

# Innovation in the Generic Competence of Reflective and Critical Communication, Derived From the Implementation of Multimodal Semiotics as a Didactic, in Communication Sciences Degree

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Educational innovation consists of the implementation of teaching strategies with the interaction of technology applied to teaching, in addition to constant training of teachers, which are fundamental axes to achieve this, of course the main axis in this process is the students, and with this in mind, the Rosario Castellanos University updates its teaching methods in hybridity, with multimodal semiotics in the degree in Communication Sciences, and little by little obtains notable results such as reflexivity, critical thinking, and discourse analysis in the media, in their students.

*Keywords:* educational innovation, hybriduality, multimodal semiotics, analysis of written discourse

## Introduction

### Theoretical Background

In 2019, in its creation as a center of higher education, and previously called the Rosario Castellanos Institute (IRC), the hybrid-dual teaching methodology was carried out, designed to execute self-teaching strategies, where the teacher established a technological dynamism of teaching, but unfortunately this did not happen due to the lack of experience and training of the teachers in this hybrid system, which had an impact on the learning of the students, who reported that it was not meaningful learning, or at least they did not see it that way in this year. Furthermore, the students expressed that they did not have the tools to interpret the content of media products, at the end of their degree, because the examples they saw in their classes were not very dynamic and far from current media and why not say so? digital. That is why this research came to light, since it seeks to contribute to a constructive criticism of the dual hybrid methodology, and of course to give an example of how we can implement a more current didactic strategy that generates significant learning for the student of sciences communication degree.

### Statement of the Problem

Currently and since its creation, the IRC has always sought to train quality professionals so that they can enter the world of work and compete in a good way, given that it is extremely saturated and where many

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professionals in various areas of knowledge are required. Just with the desire to achieve this objective through my teaching practice for three years now, in the degree in communication sciences, I have detected a great problem in the academic training of students, which has to do with the content of a program together with its syllabus of a second semester subject: Semiotics and Analysis of Written Discourse. And what is the problem with this matter? Well, in my teaching practice I have detected that for the purpose of the subject, students are asked to describe and interpret any type of written discourse and its effects at a mass level in a very general way. However, it is never mentioned and much less executed that these discourses are generated in a multimedia era, where they are no longer just written, but visual or audiovisual, where they are oriented for a certain communicative product, which is often massified in a digital version. Therefore, they are complex, with multiple connotative meanings and with a multimodal composition structure given by the nature of their manufacture. That is to say, in the reality of our teaching practice, very little of this archaic purpose is achieved, because the contents of the thematic units of the syllabus are not updated since they include theories that gave the status of science to semiotics, but where are these same theories? They were already surpassed by the current communicative dynamics and the demands of interpreting the messages of the speeches in the communicative products, coupled with this in the class exercises that have been the authentic tasks of the prototypical problem during the semester, where we apply said theories that the syllabus offers us. The students realize that they do not deepen their knowledge in the description and interpretation of the discourses of the messages in current communication products, such as for example a video news, a live chat, a video-conference, an advertising campaign, a message on social networks, etc., that is, they notice that they have only described and interpreted the most basic of these communicative examples such as the syntactic, semantic, and perhaps morphological aspect, but they are interested in knowing more. But the theories they applied do not account for this. In summary, I could mention the specific case of the prototypical problem and its critical incident (gender violence, gender inequality, and women's rights in the media) that is used in the second semester subjects, which consists of raising awareness in students about the ideological harmfulness of misogynistic discourses disseminated in emerging media and social networks, which threatens the physical and psychological integrity of women. Making a comparison between the purpose of the subject and what we ask the student to achieve with the implementation of this prototypical problem and its critical incident is incongruent, because the theories we review are very structuralist and schematic to only identify what the signs are, describe the composition of the discourses and, if anything, identifying the levels of meaning of the discourses, is why we never touched on the issue of social networks, digital villages, visual literacy, cyber-discourses, techno-signs, which today in day became the methodology for interpretive analysis of speeches. It is clear that the syllabus of the subject: Semiotics and Analysis of Written Discourse, is too attached to philosophy, lexical semantics, and formal logic on the origins of semiotics itself, where these aspects could have a space in the syllabus and in the course, but I would think that it was a thematic unit at most.

