

## **UKRAINE X RUSSIA: THE GRAMMAR OF VISUAL DESIGN IN UKRAINIAN TWITTER MEMES DURING THE CONFLICT AGAINST RUSSIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This is a study developed under the theme of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia – which erupted in February 2022 and is currently still in action. As a motivation for this study, we noticed that Ukraine had posted a series of memes against Russia on its official Twitter profile, which led to the problem: what meanings are evoked by memes from their instantiation in a multimodal genre? In this article, we aim to present an analysis of the multimodal structure of the genre in a sample of 5 memes, collected between January and March 2022, directly from Ukraine’s official Twitter profile, following the analysis criteria from the Grammar of Visual Design (GVD), proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006). The study has a descriptive and explanatory character. In its theoretical stage, we contextualize memes as a digital language and present the GVD. Results point out to various expressions and positions of resistance and criticism on the part of Ukraine against its invading country, through the visual meta-significations used in the construction of memes.

Keywords: Memes; Grammar of Visual Design; Language; War; Ukraine; Russia.

### **RESUMO**

Esta é uma pesquisa desenvolvida sob o tema do atual conflito entre Ucrânia e Rússia – eclodido em fevereiro de 2022 e ainda em andamento. Como motivação para este estudo, observamos que a Ucrânia postou uma série de memes contra a Rússia em seu perfil oficial no Twitter, o que nos levou ao problema: que significados podem ser evocados pelos memes em suas implicações como um gênero multimodal? Neste artigo, pretendemos apresentar uma análise da estrutura multimodal do respectivo gênero em uma amostra de 5 memes, coletados entre janeiro e março de 2022, diretamente do perfil oficial da Ucrânia no Twitter, seguindo os critérios de análise da Gramática do Design Visual (GVD), proposta por Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006). O estudo tem um caráter descritivo e explicativo. Em sua fase teórica, contextualizamos os memes como uma linguagem digital e apresentamos a GVD. Os resultados apontam para diversas

expressões e posições de resistência e crítica por parte da Ucrânia contra seu país invasor, por meio das metassinificações visuais utilizadas na construção dos memes.

Palavras-chave: Memes; Gramática do Design Visual; Língua; Guerra; Ucrânia; Rússia.

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## **Introduction**

On February 24, 2022, the world witnessed the invasion of eastern Ukraine by Russian troops, the fateful outcome of successive episodes of political, social, and economic tension between the two nations. According to Lima (2019), Putin – who has been in power for more than 20 years – has always been interested in the annexation of specific regions of Ukraine to Russian territory, as a way of restructuring zones of control and influence that were integrated into Russia during the former Soviet Union, along with other satellite countries. In 2014, for example, both countries fought a dispute over the Crimea (Ukrainian) region, a conflict that lasted until the signing of the Treaty of Minsk, resulting in ceasefire and demilitarization of the regions, but which was, indifferently, violated by both nations. In today's conflict, the invasion that already started in a socially violent way, in a few weeks became a conflict of binational proportions, armed, violent, heavy, and long-lasting – even revising rumours about a Third World War, namely the Nuclear Apocalypse.

However, a curious factor has grabbed the attention of many Internet users who follow the conflict on social media: among various contents posted by Ukraine on its official Twitter profile, we can find a variety of memes that mock Russia. Some of these memes even predate the war, according to an article by the news broadcaster Jovem Pan (2021), memes that show manifestations against Russia's actions and tensions on the border had already been circulating around Ukraine since December 2021, when attacks were imminent. More examples are accounted for over the course of the conflict and posts were quite numerous and constant by Ukraine. Practically every new event, advance and different episodes that occurred in the war – even at the present time of this work – were posted.

Thus, when considering the context of a contemporary conflict of such severe proportions between two powers, it is up to us to pose questions so that we can reflect on: how are these memes constructed? What is the message deployed by them? What multimodal resources are used? By synthesis, what meaning does Ukraine seek to construe in these memes?

