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Multimodal Digital Discourse and Transformations in Communicative Practice: A Socio-Semiotic Pragmatic Approach to Meaning-Making and Interaction in Digital Space

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Abstract

Over recent decades, communicative practice has undergone profound transformations associated with the rapid expansion of digital media and the increasing reliance of individuals and groups on online platforms for the production, circulation, and interpretation of discourse. Communication in digital environments is no longer based primarily on written or spoken verbal language; rather, it is shaped through the interaction of a range of diverse semiotic resources, including language, image, sound, video, emojis, visual formatting, hyperlinks, and interactive elements. Accordingly, digital discourse is no longer merely the transfer of traditional text to an electronic medium; it has become a communicative practice with distinctive structural, pragmatic, and semiotic characteristics. This study aims to develop an integrated theoretical approach to understanding multimodal digital discourse and analysing the transformations it has brought about in communicative practice by bringing together a social-semiotic perspective on multimodality and a pragmatic perspective that focuses on context, intention, interaction, and the construction of stance and meaning. The study proceeds from the premise that meaning in digital discourse is not produced by language alone, but emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources and through the dynamic relationship among the producer, recipient, context, and digital medium. The study concludes that digital discourse reorganises the relationship between discourse producers and recipients and transforms recipients from passive positions of reception into participation in meaning-making, recirculation, and recontextualisation. It also demonstrates that multimodality, interactivity, immediacy, reproducibility, and circulation constitute essential components of



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digital communicative practice, and that understanding such discourse requires moving beyond monomodal linguistic analysis towards an approach that takes into account the relationships among different semiotic modes, the pragmatic functions they perform, and the social and cultural contexts that confer semantic and communicative value upon them.

Keywords: digital discourse, multimodality, pragmatics, social semiotics, meaning-making, digital interaction, communicative practice.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the digital environment has become a central space for various forms of human communication, as a substantial proportion of everyday, academic, media, cultural, and social interaction has shifted to digital platforms characterised by speed, interactivity, and multiple channels of expression. Communication is no longer carried out through verbal messages alone; rather, it increasingly relies on complex systems comprising language, image, sound, movement, symbols, icons, video, visual formatting, hyperlinks, and interactive media. This means that the study of contemporary discourse can no longer rely exclusively on a model that regards written language as the sole centre of meaning-making.

Digital transformation has contributed to reshaping the very concept of text. A digital text may consist of words and a still or moving image, and it may incorporate an audio or video clip, or include emojis, hyperlinks, comments, shares, likes, and other resources that contribute to meaning-making and guide interpretation. From this perspective, digital communication constitutes a complex semiotic and pragmatic event within which multiple modes of expression interact. Kress (2010) argues that contemporary communication extends beyond language to encompass a range of modes and resources that participate in meaning-making, making multimodality a fundamental approach to understanding modern communication.

The significance of this transformation lies not only in the multiplicity of resources used in discourse, but also in the change it has brought about in the nature of the relationship between participants in the communicative process. In traditional models, it was possible, to a relative degree, to distinguish between a producer of a message and its recipient. In digital environments, however, recipients have become capable of commenting, participating, reposting, modifying, and repurposing content, and even producing new discourse on the basis of previous discourse. Digital communication is therefore characterised by a high degree of reciprocity and interactivity, making it sometimes difficult to identify a definitive point at which discourse production ends or to attribute authorship to a single individual.

The pragmatic dimension adds to this perspective the importance of context, intention, and the interactional situation. The meaning produced by a particular linguistic utterance

cannot be separated from the circumstances in which it occurs, just as a single image or emoji may perform different pragmatic functions depending on the relationship between interlocutors and the social and cultural context of the communicative practice. Yus (2011) points out that online communication requires attention to intention, interpretation, and context, as well as to the characteristics that the electronic medium imposes on the communicative process.

Against this background, the present study addresses the following central question: How does multimodal digital discourse contribute to reshaping communicative practice from a pragmatic and social-semiotic perspective?