### **Multimodal Semiotic Theory as a Didactic Strategy**

My teaching experience both in public and private universities as well as in my academic-research training, has allowed me to participate in large symposiums such as national and international annual conferences, in the field of analysis of advertising and semiotic discourse, where a theoretical line called multimodal semiotics. Kress (2010) delves into the analysis of digital signs and the multimodal description of their multimedia components, as well as the comparison between signs, specifically in their communicative effectiveness to attract more

audiences and have greater persuasion, harmfulness, and conviction. However, my second semester students in Communication Sciences are unaware of this theoretical current, but if we want to train professionals of excellence, a first step is to identify, promote, and really teach what communication students need to know about current semiotics to potentialize their capabilities in the world of work.

Precisely in this regard, the Communication student needs to better interpret the discourses in current communication processes that are very fast-paced, immediate, technological, and extremely persuasive, so it would not be enough for us to identify them, if at all, to apply Peirce's philosophical-semiotics. Saussure, Jakobson plans to teach throughout the semester, according to the subject program. By the way, this semiotic approach is much more useful for anthropologists, philosophers, linguists, but not for the professional in life sciences: the Communication.

Multimodal semiotics is a theoretical aspect that aims to understand the structure, composition, semiosis, and semiosphere of signs in the media, since it proposes that there are several ways to convey the messages of discourses in the media of current communication. So if multimodality has this purpose, it makes sense to use it as a didactic strategy because, for example, by returning to the prototypical problems of the objectification of the female gender, from the current perspective, the topic is no longer investigated in a monolinear way, that is, texts and discourses written in newspapers or magazines, but rather it describes, interprets, and reflects on interactive discourses, such as video news, online conferences, or content on social networks, that is, the phenomenon of study in its real context of creation, of course this theoretical current. It delves into the interpretation of the colors used in the image, in the typography, in the audios, in the semantics, in the proxemics of current discourse, that in the end all these elements are considered semiotic modes that determine the structure and meaning of the speeches in the media. Therefore, this theoretical current has greater potential to offer students a more reliable overview of the current communicative reality and would thus function as a novel, dynamic, and fresh didactic strategy.

### **Justification**

Then it would be much more pertinent and functional to consider and teach a semiotic approach that is more in line with the communicative reality that the student in communication sciences experiences today, largely determined also by the digital age, since as already it was argued that multimodal semiotics considers a complex communicative event that implements digital signs to create the interpretive meaning that is made of reality. This semiotics has no longer been divided into logical sign, verbal sign, visual sign, and then moving sign as has been done historically in sign studies. But now it is about capturing and interpreting that immediate media dynamism through intercommunicated signs in the visual communicative space. Concepts such as: discourse analysis, multimodal phenomena, intersemiosis, visual energy vectors, technosigns, are very common to hear in the theories of authors such as: Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran (2016); Kaltenbacher (2007); Kress (2010); Machin (2016); O'Halloran and Lim (2014). These authors have applied semiotic analysis to the discourse of media products with considerable success in various parts of the world, which is why they have applied the same in radio program scripts, movie scripts, in inclusive graphic advertising campaigns, in television spots, in political campaigns, in short films on social networks; That is to say, in every space where communication sciences were manifested, of course the idea that underlies here is that of visual and digital literacy in contemporary societies. It should be noted that for this to work out better, I intend to apply multimodal semiotics as a didactic strategy in the elaboration of the prototypical problem: gender inequality, violence against women, and specifically in the

critical incident: objectification of women in advertising and multimodal discourses in emerging media and social networks.

### **Research Problem**

The generic competence or ability in communication students, which consists of communicating their ideas, reflections, and knowledge to different audiences and contexts using various verbal and non-verbal languages, is worrying, given that in the authentic tasks assigned to them, they have many difficulties in the description and interpretation of signs and more digital ones, which are the basis of their reflections, where we cannot specifically reflect on what we do not understand about a dynamic and technological communicative world.