In view of the above, we have collected a sample of 5 memes directly from the Official Ukrainian Twitter for this study. Therefore, our objective is to present an analysis of the multimodal structure of the genre meme, based on the criteria of the Grammar of Visual Design (GVD), proposed by Kress

and van Leeuwen (2006) – a reference in studies to understand the organization of textual/visual pieces, their meaning production and their respective processes. Next, we present some theoretical propositions with a look at memes, in order to contextualize this genre of text that fully composes our corpus of analysis, followed by the methodological aspects of the study (with the aforementioned method), and its results.

## 1. Memes as digital language

For Chagas (2020), creator of the Museu de Memes project and researcher on the subject, memes are a contemporary and complex digital language of humour, producing meaning (Museu de Memes, 2020). A predominant language on the internet such as in websites, social media and other web environments, memes address various topics such as social life, politics, education, economy, health, the media and media figures, world events, among others. In general, meme is a language whose various pieces we find on the web are profoundly revealing of our culture, consumption and experience of the world (Museu de Memes, 2020). Practically, we can even infer that, on the internet, we “meme” everything we live, know and experience.

No wonder, Chagas (2021) presents memes as units of cultural transmission. The term meme first appeared in Dawkins’ work *The Selfish Gene* (2007). Dawkins (2007) coined it to designate information structures capable of multiplying from mind to mind, brain to brain as if they had a life of their own – in a broad capacity for replication, transformation and predominance. As examples, the author mentions songs, melodies, pieces of clothing, apparel, catchphrases, utensils, and their usability, among others.

As recognized by Chagas (2020) in his contextualization at the Museum of Memes, it is from this origin and systematization that the term meme gains association with the language that we know from internet, through jocular, unpretentious content or even useless culture. The author condemns, however, the treatment of the meme as mundane and disruptive content; he recognizes in it a high discursive potential, producer of sense and significance – demanding, therefore, its wide need for study. In accordance to Chagas (2020), in the field of studying memes, it is assumed to “understand the motivations and manifestations that are expressed”<sup>1</sup> within these humorous contents, but, above all, in their messages endowed with deeper meanings.

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<sup>1</sup> In the original: “compreender as motivações e manifestações que são expressas”.

In this way, we question: how is a meme formed? First, we should consider them as texts composed of two or more semiosises<sup>1</sup>, thus characterizing themselves as a multimodal text. As for the study of its structure, and, consequently, the way it performs its functions of meaning production, Barreto (2020) lists three elements that structures a meme: intertextuality, multimodality and message.

The intertextuality of memes refers to the elements they use to establish relationships, composition games, comparisons or other strategies that will support their meaning, joke, humour, and message. For example, a meme, that in its message employs a political subject and, in its elements, uses superhero characters, in a message of critical irony, mockery or other tones. The multimodality of the meme concerns its format, the way the information (instantiated by various semiotic elements) is organized in the text and which, finally, will lead to the reading. For example, a meme that features two comparative images, or a video, a gif, a photo, a collage, among others. Finally, let us consider the message as the soul of the meme, never alone, but always supported by the other two characteristics. It is the synthesis of the memefication agent's discourse: it carries and references all your thoughts, reflections, or other intentions sought by those who create the meme (Barreto, 2021).

Reading and understanding the meme, therefore, require references and a background of prior knowledge on the part of the reader about all the contexts present within the meme; without this knowledge, reader will not see through its discursive layer, he/she will be restricted to the superficial, he/she will not establish signification processes and the meme will have no meaning to he/she. Finally, it will be the jocular content referred to by Chagas (2020) as mistaken in terms of the classification of what is a meme.

All memes, therefore, are ideological contents, and such ideology is present in their words, especially in the game of meaning sought by the meme-making agent, in the format in which the meme is constructed. For Bakhtin (2006: 96), all our words are loaded with "content or ideological

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<sup>1</sup> "Semiosis is, so to speak, an action that involves sign, object and interpreter and, according to Nöth (2008), it makes the sign have a cognitive effect on the interpreter and generates new signs. According to Peirce's definition, the concept of semiosis, the action of the sign, is characterized as an eminently evolutionary activity. Santaella (1992), analyzing the implicit logical issues in this Peircean concept, refers to a logical engendering, as the primordial function of the complex of relations that exists between the three elements of the sign trichotomy: sign, object and interpretant." (Almeida and Silva, 2017: 207).

meaning”<sup>1</sup>, and memes are no exception; on the contrary, the critical reading of a meme presupposes the explicitness of the ideologies circulating in discourse.

