

# IN FAVOR OF MULTIMODAL TEXTS IN A CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT: WHAT, HOW AND WHY?

EM PROL DE TEXTOS MULTIMODAIS NO CONTEXTO ESCOLAR: QUAIS, COMO E POR QUÊ?

A FAVOR DEL TRABAJO CON TEXTOS MULTIMODALES EN EL CONTEXTO ESCOLAR:  
¿CUÁLES, CÓMO Y POR QUÉ?

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**RESUMO:** Na sociedade contemporânea, embora o professor não seja mais a fonte principal de informações para o aluno, continua desempenhando a função de despertá-lo para uma leitura crítica de discursos implícitos de significados culturais, ideológicos e hegemônicos que circulam em textos multimodais. Este ensaio discute possíveis caminhos para uma análise crítica desses discursos. Desenvolve-se a partir de uma concepção de texto e descrição das abordagens teórico-metodológicas sugeridas para textos multimodais, a saber, a Análise Crítica do Discurso (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001; MEURER, 2005) e a Gramática do Design Visual (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006 [1996]). Em seguida, apresenta exemplos de estudos voltados para textos multimodais analisados e tece argumentos em prol do trabalho com textos multimodais na escola. Ao final, destacam-se três pontos relevantes: participação do professor em formações continuadas regulares, o conhecimento de ferramentas analíticas aplicáveis às novas configurações textuais e a inserção de textos multimodais do cotidiano como leitura crítica na escola.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Textos multimodais. Escola. Abordagem crítica.

**RESUMEN:** En la sociedad contemporánea, aunque el profesor ya no sea la fuente principal de información para el alumno, continúa desempeñando la función de despertar al alumno para una lectura crítica de discursos implícitos de significados culturales,

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ideológicos y hegemónicos que circulan en textos multimodales. Este ensayo discute posibles caminos para un análisis crítico de esos discursos. Se desarrolla a partir de una concepción de texto y descripción de los enfoques teórico-metodológicos sugeridos para textos multimodales, a saber, el Análisis Crítico del Discurso (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001; MEURER, 2005) y la Gramática del Diseño Visual (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006 [1996]). A continuación, se presentan ejemplos de estudios orientados a textos multimodales analizados y se tejen argumentos a favor del trabajo con textos multimodales en la escuela. Al final, se destacan tres puntos relevantes: la participación del profesor en la formación continua regular, el conocimiento de herramientas analíticas aplicables a las nuevas configuraciones textuales y la inserción de textos multimodales de la vida cotidiana como lectura crítica en la escuela.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Textos multimodales. Escuela. Enfoque crítico.

**ABSTRACT:** In the contemporary society, although the teacher is no longer the main source of information for the student, she/he continues to play the role of awakening him to a critical reading of implicit discourses of cultural, ideological and hegemonic meanings that circulate in multimodal texts. This essay discusses possible ways for a critical analysis of these discourses. It is developed from a conception of text and the description of the theoretical-methodological approaches suggested for multimodal texts, Critical Discourse Analysis (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001; MEURER, 2005) and Grammar of Visual Design (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006 [1996]). Then, it presents examples of studies focused on analyzed multimodal texts and makes arguments for working with multimodal texts in school. At the end, three relevant points are highlighted: the teacher's participation in regular continuing education, the knowledge of analytical tools applicable to new textual configurations and the use of daily life multimodal texts as critical reading in the school.

**KEYWORDS:** Multimodal texts. School. Critical approach.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the current Brazilian school context, regardless of the teacher's choice, there is a multiplicity of texts that enter and circulate across the classroom through the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), which evidence new textual configurations. Many of these texts do not prioritize only verbal language. They are words, images, gestures, sounds, smells, flavors, objects, physical spaces, among other semiotic resources, which are associated to awaken the student's attention and to make meanings through their ability to see, hear and feel, allowing their interaction with the text. Usually, this interaction occurs through the teacher's mediation when she/he instigates the student to the meanings presented to her/him, allowing her/him maturation of thoughts.