Therefore, from teaching practice, it is required to strengthen and implement theoretical-didactic strategies from the pedagogical model of hybridity, which help promote and improve this generic competence.

### **Research Question**

What improvements occur when implementing multimodal semiotics as a theoretical-didactic strategy from the pedagogical model of hybridity to promote generic communicative competence in second semester students, of the subject Semiotics and Analysis of Written Discourse, of the degree in Sciences of the Communication?

### **Research Assumption**

Given my teaching-research experience, I take for granted the need to learn semiotics from different approaches that are much more modern than taking into account a communicative reality extremely different from the time of the 40s, the 60s, even from the 90s; Of course, not because of fashion, but because social sciences have to be constantly updated given that human communication processes are changing all the time. When I met and learned multimodal theory at the beginning of the year 2000, I was able to notice that it was a much more dynamic theory that did not seek to section and limit the semiotic potential of signs, but rather sought to integrate that semiotic potential in the interpretation of the discourses of the products of the media, even now this same theory has more current versions given the need that communication is constantly mutating.

### **Research Objective**

Research objective of this paper is to determine and typify the improvements generated with the use of the didactic strategy of multimodal semiotics, from the pedagogical model of hybridity to promote generic competence that consists of communicative, discursive, and reflective skills in various languages. In this case, students of the subject: Semiotics and Analysis of Written Discourse, in the second semester of the degree in Communication Sciences.

### **Conceptual Theoretical Framework**

Linguistic studies have awakened to the idea that texts are inherently multimodal (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016; Kaltenbacher, 2007; Kress, 2010; Machin, 2016; O'Halloran & Lim, 2014). From a broader perspective, it could be pointed out, in fact, that every communicative event is multimodal or multisemiotic in nature, depending on the terminology used. Even though it may be thought that texts are nothing more than words woven cohesively on a page, reality shows that other semiotic resources also participate in the creation of meaning in these texts. Communicative artifacts as common as a news story, an advertising poster, or the cover of a book are clear evidence of this. For example, a news item is generally accompanied by a screenshot that represents the event that occurred, posters make effective use of colors and images representative of what is being promoted,

and the cover of the same book can have different editions, depending on the time in which it was published, the one that was published, and the audience that is expected to be reached.

Likewise, oral texts are essentially multimodal. A simple conversation is naturally accompanied by gestures and, in the case of more formal communicative situations, such as a presentation, it is expected that supporting images or videos will be used. It is clear that the exclusive use of oral language in all the mentioned cases would mean that these texts would not function in the same way in their respective communicative contexts, since they would not be perceived as appropriate by their audience.

The recent interest in multimodality can be associated with changes in the conditions of production, dissemination, and reception of these texts. One of the main causes of these changes is globalization (Kress, 2010). For example, around the world the transition from reading on paper to the screen has become increasingly common, thanks to the existence of devices such as computers, tablets, electronic book readers (e-readers), and cell phones. This has semiotic effects that bring with it multiple possibilities in different areas related to the study of language. Among the research interests related to the new conditions, multimodal literacy (González, 2013; Walsh, 2010), reading comprehension (Serafini, 2011; Parodi & Julio, 2016), and disciplinary identity (Boudon & Parodi, 2014) stand out among others.

Now, the notable rise in attention paid to multimodal artifacts has brought with it the need for methodological proposals for their analysis, especially from the perspective of discourse analysis. The response to this intellectual concern has been called multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) or, simply, multimodality theory (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010). The ADM offers a broad view of the object of study, considering as a unit of analysis not only language, but also images, gestures, music, actions, sounds, and scientific symbolism, which, in their combination, give rise to semantic expansions (O'Halloran, 2012).