In the context of this study, it is up to us to understand how the memes posted by Ukraine on its official Twitter profile, during the conflict against Russia, are loaded with ideological meanings that express, explicitly or implicitly, the ex-Soviet country’s thinking and position, as to the actions of its invader and attacker. And the reading of these memes presupposes, as Chagas (2020) envisions, the interpretation of their meanings. It presupposes an understanding of these meanings through ways in which they are constructed, the contexts in which they are posted, their semiotic elements, messages and other resources used to convey the discourse that Ukraine wants to communicate, during the war, to the media, to the world’s population, to internet users and anyone else following the conflict.

In the next topics, we present the methodological aspects of this work, the theory that underlies our study and analysis, and the results constructed according to a delimited proposal.

## 2. Methodological aspects

Having made our introductory considerations for the contextualization of this article and its *corpus* of analysis, the memes, it is up to us to define this as a study of a qualitative, descriptive, and explanatory nature, on the topic of the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia. A qualitative study, according to Michel (2009), by making use of the analysis of non-numerical or rational data, but with a look at real-world facts and events, establishes connections with the influence exerted by the environment or context, thus enabling the construction of perspectives.

Let us consider as (1) fact and (2) context, respectively, (1) the curious practice of producing and sharing memes by Ukraine on its official Twitter profile, which we assume, therefore, a language that is openly demonstrative of the voice and position of the nation about Russia’s actions during (2) the conflict that started at the beginning of 2022, which had been increasing and turning more violent over the months. And let us, therefore, consider, as perspectives for theorizing, our construction of interpretive results regarding the meanings and manifestations carried by these memes – as proposed in the objective of the work.

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<sup>1</sup> On the original: “conteúdo ou sentido ideológico”

Composing our *corpus* of analysis, five (5) memes were collected directly from the official Ukrainian Twitter, from January to March 2022. It is important to clarify that the memes were posted and are still present on the profile. This determined collection time composed the stages of the work when in design and initial stages and was maintained to ensure an analysable sample in a timely manner for the development of the study.

The study, by addressing specific points such as memes (the conflict between the two debated nations) and the theory of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2000), making use of moments of description and contextualization of each of the examples for theoretical basis to the reader, also assumes a descriptive and explanatory character (Gil, 2002).

Thus, understanding memes, in the perspectives of Chagas (2020) and Barreto (2021), as digital language constituted of multimodality in its structure, we use the theory of Visual Design Grammar, proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), which will be explained in the subsection “The grammar of visual design”.

### **3. The grammar of visual design**

Based on the work of Fernandes and Almeida (2008: 31), we can understand that, before unveiling meaning about messages contained in verbal texts, images or other pieces (of language?) that present certain discursive constructions, “it is necessary to know how to identify the elements used to interact with the observer and construct, for him, an interpretive position”. We consider the text, both in its pure state as well as composed visual pieces, as ordered structures, endowed with specific elements (expressions, symbols, signs, etc.) that add up as meaning-producing resources. The construction of meaning, therefore, is nothing more than the process in which the observer performs the reading on each of these elements, sees through the surface layer of the text and goes beyond: it permeates, through interpretation, its ideological layer.

The method of Visual Design Grammar, proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) offers us a possibility to analyse systematically visual objects (and mixtures of text and image), independently of their structures and rules. The method, by highlighting image analysis, demands knowledge and literacy from the reader about the object. In other words, it is a semiotic process to project order into the elements that make up a piece to perceive patterns in its structure and thus building meaning and sense. From

that, let us see how the method is favourable to the reading and meaning of memes. Previously, we understand from Chagas (2020) and Barreto (2021) that memes are nothing more than visual pieces that compose verbal texts with images and that, through elements of intertextuality and multimodal dispositions, support/underpin their messages. Given its infinite possibilities of combination, arrangements of elements and treatments of messages, together with the need for references that the meme reader must have in order to conceive its meaning, this native language of the digital universe shows itself as a fertile field for the application of reading through the Grammar of Visual Design (hereinafter, GVD).

