

BEER OR VIRUS? THE OBJECT OF DISCOURSE CORONA IN PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMES OF THE INTERNET

CERVEJA OU VÍRUS? O OBJETO DE DISCURSO CORONA EM MEMES FOTOGRÁFICOS DA
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¿CERVEZA O VIRUS? EL OBJETO DE DISCURSO CORONA EN MEMES FOTOGRÁFICOS DE
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ABSTRACT: In this article, a corpus of ten photographic memes elaborated based on the relationship between two contents: coronavirus / Covid-19 and Corona Extra beer is analyzed. Based on the concept of Referencing, according to Mondada (1994, 2002, 2008), Marcuschi and Koch (2002) and Marcuschi (2004, 2007), among other authors, understanding that speech objects can be activated and / or reactivated both by textual-discursive and cognitive-inferential procedures, the study aims to show how this relationship is made and which meanings are constructed from it. The memes were produced simultaneously with the spread of the coronavirus around the world, between December 2019 and (so far) April 2020.

KEYWORDS: Memes. Referencing. Coronavirus.

RESUMO: Analisa-se, neste artigo, um *corpus* de dez memes fotográficos elaborados a partir da relação entre dois conteúdos: coronavírus/Covid-19 e cerveja Corona Extra. Com base no conceito de Referenciação, conforme Mondada (1994, 2002, 2008), Marcuschi e Koch (2002) e Marcuschi (2004, 2007), entre outros autores, entendendo que os objetos de discurso podem ser ativados

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e/ou reativados tanto por procedimentos textuais-discursivos quanto por cognitivo-inferenciais, o estudo objetiva evidenciar como é feita essa relação e quais sentidos são construídos a partir dela. Os memes foram produzidos em período simultâneo ao da propagação do coronavírus pelo mundo, entre dezembro de 2019 e (até o momento) abril de 2020.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Memes. Referenciação. Coronavírus.

RESUMEN: En este artículo, se analiza un corpus de diez memes fotográficos elaborados a partir de la relación entre dos contenidos: coronavirus / Covid-19 y cerveza Corona Extra. Basado en el concepto de referencia, según Mondada (1994, 2002, 2008), Marcuschi y Koch (2002) y Marcuschi (2004, 2007), entre otros autores, entendiendo que los objetos de discurso pueden ser activados y / o reactivados tanto por procedimientos textual-discursivos y cognitivos-inferenciales, el estudio tiene como objetivo mostrar cómo se hace esta relación y qué significados se construyen a partir de ella. Los memes se produjeron simultáneamente con la propagación del coronavirus en todo el mundo, entre diciembre de 2019 y (hasta ahora) abril de 2020.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Memes. Referencias Coronavirus.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since December 2019, in China, cases of a disease called Covid-19, arising from the contamination by a new type of coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 spread. The name of this family of viruses is due to its morphological characteristics similar to a crown. The virus spreads across all continents, reaching, until April 15, 2020, more than 2,000,000 (two million) people worldwide, with approximately 200,000 (two hundred thousand) deaths. In Brazil alone, according to data from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO, 2020), given the official confirmation of the first case, on February 26, 2020, there are approximately 30,000 (thirty thousand) cases of infection, of which almost 1,800 (thousand and eight hundred) resulted in deaths, until April 15, at 7 pm, date and time of this record.

In several parts of the world, associations between the brand of the Mexican beer called Corona Extra and the spread of the virus started to emerge (FOLHA DE SÃO PAULO, 2020). Concerning Brazil, in January, the Google Trends search verification tool recorded an increase in searches for the name “coronavirus” in association with the beer (GOOGLE TRENDS, 2020). Checking the search term “beer coronavirus”, as created by users, it is possible to observe that, between January 26 and February 1, 37 searches were carried out. Between March 15 and 21, this number increases, totaling 100 searches made at this period.