This central question gives rise to the following sub-questions:

1. What is meant by multimodal digital discourse, and what are its principal theoretical foundations?
2. How do linguistic and non-linguistic resources interact in the production of digital meaning?
3. What pragmatic functions are performed by multimodal resources?
4. How has the digital environment reshaped the relationship between discourse producers and recipients?
5. What transformations have occurred in the nature of communicative practice in digital space?

The study adopts a theoretical and analytical approach based on the synthesis of several concepts and approaches related to digital discourse, pragmatics, social semiotics, and multimodality. It does not claim to propose an independent theory; rather, it seeks to construct an integrated analytical framework that facilitates an understanding of the relationship among semiotic resources, context, interaction, and meaning-making.

2. Digital Discourse between Multimodality and Pragmatics

The concept of discourse has become broader in contemporary studies than the concept of text understood as a sequence of linguistic units. Discourse refers not only to what is said or written, but also to the social practice through which meaning is produced within a particular context. When discourse moves into the digital environment, different levels of expression and interaction intersect within it, making digital discourse a complex phenomenon that extends beyond the boundaries of language.

The concept of multimodality is central to this transformation. Multimodality refers to the use of multiple modes of resources in constructing a communicative message, such as language, image, sound, movement, visual design, gestures, and others. It does not merely mean the combination of these resources within a single message; rather, it refers to the functional relationships that arise among them and to the ways in which each

resource contributes to meaning-making. Kress (2010) offers a social-semiotic perspective according to which different modes are not merely neutral channels, but resources with meaning-making potentials that are shaped within society and culture.

In the same context, Jewitt (2014) provides a broad methodological framework for analysing multimodal communication, viewing multimodality as an approach to the study of representation, communication, and interaction through image, sound, music, gesture, space, and other resources.

Accordingly, digital discourse should not be studied as linguistic discourse supplemented by certain visual elements, because such a conception retains language at the centre of analysis and treats other resources as secondary elements. A more accurate approach is to view digital discourse as a multimodal configuration in which different resources share the functions of meaning-making.

In a digital post, for example, a sentence may perform the function of stating a particular position, while an image may provide support, clarification, or suggestion, and an emoji may indicate an emotional stance, mitigate the force of an utterance, or transform it into a humorous or ironic formulation. The arrangement of the elements within the post itself may also perform a semantic function that cannot be inferred from language alone.

This is where the importance of the pragmatic approach becomes apparent. Pragmatics focuses on how language and communicative resources are used in context, the relationship between literal meaning and intended meaning, speech acts, stances, presuppositions, and contextual cues. When these elements move into the digital environment, non-linguistic resources become part of the construction of the communicative act itself.

An emoji, for example, may modify the pragmatic force of a written utterance. A humorous image may transform the meaning of an utterance that appears serious at the linguistic level into an ironic stance. A video may also add a vocal or kinetic layer to speech that changes how the message is interpreted.

Liang's (2024) study shows that digital interaction can employ emojis and other non-verbal resources to express affective stances and construct agreement and disagreement within digital discussions. This finding demonstrates that non-linguistic elements are not merely decorative additions; they can perform clear pragmatic and interactional functions.

Accordingly, multimodal digital discourse can be operationally defined as a communicative practice formed through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources within a digital medium, with meanings produced through the relationship among the characteristics of these resources, context, intention, participants, and the interactional structure of the platform.

3. From Text to the Digital Communicative Event

The shift from traditional text to digital discourse calls for a reconsideration of the concept of text itself. Printed text often has relatively clear material boundaries, whereas digital text may remain open to a series of texts, hyperlinks, comments, images, and subsequent shares. Digital discourse therefore does not necessarily appear as a closed unit; rather, it may constitute part of an ongoing interactive sequence.

This characteristic is particularly evident on social media platforms, where a single post may generate dozens or hundreds of comments. These comments may themselves contain images, video clips, or emojis and may subsequently become the subject of other posts. Discourse production thus becomes distributed among a large number of participants, involving different levels of original discourse, responsive discourse, and reproduced discourse.