The GVD is closely related to the propositions from Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL), mainly with regards to language metafunctions<sup>1</sup>, described in Systemic-Functional Grammar (SFG), by Halliday (1985). By proposing a description of the roles of non-verbal language in the construction of meanings, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) present an analytical model “that allows the reader to better understand the construction of meanings and the importance of language as a mediating instrument of social relations”<sup>2</sup> (Vargas 2018: 45). The authors classify the visual pieces into three different metafunctions, equivalent to the SFG’s metafunctions: representational, interactive and compositional meanings (or metafunctions), based on the image’s semiotic code.

The representational metafunction is present in visual structures that build, through their elements, events and their natures; it tells us what is happening in the image, creates a scene for our interpretation and, mainly, works on the relationships between the elements that are presented. Representational meanings are classified into two types: narrative, with focus on processes, and conceptual, with focus on participants. In the narrative structure, “there are vectors indicating which actions are being carried out”<sup>3</sup> (Fernandes and Almeida 2008: 13), or speech and/or thought bubbles. There are four types of narrative processes, proposed by Kress and

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<sup>1</sup> For Halliday (1985), language instantiates three metafunctions, namely: ideational, responsible for re-presenting the social actor’s world experiences; interpersonal, responsible for instantiating the modes of interaction between social actors; and textual, responsible for the organization of language in text.

<sup>2</sup> On the original: “que permite ao leitor maior compreensão sobre a construção de significados e a importância da linguagem como instrumento mediador das relações sociais.”

<sup>3</sup> On the original: “há a presença de vetores indicando que ações estão sendo realizadas.”



Van Leeuwen (2006): action, when some element of the image works as a vector that relates the participant-actor to the participant-goal; of reaction, when “a participant takes as a starting point, his gaze towards someone or something”<sup>1</sup> (Fernandes and Almeida 2008: 15); verbal, when the participant-speaker has his/her speech highlighted by the use of a speech bubble; and mental, when there is the presence of a thought bubble that presents the thought content by the participant-experiencer.

In the conceptual framework, participants are represented “in terms of their particularities: their class, structure, or meaning. They define, analyse or classify people, objects or places”<sup>2</sup> (Fernandes and Almeida 2008: 13). Conceptual representations are classified into three types: classificational, analytical and symbolic. “The classificational conceptual representation has participants (subordinates and superordinates) belonging to the same group or class, due to the characteristics they present”<sup>3</sup> (Ferreira and Bortoluzzi, 2009: no page). The analytical conceptual representation “reports participants in terms of a part-whole structure. They involve two kinds of participants: one Carrier (the whole) and any number of Possessive Attributes (the parts)” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006: 87). In the symbolic representation, “the participants are represented by their meaning, and this is done through the effects of colours, sizes, light, etc.”<sup>4</sup> (Ferreira and Bortoluzzi, 2009: no page). About the symbolic conceptual representation, Kress and Van Leeuwen explain that

Either there are two participants – the participant whose meaning or identity is established in the relation, the Carrier, and the participant which represents the meaning or identity itself, the Symbolic Attribute – or there is only one participant, the Carrier, and in that case the symbolic meaning is established in another way, to be described below (2006: 105).

The interactive metafunction, as the name suggests, is present in visual representations in which their elements interact with the observer, establish-

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<sup>1</sup> On the original: “um participante toma por ponto de partida, o seu olhar rumo a alguém ou alguma coisa.”

<sup>2</sup> On the original: “em termos de suas particularidades: de sua classe, estrutura ou significado. Definem, analisam ou classificam pessoas, objetos ou lugares.”

<sup>3</sup> On the original: “A representação conceitual classificacional tem participantes (subordinados e superordinados) pertencentes ao mesmo grupo ou classe, pelas características por eles apresentadas.”