Due to either the lack of awareness of the coincidence between both names or the intention to produce a certain type of humor, several memes went viral on the Internet, in which this association was also established. As a result, negative thoughts about the beer were shared, according to several sources.

In a survey released by the US agency YouGov, carried out between January and February, consumers in the country considerably reduced their intention to consume Corona beer (YOU GOV, 2020). It is a striking example of how language, symbolic as it is, can cause changes in the real world.

Thus, the objective of this study is to analyze a corpus of ten Internet memes that present, as content, the relationship between both the coronavirus / Covid-19 and the Corona Extra beer. It intends to show how this relationship is made and which meanings are built from these associations. The period of production of these memes occurs simultaneously with the spread of the virus around the world, between December 2019 and (until now) April 2020. The texts were captured from Google Images (2019-2020) in the same period.

The theoretical perspective through which occurrences are observed comes from referencing processes (MONDADA, 1994, 2002, 2008; MARCUSCHI; KOCH, 2002; MARCUSCHI, 2004, 2007), understanding that the objects of discourse can be activated and/or reactivated both by textual-discursive and by cognitive-inferential procedures. Besides, we take the position that, based on the increasingly multimodal reality of texts, as in the case of memes, the referencing processes involve, in many cases, the integration

between more than one type of semiosis, requiring that in the activity of interpretation, subjects perform what Mondada (1994) means by distributed cognition.

First, the theoretical bases of the study are presented, which are inserted into the Textual Linguistics field of studies, specifically in the Theory of Referencing. Then, based on studies in the area of Communication, the discursive genre meme is conceptualized and the typification of photographic memes is shown so, after explaining the methodological procedures, it finally proceeds to analyze the occurrences.

2 REFERENCING AND MULTIMODALITY

This study has as its starting point the assumption that, through the referencing activity, the speakers establish and share meanings in the communication event. Precisely, “the subjects build, through socially and culturally situated discursive and cognitive practices, public versions of the world” (MONDADA; DUBOIS, 2003 [1995]: 17).

As Mondada (1994) explains, the notion given by the object of discourse refers to what the enunciative activity organizes in the practices of apprehension, formulation, and description of the world by the speakers. They are resources by which users discursive the world, being developed and modified according to the context. According to this understanding, the concept of referencing concerns the enunciative activities constructed intersubjectively by the speakers.

Apothéloz and Reichler-Béguelin (1995), assuming the dynamic property of objects of discourse as Mondada (1994), understood that the anaphoric activity of retaking a lexical item can not only serve as a mere substitution process in textual linearity but also can constitute an informational addition procedure. In this sense, they launched bases for the understanding of the recategorization process, but still as a *textual-discursive* conception, since they conceived the limits of the textual surface in the construction of textual chains to be the space of the phenomenon's emergence.

Other authors (MONDADA, 1994, 2002, 2008; MARCUSCHI; KOCH, 2002; MARCUSCHI, 2004, 2007) developed studies according to which referencing processes can occur based on mental activation of information, without being mentioned in the text itself. Then, a cognitive-discursive conception of this activity is released. Moreover, the perception that different semiotic resources (word, image, sound, gestures, etc.) are also used in the development of communication, and often articulated with each other, added to this view the understanding that multimodality is a complex way of meaning in which referencing operations participate.

From this perspective, different studies were carried out (MONDADA, 1994, 2002, 2008; BRASSAC *et al.*, 2008) about the interaction activity in professional and scientific contexts, showing that the senses can be built collectively with the help of several multimodal resources. Thus, in a cognitively distributed activity, through gestures, looks, body movements, or with the aid of instruments/objects, knowledge is elaborated in an inseparable way (necessarily articulated) through written and visual artifacts.

In these researches, a multimodal view towards referencing is presented, loosening, in this way, a restricted conception of referencing processes only in the linearity of the verbal text. This opens up a field for the observation of other languages and their discursive mechanisms.