Here, a distinction can be made between the concept of text as a finished product and the concept of the communicative event as a dynamic process. Digital discourse is closer to a communicative event because it is not confined to the original message; it also encompasses the processes of its production, reception, commenting, recirculation, and interpretation.

This perspective is consistent with recent approaches to the study of digital discourse, which have increasingly focused on relationships among messages and the interactional dynamics that emerge between them. Krykoniuk, Hopkin-King, and Roberts (2025) introduced the concept of "discourse space" to analyse relationships among digital messages and applied their framework to 1,684 pairs of messages across 50 sections of YouTube comments, highlighting the importance of studying relationships among messages rather than analysing each message as an isolated unit.

This perspective makes it possible to understand digital discourse as a relational structure. The meaning of a particular comment is determined not only by its internal components, but is also influenced by what precedes and follows it, the topic to which it responds, the identities of the participants, the rules of the platform, and the shared knowledge among them.

The importance of context becomes more evident here. In face-to-face communication, speakers can rely on tone of voice, eye gaze, gestures, physical distance, and other cues. In digital communication, some of these resources are absent or are re-represented through alternative resources. Emojis, punctuation marks, orthographic repetition, animated images, stickers, and video clips can all perform some of the functions that are associated in face-to-face communication with voice, movement, or gesture.

Thus, the digital environment does not eliminate context; rather, it reshapes it. Context becomes distributed across the text, medium, platform, participants, and interactional history of the message. This characteristic makes interpretation more closely connected to digital knowledge and to the social practices acquired by users.

It follows that the analysis of digital discourse should take into account three interconnected levels:

The first is the textual and semiotic level, that is, what the message contains in terms of words, images, sounds, symbols, and formatting.

The second is the pragmatic and interactional level, that is, the functions performed by these resources within interaction, such as informing, expressing, persuading, mitigating, using irony, objecting, and expressing support.

The third is the social and cultural level, that is, the values, knowledge, identities, and contexts that influence the production and interpretation of the message.

Combining these levels makes it possible to move beyond a linguistic reduction of digital discourse while also preventing its reduction to the technological dimension. The digital platform is not merely a channel through which messages pass; rather, it is an organisational and interactional environment that influences the form and possibilities of discourse.

4. Transformations in Communicative Practice in the Digital Environment

The digital environment has brought about clear transformations in communicative practice. These transformations can be understood through a set of interconnected characteristics, most notably interactivity, relative immediacy, multimodality, recirculation, changing participant roles, and the growing importance of networked context.

Interactivity and the Reshaping of the Relationship between Participants

Interactivity is one of the most prominent characteristics distinguishing digital communication. In traditional communication media, the predominant direction of a message was from a producer to a recipient, with relatively limited possibilities for immediate response. Digital platforms, however, have made it possible to reduce the temporal distance between production and response.

In the digital environment, the recipient becomes a participant in the communicative process. They can comment, quote, repost, add an image or video, modify the message, or reinterpret it. Thus, the recipient moves from a function of reception to participation in discourse construction.

This does not mean that the distinction between producer and recipient disappears; rather, it means that the boundaries between the two roles have become more flexible. On the same platform, an individual may act as a producer, recipient, commenter, and reposter within relatively short periods of time.

From this perspective, digital communicative practice becomes a participatory process in which the power to produce meaning is distributed among several parties.

Immediacy and the Reorganisation of Communicative Time

Digital platforms are characterised by the rapid production, circulation, and response to messages. Immediacy, however, should not be understood as an absolute temporal moment, because digital platforms combine synchronous and asynchronous communication. Interaction may occur simultaneously, as in live conversations, or may extend over hours, days, or even years, as in comments and archived posts.

Digital time is therefore more flexible than traditional communicative time. A message may return to circulation long after its initial production as a result of being reposted, quoted, or linked to a new event.