<sup>4</sup> On the original: “os participantes são representados pelo seu significado e isto é feito por meio dos efeitos de cores, tamanhos, luz, etc.”

ing approximation or distancing strategies; in these cases, contact resources (look), social distance, perspective and modality are employed. Regarding the contact, the interactive meaning is given by the participant's gaze, which can direct his/her gaze directly to his/her interlocutor, characterizing a demand for interaction. But if the participant's gaze falls on some object, or outside the interlocutor's field of vision, we have the characterization of an offer. With regards to social distance, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) emphasize that it is manifested, in the image, by the size of the frame, that is, the way in which the participant is presented in terms of close-up (or close-up), medium plan and open plan. Vargas (2018) explains that when the participant is presented in a closed plan, with greater focus on the face, the social distance between the participant represented in the image and the viewer of the image is small and can be considered more intimate. The average plane, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), is the distance used in professional social interactions; in face-to-face interaction, it is equivalent to an arm's length away. It is the mark of cordiality. Finally, the open plan is one in which the participant appears in full body and with a background, situated, therefore, in an interactional context. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006: 125) explain the type of open plan distancing as follows: "Public distance', finally, is anything further than that, 'the distance between people who are and are to remain strangers'".

Regarding the perspective, it determines the point of view of the observer in relation to the participant and is given by the angle of capture of the image. Vargas (2018: 54) explains that "the points of view can, in this way, be naturalized and presented as "studies of nature", faithful copies of empirical reality. There are three types of points of view or angles: frontal, oblique and vertical"<sup>1</sup>, which denote power relations between the participant and the observer. When the participant is represented in his/her frontal angle, the type of power relationship that is established between the participant and the observer is one of relative equality. On the other hand, when the angles are oblique and horizontal, the power relations are asymmetric between the represented elements and the observer; the closer elements are those that receive more attention, while the more distant ones configure a kind of background, being perceived last. The vertical angle also represents an asymmetry of power between participant and observer, with the former assuming power

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<sup>1</sup> On the original: "os pontos de vista podem, desta forma, ser naturalizados e apresentados como "estudos da natureza", cópias fiéis da realidade empírica. Há três tipos de pontos de vista ou ângulos: frontais, oblíquos e verticais."

when the image is captured from bottom to top; or the second being more powerful, when the image is captured from top to bottom.

Regarding modality, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) consider that images can represent reality with a greater or lesser degree of abstraction, precision, clarity, and the like, from the mechanisms of the use of colours, contextualization, representation, depth, lighting and brightness. In this case, the way in which the mechanisms are used in the production of the image makes the observer have emotions and feelings for the image and what is represented in it.

The compositional metafunction, finally, is present in those pieces in which the representational and interactive functions intersect in a single composition, so that it can make sense. The dependence between the two, for this purpose, therefore, must be made explicit. The way in which the compositional meaning is realized is through the organization of the elements in the image. This organization can be perceived by the observer in aspects such as the frame (whether or not there are limiting elements in the image and which types are presented), margin x centre relationship (where is the most important element of the image or is there not an element more important than the others), (non) linearity of the elements. For Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), image reading depends on its composition. Fernandes and Almeida (2008: 31) present and demonstrate the application of this method, in their work, through the reading of war/political posters, and recognize that Kress and Van Leeuwen “provide a theoretical apparatus that allows us to analyze and produce visual structures”<sup>1</sup>. In this article, we use the theoretical-methodological perspective of Visual Design Grammar to understand the meaning of memes in a political context, posted on Twitter in Ukraine during the conflict against Russia.

For Chagas (2018: 10), “political memes occupy a privileged position among other apparatuses [...] to conceptually define political communication strategies”<sup>2</sup>. According to the author, this happens due to the way they are built, possibilities of elements to be used and different ways of working the message through the combination with images. For Chagas (2018), digital memes, when linked to politics, can perform the same functions that a printed political poster/poster would also perform, however, in the digi-

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<sup>1</sup> On the original: “fornecem um aparato teórico que nos possibilita analisar e produzir estruturas visuais.”

<sup>2</sup> On the original: “memes políticos ocupam posição privilegiada entre os demais aparatos [...] para definir conceitualmente estratégias de comunicação política.”

tal field, for the digital public. In summary, therefore, political memes are equivalent to political posters; and, considering Barreto (2021), posters that can assume the most diverse tones: irony, criticism, mockery, among others.