In the field of social semiotics, for example, the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) on multimodality highlights the importance of considering the different ways in which language (therefore, communication) can be constituted (words, sounds, images, etc.): We intend to provide useful descriptions of major compositional structures which have become established as conventions in the course of the history of Western visual semiotics and to analyze how they are used to produce meaning by contemporary image-makers. (KRESS; van LEEUWEN, 2006 [1996], p. 1)

They propose, in the work, to describe several compositional structures and to develop a horizontal approach of the relationship between word and image, without supremacy of the verbal text over the non-verbal one. The authors advocate, then, for an integrating construction of meanings.

Urban practices of interaction, intensely mediated by digital resources and formed by groups with varied cultural experiences, demand special attention to the way texts are constituted and meanings are constructed. Thus, multimodality refers, according to Rojo (2012, p. 18-19), to the multiplicity of languages in the texts: “whether printed or digital [...] the images and the layout impregnate and conceive meaning to contemporary texts”.

All of this has an impact on the social life of citizens and shapes their needs for (multi)literacies towards life in society. According to Rojo (2012, p.13)

The concept of multiliteracies points to two specific and important types of multiplicity present in our societies, especially in the urban ones, in the contemporary world: the cultural multiplicity of populations and the semiotic multiplicity of organizations of texts through which it is informed and communicated.

This means that social practices, with the increasing frequency of varied semiosis in the construction of texts, demand reading skills beyond those related to the linearity of verbal text. This is the case of memes that, due to their multimodal nature, require recognizing the role of each material (and what is extracted from it) in the construction of meanings.

3 PHOTO-BASED MEMES

The term meme, coined in the 1970s by Dawkins (2007 [1976]), denominated a cultural replication unit analogous to the gene. According to the author, cultural contents are propagated in people's minds, where they change and evolve. Currently, the term designates a certain textual pattern, characterized by its functionality in a socio-communicational context.

Shifman (2014, p. 341) defines Internet memes as a group of digital items that: “(a) share common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) are created with awareness of each other; and (c) are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users”.

In the conceptualization of Oliveira (2017, p. 1)

[...] meme is a digital (audio)visual and/or textual form that is appropriated and recoded by users, being introduced back into the Internet infrastructure from which they came (NOONEY; PORTWOOD-STACER, 2014, p. 249). Therefore, it is a “common pattern” or “basic formal model” (FONTANELLA, 2009, p. 09) that is quickly assimilated, copied and repeated, generating several versions and variations of the meme that spread from person to person virally.

In our understanding, it is a discursive genre of digital ambiance characterized by the rapid replicability of units of meaning (for example, a scene, a phrase, a photograph), updated discursively in each statement. It has, in general, compositional hybridity, which means, by its nature, to consist of one or more semiosis (word, image, sound, gifs, video). From its functionality, it admits humor, criticism, or unpredictably, other functions. Besides, they are necessarily sharable texts, which leads them to form a network of interconnected statements, while also grouping people with common interests.

Shifman (2014) further develops the concept of hypersignification concerning photographic memes. He explains that, in memes, as in advertising, photographs operate to deconstruct reality. Often, additionally, in these textual forms, the construction activity itself becomes evident, which assumes a meaning not only related to the content but also can carry irony, humor, denounce or reinforce prejudices, etc.

Several studies present different proposals for categorizing memes. Lima (2014) proposes a semantic classification of Facebook memes, Recuero (2007) develops a meme taxonomy for weblogs, Chagas (2018) brings a formal classification of photographic memes. Adopting the latter, we have the following typification:

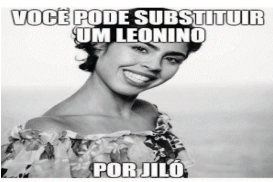
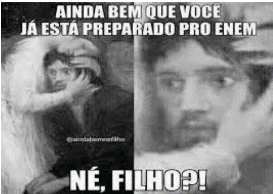
MACRO IMAGE- Images with captions. One of the most widespread formats due to its simplicity.	
EDITABLE- Photo montages in which an element is added on a background scenery, creating variations that reinforce a specific character.	
ZOOMING- a sequence with an image repeated multiple times to emphasize a detail that is highlighted.	
SELFIES- There are variants such as group selfies and belfies, which value the subject's butt.	
POSES- Series that are related by the pose of the photographed. Corresponds to a challenge or an imitated behavior.	
SEPARATED AT BIRTH- A format that displays images of two characters side by side, usually a real person and a fictional character or an animal. It highlights with irony or scorns the similarities between both.	

