarily, to publishing relevant reflections in the field of semiotics and linguistics. Thus, it is an issue that aims to contribute to our understanding of the meaning-making processes that characterize contemporary digital discourse practices through different theoretical and methodological instruments. Moreover, most of its

papers stem from presentations held at the 12th Meeting of Graduate Students in Discourse Studies¹, hosted by the University of São Paulo (USP) in October 2021. The event gathered around 80 researchers, and its plenary talks all revolved around digital discourse as it is conceptualized by different fields, such as Applied Linguistics, Semiotics, Discourse Studies, Platform Studies, and Journalism, among others. This issue presents, then, a snapshot of some of the discussions developed during the event.

The first paper of this special issue, “*Dualismo digital no ativismo contemporâneo: uma abordagem discursiva da #elenão*”, authored by Julia Lourenço Costa, debates how the hashtag #elenão, which expresses an attitude of rejection towards the current Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, transitioned from online to offline spaces, thus becoming a powerful resource of activism. Drawing on the Digital Discourse Analysis framework (Paveau 2021), hashtags are understood as technodiscursive elements that not only condense complex political and social themes, but also inscribe subjects in the frontier between digital and urban spaces.

Cândida Almeida, in *O continuum da vida nos perfis virtuais póstumos do Facebook*, employs the Peircean (1994) framework to discuss the semiotic implications and the communicative interactions held in memorialized Facebook profiles. The author frames the social network’s symbolic and systemic organization structure as a meaningful factor for the constitution of a continuity between our online and offline identities, which is further extended in virtual memoirs, as the person is simultaneously “alive” in its profile, being both a referent and an addressee of its friends, as well as “dead” in its physical-corporeal life.

¹ In Portuguese, XII Encontro de Pós-Graduandos em Estudos Discursivos da USP (EPED-USP). Website: <https://eped.ffch.usp.br/>.

Through a review of the literature and interesting insights, Verónica González-List, in her article *There is a group of political tweeters that nobody is studying: the detached*, exhorts researchers to pay attention to the political interaction made by what might be the biggest collective on Twitter. These users are currently invisible because they are not inscribed around political parties or hashtags. The “detached” might not become influencers, their tweets do not become a trend and their interactions do not exceed a certain number; yet they might be an important network of background interaction for what happens in Twitter’s political arena.

In a fairly original contribution, Theodoro Casalotti Farhat addresses the issue of context collapse through a systemic-functional perspective on language (Halliday, Matthiessen 2014). The author argues, based on Hasan’s (2009, 2014, 2020) conception of context, that context collapse does not encompass all variables of a contextual configuration (Field, Tenor, and Mode); rather, it involves the following nuclear features: “one-way digital contact in Mode, the selection of [addressee: absent: category] in the system of textual roles and a generalized vagueness in the system of social roles”. Afterwards, Farhat also discusses two main kinds of strategies social actors deploy to circumvent context collapse: enactment-based and activation-based strategies.

Paulo Roberto Gonçalves-Segundo, in *Fake news, moral panic, and polarization in Brazil: A critical discursive approach*, combines insights from Media Studies, Sociology and Political Science (Wardle, Derakhshan 2018; Bakir, McStay 2017; Critcher 2017, among others) with a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective on meaning making (Fairclough 2003) to discuss the motivations and effects of the production, distribution and interpretation of fake news stories which draw on moral panics in contemporary Brazilian society. The author pays particular attention to fake news stories that (re)produce a conservative stance towards children’s development of gender and sexual orientation identities. Gonçalves-Segundo argues that this kind of fake news lies in the tension between the absurd and the evident, thus eliciting different responses from both the endogroup and the exogroup. For the neoconservative endogroup, who may read the text as evident, the consumption and distribution of the story becomes a resource for fostering social cohesion and inducing affective responses that intensify the dichotomization of identities. For the progressive exogroup, who may read the text as absurd, it acts as a means of both drawing antagonism towards their political agenda and diverting public attention and public debate to topics that keep the polarization alive.

In the article *Análise do conceito de desinformação a partir da semiótica de Peirce*, Vinicius Romanini and his students Márcia Ohlson and Leonardo Ripoll aim at an analysis of the concept of disinformation from a Peircean semiotic perspective. They briefly review the traditional scientific concept of information that emerged in the cybernetic tradition and then argue that

the semiotic/pragmatic perspective is much richer and useful to understand contemporaneous phenomena such as fake news and post-truth. They suggest that disinformation can be described in three complementary dimensions: the denotative and/or connotative manipulation of a symbol, the disarrangement between the iconic, indexical and symbolic characteristics of a sign, and, finally, the result of fixating beliefs by Peirce’s three non-scientific methods: a priori, tenacity and authority.

In *Queering Bolsonaro’s mediatic discourse: Strengthening Brazilian LGBTQIA+ communities through language education*, Daniel de Mello Ferraz and Lucas Cardoso Miquelon draw on Discourse Studies and Queer Theory “to problematize some media discourse produced by [Brazilian president] Bolsonaro and to investigate how such discourse has influenced the lives and education of the participants in our research (pre-service teachers)”. The authors conclude that language education for sexual and gender diversity should comprise: (i) a conceptualization beyond its own categories, taking as a starting point the notion of intersectionality, since there are contradictions inherent to the relations between gender, sexuality, race, class, among others, that need to be addressed in their complexity; and (ii) a stance of self-critique and dialogue, since language educators should remain attentive to the power structure they are embedded in, thinking critically about their environment, and thinking with others, as a collective endeavor, to achieve transformation.

Finally, based on Lotman’s notion of semiotic boundary space and new studies on Decolonial intercultural relationships, Irene Machado, in her original and inspiring article *Semiotic Boundary Spaces: An Exercise in Decolonial Aesthesis*, analyzes the discourses expressed between Jaider Esbell’s Brazilian artistic sculptures and the monuments of the urban space, focusing on controversial discursive relationships, such as intelligibility and unintelligibility. She explains that, from a semiotic perspective, aesthesis implies instances that do not always act in the same direction and concludes that the artistic practices now claimed as *poiesis* do not refer to an established Aesthetics, but to the Aesthesis that emerges when forces of the imaginary, of sensitivity and the senses are joined with actions that fight for the transposition of limits.

We wish you an excellent reading!

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