Therefore, as recognized by Fernandes and Almeida (2008: 31), proposals such as GVD, by Kress and Van Leeuwen “emerge as an important tool for image analysis [...] both for the construction of these texts and for its critical analysis”. We continue, in the next topic, with an exposition of our collection and analysis of the memes posted by Ukraine on their official Twitter account, their senses and meanings. During the exposition of the analysis, we also explain the GVD analytical categories related to the interactive metafunction.

#### 4. Analysis of memes on ukraine twitter

The first meme collected was posted in the second week of January 2022, weeks before the invasion took place, and brings a text message that establishes a critique of the idea of a crisis in Ukraine: it brings, in its text, the message “stop saying ‘Ukraine Crisis’. There is no crisis. There is a bad neighbour”. The meme uses a frame from the cartoon “The Simpsons”, with the character of Lisa Simpson carrying the speech. See Figure 1.



Figure 1. Meme I, Lisa Simpson

Considering the visual elements that can be captured from the meme, the character Lisa Simpson appears in evidence on what looks like an auditorium stage, in front of a screen where the message is displayed – guaran-

teeing authority within the message of the image to the observer. Applying the reading of these elements by GVD, we clearly perceive in the image an approximation of Lisa's relationship (in this case, the interlocutor actor in the meme, who in itself represents the voice of the memeficator agent) with all of us, observers of the meme – giving her the interactive metafunction.

Within this interaction established by the meme, therefore, considering the points of contact, social distance and perspective, highlighted by Kress and Van Leeuwen within the interactive metafunction of the image, we have the character Lisa observing us with a look of seriousness and criticism, in a distance between average to open, as if we could observe it with clarity and impact on the auditorium of this constructed scene, from a frontal perspective, *contra-plongée* – perspective angle in which we see the actor/object from the bottom up, emphasizing its superiority in front of us. When added to its message, enhanced by all this combination of elements, we see that the meme clearly takes on a tone of reproach against us, the interlocutors, based on the principle that we have – or were induced to have – the idea that there is a crisis in Ukraine and not, in fact, the clear intention of Russia to invade the country and take its points of interest for itself – as Ukraine, through the meme, warns us.

The second meme collected is quite symbolic and has a completely different function. It brings the figures of Adolf Hitler, dictator leader of Nazi Germany, together with Vladimir Putin, current ruling leader of Russia – the modern czar, as portrayed by the media universe. See Figure 2.



Figure 2. Meme II, Hitler and Putin

The image does not contain any text, and essentially uses the relationship between its elements to build an interpretive meaning for us – which provides for the representative metafunction. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) break this metafunction down into two smaller categories: the narrative representative metafunction and the conceptual representative metafunction. The first consists of creating narrative processes where the image elements establish actions, reactions or verbal/mental processes; the second treats the elements from their representative particularities (comparatives, etc.).

In this sense, let us see that the figure of Adolf Hitler – on the left and higher in the image, in relation to Putin – is the actor who, therefore, is in evidence, who initiates the establishment of a narrative in the image by performing an action: the caress over Putin's face. The figure of the Russian leader, in turn, outlines a chorused facial expression as a reaction, pleasure with the gesture of what seems to be recognition on the part of the other character – as if both were father and son, in a narrative, in a moment of tenderness. This narrative is consolidated from the establishment of this action-reaction gesture (caress/smile) between the figures, as well as the exchange of glances and the positions (symbolic height) of Hitler and Putin, which act as vectors to guide the interaction between the elements of the image (characters), and our reading.

From this reading, it is a clear representative narrative metafunction strategy used in the image, by Ukraine that posted it on its Twitter, to imply (without any use of text) the comparison between the leader of the invading country with the other leader who, once, in Europe, also started a war by invading foreign territory, being also responsible for the greatest extermination of lives in the history of humanity.

The third meme, out of all five, is possibly the one that most presents us with elements used in the construction of its meaning to support the message and to base its meaning. This is now a comparison between Vladimir Putin and the leader of Ukraine himself, President Volodymyr Zelensky – however, whether the intention was to match the figures, now we will see a purposeful (and structured) explanation of differences. See Figure 3.