In contemporary society, the teacher is no longer the main source of information for the student, since the new technological resources have disseminated them quickly in various social contexts. In any way, the new textual configurations, along the teaching career, demand from the teacher a constant updating that can be achieved by continued formations in search of new knowledge, as pointed out by Nascimento, Bezerra and Heberle (2011) and Bezerra (2016) when they emphasize the importance of working with multimodality in the classroom in face of these new textual practices, requiring updated training of teachers. At the same time, the role of the teacher goes beyond the insertion of multiple languages and the use of new technological resources for didactic purposes. Its primary function is to awaken the student to a critical reading of the discourses imbued with implicit cultural, ideological and hegemonic meanings that circulate in society, that is, to mediate this reading process.

It is believed that the knowledge of other notions of text, the knowledge of analytical tools that meet the new textual configurations and the knowledge of academic productions focused on the analysis of multimodal texts (beyond the descriptive layer) stimulate the teacher to promote in her/himself, and in the student, a criticality in the production and reception of discourses that permeate the school context. Thus, possibly, the teacher her/himself may answer the questions from the title of this work: which, how and why multimodal texts in the school.

In view of the problematic, this essay aims at indicating possible ways for a critical analysis of the implicit discourses of ideological meanings and power relations presented in multimodal texts of everyday life, considering the various semiotic modes that

corroborate the meaning-making. Generally, due to new emerging literacies that we do not always dominate, we end up consuming these texts in an uncritical manner, as Rojo (2012) points out when addressing the pedagogy of multiliteracies.

In order to achieve the proposed objective, the discussion is structured into four main sections. The first presents the notion of text. The second presents a description of the theoretical-methodological approaches suggested for multimodal texts, the Critical Discourse Analysis (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001; MEURER, 2005) and the Grammar of Visual Design (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006 [1996]). The third cites examples of multimodal texts already analyzed linguistically, which go beyond the notion of exclusively verbal text. The last section makes arguments in favor of working with multimodal texts at school.

## 2 WHICH TEXTS TO USE IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT? CAN EVERYTHING BE READ AS A TEXT?

Starting from a general conception of text associated with the semiotic sign of Pierce (1975, p. 94), that defines it as "something that, in some aspect or in some way, represents something to someone", one perceives, initially, an amplitude on the notion of text beyond of the verbal. A conception associated with other modes of representation of a sign that may be captured according to the interpretation produced by the reader.

Although it is common to associate the notion of text with verbal language, we live in institutionally organized environments, characterized by specific practices and values that are expressed through multiple languages (MEURER, 2005). According to this same author (p. 90), the text "can be analyzed in terms of language as a system (a set of lexical-grammatical elements) and as a semiotic element that reflects discursive and sociocultural processes linked to social structures", representing realities, manifesting identities and power relations.

In the vision of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006 [1996]), the multimodal texts are materialized discourses, consisting of several semiotic modes organized in favor of the production of meanings: writing, image, colors, size, angles, visual effects, sound, gestures, or spatial texts — constructions, in the vision of Ravelli (2011) as well as of Ravelli and Heberle (2016). Nascimento, Bezerra and Heberle (2011) state that all texts are multimodal. Even those materialized exclusively through writing bring with them multimodal traits, such as: differentiated colors and fonts, font size, italic, bold and underlined. Thus, everything that transmits meanings produced through semiotic modes that are associated within a social context, allowing the reader to attribute meanings to it, can be read as text.

In the school context, the teacher can explore multimodal texts that promote a reflexive debate on varied topics of daily life, covering the multiple representations of these themes through different discursive genres: cartoons, comic books, flyers, posters, photographs, tabloids, magazine covers, toy packaging, website pages, memes, videos, three-dimensional spaces, etc.

Within this context, the relevance of this essay lies in the emphasis on working with multimodal texts based on a conception of text that considers the various semiotic modes as co-responsible for the construction of meanings, pointing ways for a critical analysis of the implicit discourses that permeate these texts, corroborating the studies already produced in the area, such as Heberle (2012), Rojo (2012), Nascimento, Bezerra and Heberle (2011), besides contributing to the field of the Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics studies.