This characteristic indicates that digital discourse does not exist only at the moment of its production; rather, it may undergo continuous processes of recontextualisation.

Recirculation and Recontextualisation

Digital messages are characterised by the ease with which they can be copied, shared, quoted, and reposted. This characteristic makes a message capable of moving from one context to another. Such movement may lead to a change in its meaning or pragmatic function.

An utterance published in a humorous context may be reshared in a serious context, or an image associated with a particular event may be used in a different context. In each case, it is not the message alone that is transferred; rather, it enters into a new relationship with the context, participants, and surrounding semiotic resources.

This observation confirms that digital meaning is not necessarily fixed; rather, it can be reconstructed as a result of changes in the interactional context.

Changing the Concept of the Audience

The audience of digital discourse is no longer necessarily predetermined. A message may be produced for a small group and then become available to a broader audience as a result of reposting. The audience may also be multilingual and culturally and socially diverse.

This situation requires the discourse producer to make decisions concerning language, imagery, style, and the symbols used, because the message may be read outside the original context in which it was produced.

Consequently, shared semiotic resources become increasingly important because they can help overcome some linguistic boundaries, while interpretation nevertheless remains connected to users' cultural contexts.

User Agency in Meaning-Making

Recent studies emphasise that digital users are not merely passive consumers of the resources made available by the platform; rather, they can repurpose these resources and establish new relationships among them. Simungala, Jimaima, and Nkhata (2025) demonstrated that social media users can combine linguistic and visual resources, emojis, and multilingual practices to produce multimodal configurations associated with their social and cultural contexts.

This means that users do not treat language, images, and symbols as closed systems; rather, they can reorganise them according to their communicative purposes.

5. Meaning-Making in Multimodal Digital Discourse

If digital discourse is multimodal, meaning cannot be attributed to a single element of the message. A word may be clear in itself, but the accompanying image may determine or extend its interpretation or contradict it. Sound, movement, or an emoji may likewise alter the pragmatic value of a written utterance.

Meaning-making in digital discourse therefore rests on the principle of integration among resources.

This can be illustrated through several relationships.

First, there is a relationship of reinforcement, in which an image or icon supports and clarifies the linguistic meaning.

Second, there is a relationship of specification, in which an image or visual element narrows the possible range of interpretations of an utterance.

Third, there is a relationship of addition, in which one mode provides information that is not provided by another mode.

Fourth, there is a relationship of contradiction, in which the apparent meaning of the language conflicts with the meaning conveyed by the visual element, potentially producing irony or incongruity.

Fifth, there is a relationship of pragmatic modification, in which an emoji, image, or style of writing modifies the communicative force of the utterance.

This interaction makes the analysis of digital discourse more complex than the analysis of an isolated linguistic text.

Language and Image

The relationship between language and image is one of the most prevalent relationships in digital communication. An image may be illustrative, explanatory, affective, humorous, or argumentative. Its function cannot be determined without considering the linguistic and social context in which it appears.

Social semiotics is based on the idea that semiotic resources acquire their potentials through social and cultural use. An image, therefore, does not possess a fixed meaning independent of users and contexts. Kress (2010) emphasises the importance of considering semiotic resources in relation to the social practices in which they are used.

Emojis

Emojis represent a clear example of the transformation in the tools of digital expression. They may be used to express emotion, mitigate the force of a stance, reinforce meaning, indicate irony, or construct solidarity.

The function of an emoji cannot be determined solely on the basis of its form. The same emoji may perform different functions depending on the context and the relationship between participants.

Liang (2024) demonstrated that emojis can contribute to the construction of affective stance and to the management of agreement and disagreement in digital interaction.

This makes the emoji a pragmatic resource rather than merely a visual sign.

Sound, Video, and Movement

Video platforms have greatly expanded the possibilities of digital communication. Users no longer rely solely on writing and still images; instead, they can combine sound, movement, image, and written text.

Video enables users to express information that is difficult to convey through written language alone, such as tone of voice, gesture, facial expression, and rhythm.