Figure 3. Meme III, Putin x Zelenskiy

Beforehand, let us see that this is a meme with the use of the representative-conceptual metafunction to establish the difference between the two figures. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) point out, it is a function to analyse or classify people, objects or places. The representative conceptual strategy used in the meme was, initially, to draw four (4) comparative parameters between Putin and Zelenskiy: family, militarization, diplomacy and location; this information is arranged in columns, one for each leader, so that the visual reading of the piece is done, in linear order, from top to bottom, from left to right.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) highlight that, unlike the narrative representation, in the representative-conceptual metafunction, there are no vectors (movements, glances, gestures, etc.), as there is no action/narrative being constructed, which is exactly the conceptual representation of all the aspects that constitute and characterize the elements employed by the image. And the reading that we are led to conceive, therefore, is of a cold, lonely Putin, apparently without allies, without diplomatic openness, and not even a defined location for knowledge of his own army. All this, in contrast to the reading of a familiar Zelenskiy, who appears smiling or relaxed in all images, who dresses informally, who is with his family, with allies, who can be found in the palace of the Capital of Kiev and who, in general, conveys equality to

its entire population – including internet users, given the self-representative visual and textual language adopted.

The fourth collected meme also uses a columnar structure to construct its meaning – however, returning to a previous format, performing a representative-narrative metafunction, as we will see. It features two frames from the movie *Spider-Man* and two photographs of the context of the conflict. See Figure 4.



Figure 4. Meme IV, Peter Parker

The narrative, at this moment, is perhaps clearer to visualize than in the previous example. Having the linear reading mode, but now from left to right, from top to bottom, promptly at the first frame (upper left) we see the character Peter Parker performing the action that starts the narrative: putting on his contact glasses; as a reaction to this, the narrative shows us (top right) a large row of Russian war tanks in motion, framed with the Kremlin in the background, as if leaving the Russian capital, all armed and loaded, leaving for war; Peter's gaze forms the vector that directs us to the tanks. Following the narrative (bottom left), Peter finishes putting on his glasses, implying that he is able to see clearly; the answer (bottom right) final reaction and, therefore, conclusion of the narrative, shows us a row of downed war tanks, amidst flames and wreckage.

As in the previous figure, of Hitler and Putin, the character's look again forms a vector that indicates the interpretive direction to look and



build the meaning of the narrative – as proposed by the memefication agent; the tanks, due to their shape and positioning, also show themselves as moving vectors, starting the conflict. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) emphasize that the vector is always the link between the elements to establish the narrative. And within this narrative, similar to a newspaper strip, we can induce the evocation of a mockery joke from the representation established by the visual metafunction of this meme – as if Ukraine communicated the ease of destroying the opposing forces from one moment to the next, in the blink of an eye, of a “put on/adjust the glasses” gesture.

Let us consider the order of Peter Parker’s frames appears inverted in the film<sup>1</sup>, possibly on purpose to lead the reader further into this process of meaning: into the specific message that Ukraine is prepared to fight the forces of its invading country, and that it has no intention of yielding.

The last meme collected, finally, brings all the information within the same image – without collages or montages. In the image, two windows are displayed, the first of which reads “Ukrainian citizenship”, the second “invest in Russia”. In the first, a large and tumultuous queue; in the second, few people, almost empty. See Figure 5.



Figure 5. Meme V, Ukranian Citizenship

<sup>1</sup> First, the character is wearing glasses, and then he takes them off, realizing he has superpowers.

We have in this meme a work of intertextuality, as Barreto (2021) observes about the memetic structure in general. In the example in question, the use of the resource is treated not through elements, but through the events that originate the meme – it is first necessary to understand to what it refers the meme deals with the events that followed the weeks of the conflict, described in articles such as Pennington (2022), on CNN Brazil: after the deputy interior minister of Ukraine, Yevhen Yenin, declared that all those foreigners who volunteered to fight for the Ukraine would be honoured with eligibility for local Ukrainian citizenship, more than 16,000 foreign fighters have emerged to fight against Russia, plus another growing number in humanitarian aid to Ukraine. As Pennington (2022) points out, the number continues to grow, as does the Ukrainian-foreign combat contingent.