## 3 HOW TO WORK WITH MULTIMODAL TEXTS IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT?

To work with multimodal texts in the school, the teacher needs to know some theoretical and methodological tools. According to Meurer (2005), the texts can be analyzed from their literal meanings when describing the linguistic elements and the imagetic elements, but also by interpreting these elements within the broader scope of social practice and discursive practice, through an interpretative and explanatory analysis more comprehensive via Critical Discourse Analysis (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001; MEURER, 2005; RESENDE RAMALHO, 2006). Generally, in the descriptive analysis of verbal texts, it is used the Systemic Functional

Grammar, proposed by Halliday (1978) and in the descriptive analysis of visual texts, it is used the Grammar of Visual Design (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006 [1996]).

### 3.1 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Resende and Ramalho (2006), as well as Meurer (2005), attribute the term 'Critical Discourse Analysis' (ACD) to Norman Fairclough. The authors claim to be dealing with a theoretical-methodological approach to the study of language characterized by a strong concern with the social, derived from multidisciplinary approaches and that helps in the critical analysis of texts. Fairclough (2001) suggests a three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, consisting of three analytical dimensions that do not obey a sequential order and can initiate the analysis by any of them: text, discursive practice and social practice.

On the dimension of social practice, Fairclough (2001) exposes that it involves the macrosociological aspect, seeking to explain how the text is invested in social aspects linked to ideological and hegemonic formations. As for the analysis of the discursive practice, this involves the processes of production, distribution and consumption of texts, interpreting their coherence, strength of statements (types of speech acts such as promises, requests and threats), presence of other texts and other discourses in the text analyzed. The dimension of textual analysis occurs through the description of linguistic elements: lexicon, grammar, cohesion and structure. The lexicon deals mainly with individual words; grammar deals with words combined in clauses and phrases; cohesion is about the link between clauses and phrases, and the textual structure discusses the large-scale organizational properties of the texts.

On the last dimension of analysis, text as a discursive event, Meurer (2005), following the thought of Fairclough (2001), states that it is the level of analysis that comes closest to the literal meanings of the text. However, these meanings do not come from words in dictionaries or linguistic structures according to traditional grammar, but from the perspective of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978), which presents the Systemic-Functional Grammar (SFG) for analysis of verbal texts.

### 3.2 SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR (SFG)

In the words of Heberle (2012), several researchers from the CDA use SFG as a theoretical-methodological apparatus for the analysis of multimodal texts, as a means of investigating the levels of situational context, semantics and lexical-grammatical choices. This context of situation consists of three components, field, tenor and mode, which are equivalent to the three basic metafunctions of language proposed by Halliday (1978): ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions. These, in turn, correspond to the structures of transitivity, mode and theme in the lexical-grammatical.

In general, by engaging these three metafunctions, Halliday's SFG emphasizes the clause. In the ideational metafunction, clause is seen as representation, a construct of actions or relationships involving processes (materials, mental, behavioral, verbal, existential, relational) and active participants or not, through the system of transitivity. This is what is happening. It is what we talk about our experiences of the world, external and internal, when we describe events and states involved in this experience, reflecting/creating/reinforcing certain knowledge and beliefs. In interpersonal metafunction, clause is seen as an exchange of experiences and includes participants with roles of asking/answering, giving or demanding information or goods and services, through a mode structure. It refers to the interaction with other people, used to establish and maintain social relations among the participants of the text, between them and the readers, indicating more or less power and involvement among them. In textual metafunction, clause is seen as a message consisting of two elements: Theme and Rheme. The first one serves as a starting point, including everything that initiates clause. The second is the prolongation of the message, the rest of the clause. It is the metafunction responsible for the construction and organization of meanings of the text to form a coherent whole, through thematic structures and cohesion.

For the analysis of multimodal texts, predominantly imagetic, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006 [1996]), based on the SFG, propose the Grammar of Visual Design (GVD), the next point presented.