Table 1: The memes

Source: prepared by the author from Google Images (2020)

In Chagas' (2018) approach, in general, the formal manipulation of the semiosis involved in the elaboration of the meme is emphasized. It is important to note that these are resources for the construction of meaning that characterize the language modality of memes, which goes beyond oral or written, as it is multimodal.

Memes made up of captions stand out for their high voltage, related to users being able to operate the replication of the basic semiosis (usually a photo, a photomontage, etc.) and to add a caption, creating another utterance in the verbal-imagery totality. This is more

common in the macro-image, editable and zooming types. At the same time, the techniques of photomontage, captions, and zooming are also significant resources that can be integrated or not into the caption of the meme.

Both selfies and poses differ from the previous ones due to their more situated nature of the statements. For example, on Bela Gil's meme network, there is an integration between the statements created by users, which is the delicate way in which the host of the cooking program gives suggestions to the audience to replace an ingredient for a healthier one. A traditional *You can replace meat with flaxseed, for example*, generated memes subtitled with *You can replace Alckmin with yam, for example*.

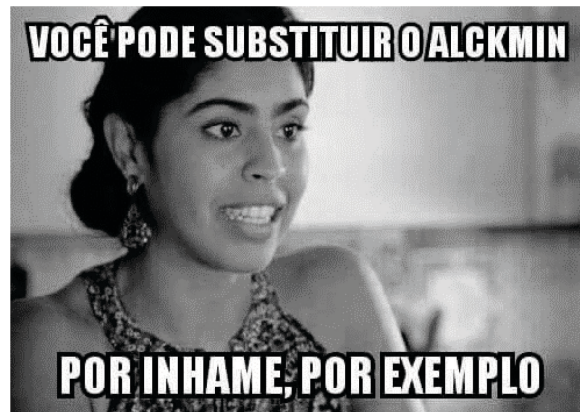


Image 1: Bela Gil's Meme

Source: Google Images (2020)

This is not exactly what happens in the diffusion of selfies and poses. These memes dialogue mainly because of their structural organization, which is the pose or the location.

In memes of the type separated at birth, the construction of meanings, generally pejorative, is achieved by the association between images, almost always not needing the captions. In these cases, the content of memes extrapolates from a mere physiognomic connection between the characters, as they hypersignify (SHIFMAN, 2014), usually attributing political-ideological content or conveying multiple prejudices.

Having exposed the theoretical foundation that underlies the study, we now proceed to the analysis of the *corpus*. Before, we will describe the research methodology adopted.

4 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The corpus under analysis consists of ten photographic memes collected between December 2019 and April 2020. All memes, at the end of the selection period, were still available for access. To generate data, a search was made on Google Images with the term "memes corona beer". The unity of the texts is characterized by the relationship between the contents coronavirus/Covid-19 and Corona beer, which constituted a selection principle.

The data treatment method is qualitative and the objective analysis is to show a) how this relationship is made between the coronavirus/Covid-19 and Corona beer content and b) which meanings are constructed from this relationship. Thus, our observation falls specifically on:

- ✓ the referencing corona activation (photo-based or verbally) and its integration to other textual elements;
- ✓ how the inferential referencing activity takes place in the relationship between the contents;
- ✓ the process of (re)building the meaning of the brand Corona Extra.

5 CORONA: (RE)BUILDING MEANINGS IN PHOTO-BASED MEMES

The set of ten memes collected for this study proposes, from the point of view of functionality, to generate the production of humor from its circulation among users of social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram, and applications such as Whatsapp.