In the meme, by addressing these facts, Ukraine satirically shows us the world's lack of interest in investing in Russia during times of conflict, at the same time as the Ukrainian population itself and growing support (long queue) aiming citizenship and, therefore, of the forces received. Analysing the meme from the perspective of Visual Design Grammar, we have the people within the speeches as participants in the narrative that is being built, at the same time that their looks and positions towards the counters make up the respective vectors that guide our interpretation – and that give meaning to the narrative. According to Fernandes and Almeida (2008: 13), in their analysis of political/war posters, these participants are always engaged “in events and actions” under “the presence of an action, performed by a vector or trace that indicates directionality” given the visual construction the representative-narrative metafunction. And the narrative that is built, once the reader has knowledge about the original event of the meme, is quite simple: as an action that marks its beginning, we have the long queue to acquire Ukrainian citizenship, which, in turn, represents Ukraine's strength and alliance superiority in that context; as a response/simultaneous action and which also gives the meme a joking and mocking tone, we have the empty row in the window for “investing in Russia”.

Returning, again, to the points established by Barreto (2021) regarding the intertextual and multimodal structure to support the meme message, we can infer that the use of the intertextual resource is present with more emphasis in this last meme than in relation to the others. Without references, the meaning of the meme cannot be reached, its interpretative layer cannot be deepened. In memes IV and I, where intertextuality was employed by using the characters of Peter Parker and Lisa Simpson, we can

see that the use of their figures was intended only to match the visual tone and the narrative built in the meme in order to provide meaning – not being necessary, therefore, on the part of the reader, a deeper knowledge about who they are or what they do.

In a different tone, in meme II, where the comparison between Putin and Hitler is established through the intertextual junction between their figures in the same narrative, it is necessary for the reader to know – by the physical/caricatured appearance – who each of them are, effectively, and what they represent within the conflicts of the world with which they relate. Bearing this baggage in mind, it is possible for the reader to establish the meaning process through the comparative narrative that the meme establishes. In example III, finally, where no intertextual element is employed, the reader must basically use the interpretative process within the conceptual comparative representation that the image builds.

As for the multimodal aspect, we have comparative images, drawing frames, films, collages, caricatures, among others. For Chagas (2018), the easiness of meme production is due to the practicality of using visual resources in a simple way, in easy-to-understand layouts, useful for synthesizing messages, effective to be transmitted. Let us face it, meme is basically a digital poster – and it does its job. For this reason, Chagas (2018) recognizes them as very useful to disseminate messages and ideologies in an accessible way when in political contexts.

Therefore, when we see the messages transmitted by Ukrainian memes, we can interpret a discourse of resistance, on the part of Ukraine, aimed at its population, expressing positions of attested reproaches and condemnations before the actions of Russia and its leader, Vladimir Putin, at the same time in which they do not intend to cede their territories under any circumstances, regardless of Russian demands or advances. Not restricted to that, the metafunctions employed in the visual construction of the meaning of the memes messages also express criticism and mockery against the movements of the other country – which shows us an appropriation, by Ukraine on its Twitter, of profound authority over the language of the meme and its systematic.

### **Final considerations**

Upon completion of this study, in relation between authors such as Chagas (2018; 2020), Barreto (2021) and Bakhtin (2006), it is possible to contextualize memes initially as a digital language with strong presence and

influence on the internet and social media, and it is also possible to understand how each meme is – far beyond a mundane piece – an object loaded with ideological elements, representative of cultures, discourses, thoughts and perceptions of the mememaker agent about their observations and experiences about the world.

Through the analysis of the memes collected from Ukraine’s official Twitter account, as read by Grammar of Visual Design, by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), we were able not only to respond to the problem raised at the beginning of the study about which meanings were expressed through these memes, but also, we were able to understand in what ways these meanings were made through appropriations on the language and systematic of memes.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the purpose of this text is not to take sides in the conflict: the authors, as professionals in communication and in humanities, value democracy and human rights, and repudiate any and all practices that go against humanitarian principles or the general well-being of the planet and human beings. It is an analysis with a critical-reflective eye to propose theories and debates about the identified problem.

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