There are various perspectives that have taken charge of the studies of multimodal discourse. For example, some authors have sought to identify the multimodal artifacts used in specific discursive communities, through analysis of corpora created based on different academic discourses (Boudon & Parodi, 2014; Parodi, 2010). Others have studied the meaning and effect of multimodal resource choices, both from systemic functional theory (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran & Lim, 2014; Royce, 2007) and with a cognitivist emphasis (Forceville, 2009). Within the first line, the compositional approach (Martinec & Salway, 2005) and the socio-semiotic theory of multimodality (Kress, 2010) stand out; while, from the second, the proposal of the multimodal metaphor stands out (Forceville, 2008). Furthermore, other research avenues have recently been explored, such as multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Zhao, Djonov, Bjorkvall, & Boeriis, 2018) and software-assisted multimodal analysis (Roderick, 2016). These approaches have made use of the resources proposed by classical views, in order to study the linguistic realization of ideology, the possibility of automating analytical procedures through technological resources, and the questioning of the uses of these resources in society current.

Despite the diversity in ADM, these perspectives have rarely been compared, and in the cases in which this exercise has been carried out, it usually focuses exclusively on terminology and/or specific research interests (Kaltenbacher, 2007; O'Halloran, 2012; Parodi & Julio, 2017), thereby leaving aside the discussion of the methodologies used to carry out the analysis of the multimodal artifact.

In this project I consider it useful to apply the socio-semiotic theory of multimodality, given that Gunther Kress (2010) proposes a unifying theory based on previous studies and the theory of social semiotics. He calls this theory socio-semiotic theory of multimodality. This theory conceives a view focused on what Kress calls

design, instead of Chomskian competition. Design is equivalent to individual linguistic realization with interests in present use, taking into consideration the semiotic effects it may have. Similarly, grammar (and the clause as its representative unit) is left aside as the center of communication studies, since it shows little congruence with the unstable present and the semiotic demands that reality imposes. Instead, a change of focus is proposed that considers “semiotic resources” as the center of communication, as these are more comprehensive and more aligned with current communication, which requires that they be constantly reformulated.

Finally, this theory visualizes a movement from a mentalistic and abstract view of language towards a material and corporeal understanding of communication. Therefore, there are three complementary changes of focus in this perspective, which would lead to attention to individual linguistic achievement, semiotic resources, and a corporeal approach.

Furthermore, the socio-semiotic theory of multimodality understands signs as motivated and always remade. That is, these signs created by particular interests are evoked by the context of use, which, in turn, causes the signs to not simply be used, but resemiotized in each particular situation. In this sense, the relationship between form and meaning is one of adequacy (aptness). Adequacy refers to the fact that the form has the requirements to convey the meaning sought, in such a way that it can be noted that every sign is constantly remade (Kress, 2010).

In particular, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) have proposed four analytical strata for the analysis of a multimodal corpus, which are already outlined in socio-semiotic theory. First of all, the stratum of discourse understood as social knowledge must be identified. That is, the discourses that will be used in the communicative act are determined, answering questions of who, how, where, when, and what, in light of the semiotic resources used. Then, the design layer is studied. At this level, the discourses are integrated and studied from the ideational level (ideas that are desired to be communicated) and the material level (semiotic resources for the transmission of the message). Thirdly, the production stratum is analyzed, the level at which the discourses are linked to the resources used that allowed the design to materialize. Finally, the distribution stratum is considered. There it is generated with science regarding the source of dissemination of the message and how this can condition the dissemination of the message. For example, a newspaper that allows short comic strips would limit the author to generating a multimodal text of between one and three panels (Rodríguez & Velásquez, 2011).

## **Methodology**

### **Ethnographic-Qualitative Method**

This article reports the results of a qualitative study with an ethnographic approach. Considering that, for its objectives, this methodological framework is the most appropriate, since qualitative research is understood here as that which is oriented to the in-depth understanding of the phenomena, which uses a more conceptual language, is based on reflection of constant experiences and review during the research construction process, does not start from pre-established hypotheses, and addresses the phenomena contextually by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006). It helps a lot when participants express their experience that results from exposing them to multimodal theory in their multimodal semiotics course; In this sense, what was proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) will be taken up, in their four analytical strata for the analysis of a multimodal corpus, which are already outlined in socio-semiotic theory.

Therefore, that is what it will do, that is, a certain pedagogical activity will be applied to two semiotic groups, where through the ethnography of communication, we learn about their qualitative experiences and they will be reported in this research.