### 3.3 THE GRAMMAR OF VISUAL DESIGN

In visual language, the meanings are constituted through the relationship between the participants in the image and what happens around them (representational metafunction); the relationship between the participant of the image, which also represents its producer, and the reader/observer (interactive metafunction); through the distribution and organization of elements in the image that form a whole and are related to each other (compositional metafunction). These metafunctions correspond respectively to those of the SFG, ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunction.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006 [1996]), representational metafunction is accomplished through narrative processes and conceptual processes, subdivided into participants, processes and circumstances features. Participants are people, objects or places. In narrative processes, the participants are connected by a vector, they establish relationships between them and they are engaged in actions and events. In this case, they are classified in action, reactional, speech and mental processes. If participants do not perform actions, they are represented in terms of their class, structure or meaning, that is, in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence. In this case, the conceptual processes are called classificational, analytical and symbolic. Classificational processes relate participants to each other and they are identified as superordinate and subordinate, as belonging to a group, defined by common characteristics and in terms of taxonomy among these participants. Analytical processes connect participants in terms of a part-whole structure. The carrier is represented as the whole; the various possessive attributes are represented as the parts. In the symbolic processes, the participants are identified as meaning/with symbolic attributes. These processes are subdivided into symbolic attributive and suggestive. In the symbolic attributive, two participants are involved: a carrier (the part whose meaning or identity is established in the relation) and a symbolic attribute (the part which represents the meaning or identity itself.) In the symbolic suggestive, there is only the carrier, whose meaning and identity come from its own qualities. The circumstances are categorized into settings, means and accompaniments, that is, location in time and space, tools used in action processes and participants who are not linked by a vector.

The interactive metafunction occurs through contact, social distance, attitude and modality, in other words, the gaze, distance, point of view and the reliability of messages. Contact is divided into demand (gaze at the viewer) and offer (absence of gaze at the viewer). The social distance is carried out by intimate (close shot), social (medium shot) or impersonal (long shot). The attitude is related to the involvement (frontal angle), detachment (oblique angle), viewer power (high angle), equality (eye-level angle) and represented participant power (low angle). The modality is categorized into naturalistic, sensory and scientific.

The compositional metafunction occurs through the value of the information (position of the elements in the image), salience (greater or lesser emphasis given to certain elements over others) and structuring (framing, dividing lines that connect or disconnect). These three metafunctions occur simultaneously, even if one or the other is more explored in an analysis.

It can also be said that from the Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978), tools for the analysis of verbal texts through SFL were expanded to analyze visual texts through GVD (KRESS; VAN LEUWEEN, 2006 [1996]) and, more recently, analysis of three-dimensional spaces, Spatial Discourse Analysis (SpDA) proposed by Ravelli and McMurtrie (2016), were expanded. In this case, categories already proposed by scholars for the interactive metafunction, such as control (RAVELLI; STENGLIN, 2008), binding and bonding (STENGLIN, 2004, 2009).

### 4 EXAMPLES OF MULTIMODAL TEXTS AS OBJECTS OF STUDY

Due to the limited nature of an essay, only three examples of multimodal texts will be listed without the insertion of the respective images. The choice is due to their uniqueness as objects of linguistic analysis when compared to the commonly used verbal texts.

#### 4.1 TOYS AS TEXTS

Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen (2002, 2004), in their articles, present an analysis of toys that represent human beings and transmit gender-specific meanings as an area of extreme importance in terms of representations and social values for differentiating toys for girls from toys for boys. The texts analyzed are the dolls Ken, Rock, Action Man, Barbie and Jacqueline, as well as Playmobil toys and all the photographs in their respective catalogs.

Almeida (2006), in her thesis, analyzes ten ads extracted from the Brazilian doll Susi's website and ten ads extracted from the American dolls The Bratz's website. The objective was to observe how the social practices of the two countries are reflected and how they reinforce certain social structures, such as gender issues.

#### 4.2 THREE-DIMENSIONAL SPACES AS TEXT

In terms of three-dimensional spaces, Ravelli (2000) presents an analysis of the *Sydney Olympic Store*, in Australia, a souvenir shop located in the commercial center of Sydney. It is a store that interconnects a range of semiotic resources — design, image, spatial layout, color, language etc. — to create a coherent and persuasive text in relation to the Olympic Games, transforming the store not only into a place for shopping, but also a place where ideologies surround the Olympic Games. The author states that, on the one hand, the store is a static text with all its semiotic elements spatially co-presented, but the experience promoted by the store makes the visitor to move through the space to buy or contemplate something, promoting a passive role relationship (where goods can be read but not touched) to relatively active and open roles (where goods can be touched, turned and examined). In general, buyers are free to walk around the store and hold goods.