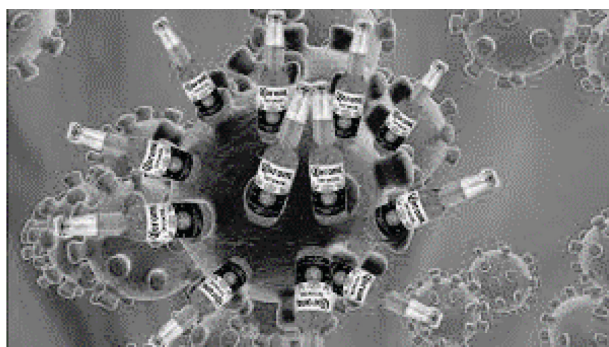


Image 2: Meme (2)



Image 3: Meme (3)

Source: Google Images (2020)

Both memes are the editable type, built by adding the image of the Corona beer with images of the virus in the background. In (2), it is the morphology of the virus in the form of a crown that stands out. Its part called glycoprotein is represented by beer bottles. In (3), the beer image appears inside the virus, as if representing RNA (its genetic material).

In (2), there are no captions, the construction of meanings is established by the relationship between the images. We have then activated both discourse objects: Corona and coronavirus, from which the contents are connected. In (3), captions were used to establish the relationship explicitly and therefore its purpose. From this, the interpretation that beer is the “cold” virus appears.



Image 4: Meme (4)



Image 5: Meme (5)¹

Source: Google Images (2020)

Meme (4) is the Macro-Image type, but meme (5) is the Editable one. In both cases, the association between Corona and coronavirus occurs through the explicit (textual-discursive) activation of the object of discourse mask, which indirectly allows activation by inferential (cognitive-discursive) procedure of the object of discourse coronavirus, even though this is not mentioned imagery and verbally.

In (4), considering the activation of the object of discourse coronavirus, the image of the Corona beer, through a metaphorical referencing procedure, starts to mean the virus itself, namely, the contamination mark. For this reason, oppositely, a group of individuals represented by the competing brand Heineken is put in place, to represent the health community to be protected.

¹ In the verbal text: “Carnival is coming! So, do you have your costume ready?”

In (5), similarly, two types of qualifying senses are opposed: a euphoric one, for Heineken; another dysphoric, for Corona, meanings associated with the catchphrase *Carnival is coming! So, do you have your costume ready?*. Notice that these senses are listed via the imagery (therefore textual-discursive) activation of the objects of discourse carnival mask and protective mask, respectively qualifiers of the Heineken and Corona beer brands.



Image 6: Meme (6)



Image 7: Meme (7)

Source: Google Images (2020)

Both memes (6) and (7) are Editable, in (6) the beer image is modified by the inclusion of elements that try to reproduce the image of a virus. In (6), the label makes it possible to include this meme as editable, since the name Corona is replaced by the name Ebola².

In (6), the caption *How I imagine a coronavirus* is prospective, projecting itself to the image below. The object of discourse *coronavirus* is activated both verbally and photo-based (textual-discursive procedure), the difference in the photo-based referencing is that it is constituted mainly by the beer image, consequently, summarizing and exposing the relation of intended meanings.

In (7), the edit is located at the label and activates the object of discourse *Ebola*, which renames and recategorizes the beer in the image. Thus, even without the caption, *Corona has changed its name to avoid being associated with the virus*, the object of discourse *Corona* would still be activated, for example, by the similarity of the bottle, liquid color, font, and label, besides its logo Corona. However, By adding captions to the image, trying to make explicit the humoristic proposal of the meme, the object of discourse *Corona* and *coronavirus* are activated. For the production of humor, it is precisely the antithesis caused by the edition of the label with the name Ebola, a virus that is also highly dangerous. Thus, it is from this edition that the relationship between Corona and coronavirus content is established. The reader operates with several simultaneous referencing procedures, constructing meanings through a distributed cognition.