### **Corpus of Study to Be Interpreted**

The two best multimodal semiotic analyses were chosen, carried out on two infographics prepared by two project teams, from two different second semester groups, of the subject of Semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis, which seek to raise awareness about the harmfulness of the topic of objectification of the female gender in emerging media and social networks. For this purpose, the teaching-learning model at the IRC will be resumed, in which we work with prototypical problems, under the face-to-face-hybrid modality, so that this would be added to the multimodal approach that I intend to impregnate in the project teams and thus they have better academic training, and of course this is a parameter for choosing the two best semiotic analyses, given that it is a much more recent and digital semiotics. To reach such an investigative stage, it is necessary to collect a corpus of data to be interpreted through the ethnography of communication methodology, and thus make records of face-to-face classes with this multimodal approach, through participant observation, just to interpret what that route is like of learning with the students, already with this different semiotic approach.

### **Results**

Once the ethnography of communication was carried out in groups 201 and 203 of the subject in Semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis, where the creative process of creating the awareness infographic was followed up, we found that Team 1 of group 201 with their infographic titled: “Woman is not synonymous with violence” and Team 4 of group 203, with their infographic titled “The feminist cause is everyone’s cause”, were the best in executing and presenting the infographic, according to the four analytical strata of multimodal theory; and we were able to record this given that an open interview was applied to them, where they explained their creative processes and how they used multimodal theory.

Both teams point out that, in the speech part, they have more elements to integrate into the infographic, if in their classes they analyze interactive examples, such as photo-reports, video news, since they better understand visual dynamism and not just a textual message. They also point out that, in the design part, they have more tools to design, if and only if in their classes they use applications where they add a lot of visual and social awareness content. Finally, they point out that, in the participatory part of the team, this is improved because the same multimodal semiotics requires them to investigate in independent work, in order to bring their progress and share it in group discussions and thus, no one is excluded from the final work, it is clear that multimodal semiotics invites group reflection on social issues that appear in the media. According to the objective of the research that was proposed, we can argue that these analytical strata applied by the members of the project teams are the changes for improvement in reflective and critical communication, since they place each team at a level of interpretation more real, conscious, and capable of generating an innovative communicative product (for example, an infographic), since it integrates a discourse (with substantiated signs) typical of the team, a different design, which can open a space in the working world (a future) and of course at the production level, sharing ideas and debates to build a collaborative production.

### **Conclusions**

Research contributes to developing concepts, approaches, and schemes that refine the perception and interpretation of communicative phenomena. That is, it provides teachers with new categories and perspectives that contribute to the development of higher quality teaching, such as multimodal theory. It presupposes and induces a critical attitude in relation to educational processes and the structure of teaching in communication

sciences. This critical attitude represents the first step towards educational innovation, this being an important pillar of the quality of teaching, which is also reflected in the students of Communication Sciences. It seeks to help support the analysis of the limitations and proven deficiencies of the educational system in the URC. These analyses constitute the starting point for the development of innovation and renewal processes in teaching from now on at the URC.

It also supports the development of models of educational activity, teaching materials, curricular approaches, and evaluation procedures that serve as support for the effective and concrete renewal of teaching, for example, that one day teaching materials will be developed with multimodal theory to carry out a better and more complete semiotic analysis of communicative products to generate social awareness that would be ideal for the URC.

In the case of the second semester groups and in particular the selected project teams, they are an example of how educational innovation is more than necessary and where, with adequate monitoring, significant learning is achieved. The analytical strategic was applied to this research, consequently progress was noted, at the discursive level, where the students generated more, more interactive signs and thus had a more well-founded discourse about the social causes, derived from reviews of more real examples, in their semiotics classes, from a multimodal perspective. Later, at the design level, they can choose the appropriate digital tool, if in their classes they previously review the most functional apps to create an awareness infographic. At the production level, it was sought at all times for it to be a collaborative and integrative work within the project team and for its infographic to be hosted on a social network in order to have greater media impact, an objective pursued at all times by the multimodal trend; and this in the end is a significant learning, since the student now perceives that he is not only doing school work, but that he can directly influence the media world and, why not say it, work.

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