Ravelli (2011, 2014) states that three-dimensional texts construct meanings and function within a given social context. They are possible spaces to move within them and that are always geographically located in some way, allowing the look around them and their relationship with other texts. In other words, it is necessary to consider how we look at these texts, how we look around them and how we navigate through these texts. The author cites some scholars who have expanded the GVD scheme for the analysis of the built environment and some of the main areas of analysis of three-dimensional texts, having as object of study the Scientia building at the University of New South Wales, in Australia.

Heberle and Ravelli (2016) present an analysis of the three floors of the Museum of the Portuguese Language in São Paulo-SP, identifying the various features that differentiate the museum's distinct floors but also bring them together, creating an intense focus on cultural identity and placing the visitor in the center of practices of building meaning through representational, organizational and interactional metafunctions. In the latter, the authors bring the categories of binding (related to the feeling of comfort and safety of the user in the environment) and bonding (related to the bond of identification and belonging of the user in the environment). The authors show that the spatial texts can be analyzed through the materials used in the construction or the forms of design, as well as in the identification of the functions and uses of the text, in addition to the selection and inclusion of objects or particular characteristics.

Callegaro, Martins and Kader (2014) analyze the building of the rectory of the campus of the Federal University of Santa Maria, in order to present possible interpretations regarding the choices of the spatial semiotics made for the building in question. They use categories of analysis from the GVD (although they seem to confuse with the SFG), as power, involvement, contact, modality and social distance that are applied according to the influences of the modernist movement at the time of construction. They realized that the building of the rectory is the tallest, it has windows only in its laterality and they are all mirrored, reflecting the functional separation of spaces, a functional and road hierarchy and preferences of modernist architects of that time.

#### 4.3 MEMES AS TEXT

Guerreiro and Soares (2016) analyze the visual discursive configuration present in two memes, digital genre, as objects of analysis. These objects were chosen for having been widely disseminated on social networks and for representing contemporary social

practices of many people. The Grammar of Visual Design was one of the analytical categories used. In addition, they verified how much these texts carry ideologies and concepts that are introduced at the time of production, but are not accepted and interpreted in the same way by readers who need a previous cultural knowledge to understand them.

The studies cited illustrate that the reading of texts should not be exclusive to verbal texts. Just like words, toys, three-dimensional spaces, street graffiti and the digital memes express meanings and "talk" to the reader.

Like the Museum of the Portuguese Language, other constructions may be seen as texts, therefore, open to interpretation, appreciation and analysis. This point, in particular, has awakened the author of this text from the multiplicity of children's birthday party themes in Brazil visualized in the same party house in João Pessoa-PB, leading her to the elaboration of a research project in its initial phase this year.

## 5 WHY WORK WITH MULTIMODAL TEXTS IN CLASSROOM PRACTICE?

The problem initially pointed out was that, in the contemporary society, the teachers are no longer the main source of information for the student, but they continue to perform the function of awakening the student to a critical reading of ideological and implicit hegemonic discourses that circulate in everyday life, through multimodal texts, what implies the need for their continued training, for new knowledge. Otherwise, the teacher may feel frustrated and may not achieve her/his expected pedagogical objectives. These textual reconfigurations imply the knowledge of other notions of text, analytical tools and readings of academic productions focused on the analysis of multimodal texts, such as the discussion pointed out throughout this text.

In this way, the work with multimodal texts in the school is judged to be of profound relevance for both the teacher and the student, since besides being attractive to the eyes, it can awaken the student to a criticality in the production and reception of discourses that permeate the school context, discourses that are implicit in ideological meanings and power relations that express a unique vision for issues of gender, sexuality, cultural diversity etc.

## 6 CLOSING REMARKS

This essay emphasized the need for considering the new textual configurations mediated by new technologies that permeate the school context traditionally occupied by verbal language. It has pointed out the relevance of working with multimodal texts considering the various semiotic modes (co)responsible for the meaning-making, besides indicating ways for a critical analysis of these texts, permeated by ideological discourse and power relations, seeking to describe, interpret and explain these meanings.

In short, as well as the three examples of multimodal texts, other texts can be worked in the school context. The teachers can select them from the target audience, from the preferences of students themselves or suggestions from mini-courses, workshops, congresses, etc. Consequently, it is extremely important their participation in regular continuous training, knowing analytical tools applicable to new textual configurations and studies focused on analysis of multimodal texts, thus enabling a critical analysis of the discourses shaped in these texts.

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