Image 8: Meme (8)



Image 9: Meme (9)

Source: Google Images (2020)

² Reference to a highly infectious disease that appeared in the African continent and is also transmitted by viruses.

Meme (8) is the Macro-Image type with two pictures and no captions, while meme (9) is the Editable one, adding both the beer's logo and its name Corona to the yellow t-shirt (copy and paste procedure). Besides, the word virus is also inserted in order to formulate the name *Coronavirus*.

In (8), if we consider each frame alone, it is not possible to activate the object of discourse coronavirus, which results only from the integration of the two elements of the structure. In the first frame, the object of discourse Corona is activated verbally and photo-based only. It is the visual element of the second frame (the man with a mask, gloves, and protective clothing, gesturing distance to a reference point where the beer is located) that requires the procedure of reconstructing the meanings, still partially attributed to the whole discourse of the meme. Then, inferentially, the object of discourse coronavirus is activated and, consequently, the relationship between Corona and coronavirus is established.

In meme (9), as mentioned, both contents, Corona and coronavirus, are associated by activating the object of discourse Coronavirus in the same style of letters and with the crown, the brand's logo. The yellow background can also allude to the color of the drink, to the sun (solar crown, by extension: summer, beach) to which the name of the beer makes mention.



Image 10: Meme (10)

Image 11: Meme(11)

Source: Google Images (2020)

Both memes (10) and (11) are the Macro-Image type with captions, the most common construction due to its uncomplicated elaboration.

The object of discourse *coronavírus* present in (10) is verbally activated in the text. Besides, in the images, the objects of discourse *mask* and *Corona* are also activated. The set of these elements is through a distributed cognition intertwined in the construction of meme meanings, towards the idea of the relationship between Corona and coronavirus.

In (11), the beer image, which activates the object of discourse Corona, is in the foreground. In the caption *This is the only corona I want to get!*, by a resumption procedure, the object of discourse corona is reactivated (the use of the demonstrative *this* and the relevance of the image in the meme indicate the activation of the object of discourse Corona), the target of the content expressed by the verb to catch. In the meme, one plays with the double sense of corona (virus or beer?), indicating that there would be another corona, given the assumption operated by the restrictive adjective *that I want to get*. In this meme, although there is a textual option for beer (not for the virus), the double meaning suggests the association, which in itself represents a depreciation of the brand.

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, we analyzed a corpus of ten photographic memes whose content is about the relationship between the beer brand Corona and the virus/coronavirus/Covid-19. We aimed to understand, from the perspective of referencing processes, how the subjects build this relationship in the elaboration of memes, and what possible meanings arise from it.

The analysis showed that in memes the association between Corona beer (from Spanish) and coronavirus (from Latin corona), may result from the ignorance of the formal similarity of names or from the very deliberate intention of producing humor.

From the compositional structure of memes, several formal resources were adopted to relate the two contents, such as subtitling and photomontage, techniques from which the textual references were introduced in the texts, or suggested for inferential activation by the reader. Thus, in all memes observed, there was textual-discursive or cognitive-inferential activation of the object of discourse coronavirus. As for the interpretation activity, the difference is that the reader, in the second case, needs to integrate a set of information arranged in a not necessarily linear way, being required to carry out a distributed cognition in the (re)construction of meanings in/from the multimodal materiality of memes.

Returning to the title of the article asking whether “Beer or virus?”, the analysis of memes showed that the construction of meanings alternates all the time. Unlike this, both Corona and coronavirus contents were intentionally amalgamated. Thus, it became evident, after the study, that the beer brand Corona, when becoming a meme, was the target of associations that in the texts built negative hypersignification (such as contamination and danger), permeated by a tone of humor.

Finally, don't forget to add that the sharing of memes, being an action to propagate ideas in society, therefore it requires responsibility since it can reinforce values that exalt or destroy a certain image.

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