Consequently, the analysis of digital video requires attention to the interaction among multiple components rather than to speech alone.

Multilingualism and Mixed Resources

Digital spaces also exhibit linguistic practices that transcend traditional boundaries between languages. Users may combine Arabic, French, and English, or Standard Arabic and colloquial Arabic, or words, abbreviations, and symbols.

The study by Simungala, Jimaima, and Nkhata (2025) indicates that multilingual practices can interact with images, emojis, and visual resources to form multimodal configurations associated with users' cultural contexts.

Multilingualism thus becomes part of multimodality rather than a phenomenon separate from it.

6. Pragmatic Functions of Multimodal Resources

The role of multimodal resources is not limited to conveying information; they also perform pragmatic functions associated with intentions, social relationships, and interaction management.

An image may perform a persuasive, emphatic, or humorous function. An emoji may mitigate the force of an objection or reinforce an affective stance. A video may combine information with emotional expression and credibility-building.

The principal pragmatic functions of multimodal resources can be organised into four major domains.

Expression of Stance

Non-linguistic resources help express the speaker's stance towards the subject matter or the recipient. This may be manifested through the selection of a particular image or emoji or through the manner in which a video is presented.

Management of Social Relationships

Multimodal resources can contribute to constructing proximity, solidarity, or social distance. The selection of a particular image or emoji may create a sense of familiarity, whereas another form may convey formality or reserve.

Mitigation and Intensification

Semiotic resources can operate to mitigate or intensify the force of a speech act. For example, emojis may make a direct utterance less forceful, whereas certain images or symbols may be used to strengthen an oppositional stance.

Irony and Incongruity

Irony is among the phenomena that most clearly reveal the importance of the relationship among modes. A linguistic utterance may appear positive on the surface, while the image or emoji reveals an opposite meaning.

For this reason, digital irony cannot be analysed through language alone. It is necessary to consider the totality of resources, the context, and the shared knowledge among participants.

7. An Integrated Model for Analysing Multimodal Digital Discourse

Based on the preceding discussion, the study proposes an integrated analytical model consisting of five interconnected components: the semiotic resource, pragmatic function, context, interaction, and meaning-making.

Semiotic Resource

At the first level, the resources used in the message are identified, such as:

- Written or spoken language.
- Image.
- Sound.
- Video.
- Emojis.
- Icons.
- Hyperlinks.
- Visual formatting.
- Abbreviations.
- Multilingualism.

Identifying these resources does not mean analysing them separately; rather, it involves determining how they interact.

Pragmatic Function

At the second level, the function performed by the resources is identified, such as:

- Informing.
- Explaining.
- Persuading.
- Expressing stance.
- Expressing agreement and disagreement.
- Mitigating.

- Using irony.
- Building solidarity.
- Managing identity.

Context

The context in which the message appears should then be identified. This includes:

- The topic of the discourse.
- The identities of the participants.
- The relationship between them.
- The platform used.
- The social and cultural context.
- Previous and subsequent messages.
- Shared knowledge.

Interaction

At this stage, the relationship between the message and other messages is analysed. Is it an original post? Does it constitute a response? Does it reproduce previous discourse? Does it contain a quotation, share, or comment?

This level is essential because digital discourse is relational in nature.

Meaning-Making

At the final level, the findings from the preceding levels are integrated in order to interpret how meaning is formed.

The model can be represented as follows:

Semiotic resources

↓

Relationships among modes

↓

Pragmatic functions

↓

Social and cultural context

↓

Interaction among participants

↓

Production and reproduction of meaning

These levels should not be understood as separate linear stages, but as interconnected elements within the communicative process.

The value of this model lies in its integration of semiotic, pragmatic, and interactional analysis without reducing digital discourse to any single level.

The model can be used to study posts, comments, short-form videos, digital conversations, educational and media content, and other forms of digital communication.

8. Discussion

The preceding approach reveals that digital transformation has changed not only the tools of communication but also reshaped the very concept of communicative practice. Meaning-making has become a process that is more open to interaction among resources, participants, and contexts.

Recent literature supports this direction. The study by Krykoniuk et al. (2025) does not treat digital comments as separate messages; rather, it focuses on the relationships among messages and the dynamics through which the discursive structure of the online space is formed.

In the same context, Simungala et al. (2025) situate multimodality within a social and cultural framework and demonstrate that users employ multiple linguistic and visual resources in meaning-making, confirming that digital communication cannot be separated from the cultural and social backgrounds of participants.

Recent work in social media discourse analysis likewise demonstrates that analysis needs to address interaction, relationships among users, and multimodality as interconnected elements. In their work on social media discourse analysis, Zappavigna and Ross (2024) present a social-semiotic approach concerned with interaction, relationality, intersubjectivity, and multimodality.

From a pragmatic perspective, Liang's (2024) study confirms that non-verbal elements, particularly emojis, can contribute to stance construction, the management of agreement and disagreement, and the expression of emotions in digital interaction.

Taken together, these findings point to the need to move beyond two reductionist conceptions.

The first conception views digital discourse as merely an electronic version of traditional discourse. This conception does not account for interactivity, recontextualisation, and multimodality.

The second conception treats technology as the sole factor explaining communicative change. This conception overlooks the role of users, culture, and social context.

A more accurate perspective is to view digital discourse as the result of an interaction among the characteristics of the medium, the affordances of semiotic resources, user agency, and the social and cultural context.

From this perspective, technology provides communicative affordances, but it does not automatically determine how they are used. Users repurpose these affordances according to their purposes, contexts, identities, and social practices.

It should also be recognised that multimodality does not necessarily mean that meaning has become clearer. The multiplicity of resources may also increase the possibilities for interpretation. As image, language, sound, movement, and context become increasingly intertwined, a greater degree of background knowledge may be required to understand the relationships among them.

Accordingly, competence in digital communication does not consist solely in the ability to use technological tools; it also includes the ability to interpret relationships among different resources and understand their pragmatic and social functions.

9. Conclusion

The study concludes that multimodal digital discourse represents a qualitative transformation in communicative practice because it shifts meaning-making from a model focused primarily on language to a model in which multiple semiotic resources interact within changing social, cultural, and pragmatic contexts.

The study has demonstrated that multimodality is not merely the addition of image or sound to text; rather, it involves a reorganisation of the relationships through which meaning is produced. Language, image, sound, video, emojis, visual formatting, and other resources may perform different functions, and they may complement, contradict, or modify one another.

The study has also demonstrated that pragmatics provides an essential approach to understanding digital discourse because it makes it possible to analyse intention, context,

stance, the relationship among participants, and the functions performed by different resources within interaction.

The study further shows that the digital environment has reshaped the relationship between producer and recipient. The recipient is no longer merely a consumer of the message, but has become capable of commenting, reproducing, recontextualising, and participating in meaning-making. Communicative practice has thus become more interactive and less amenable to a strict separation between the roles of producer and recipient.

In light of this, the study proposes an integrated analytical model based on five interconnected components: semiotic resources, relationships among modes, pragmatic functions, social and cultural context, and interaction among participants. The model is intended to provide an analytical basis that can be employed in future studies of digital discourse.

Nevertheless, the explanatory value of this model requires empirical testing across different digital genres, because the nature of interaction and semiotic resources varies according to the platform, discourse type, audience, and cultural context. Future studies could therefore apply the model to specific samples of social media posts, digital conversations, or short-form videos while combining pragmatic, semiotic, and interactional analysis.

Accordingly, the study of digital discourse requires more than simply adding the concept of "digitality" to traditional theories of discourse. It requires reconsidering the unit of analysis, the concept of text, the roles of participants, the nature of context, and the way in which meaning is formed through the interaction of multiple resources. Within this framework, digital discourse becomes a social, semiotic, and pragmatic practice that is continuously shaped through the relationship among users, resources, platforms, and contexts.

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