

#humansof: language, identities and multimodal narratives in the digital society

#Humansof: linguagem, identidades e narrativas multimodais na sociedade digital

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ABSTRACT

In the current paper, we discuss inter-relations amongst identities and narratives in the digital society. Assuming a dialogic and sociohistorical perspective to languages and culture (Bakhtin, 1986; 1993), we present selected findings from a digital ethnographic investigation (Pink et al, 2016) that aimed to map the cyberspace in search of narratives connected to the criterion “#humansof”. Objectively, we exam excerpts of two social profiles, “Humans of Curitiba” and “Humans of Ghana”. Drawing our interpretations from the concept of narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1991), our analysis suggests that both profiles employ transmedia narrative (Jenkins, 2011) and multimodality to build up online stories about local communities/people that are geographically, socially, and culturally distant and distinct. Meanwhile, they adopt the expression “humans of” to establish dialogic relations to actively respond to the (original) photographic project “Humans of New York”, thus mobilizing discursive interactions in which subjectivities emerge. We hope this work might contribute to current discussions performed in the educational field, especially those dedicated to contemporary perspectives of Literacies and to the dialogical interfaces established between “the writing society and the digital society”, as Monte Mór (2017) suggests.

Keywords: dialogism, identity, multimodal narratives, digital technologies.

RESUMO

Neste artigo, discutimos inter-relações entre identidades e narrativas na sociedade digital. Assumindo uma perspectiva dialógica e sociohistórica para as línguas(gens) e culturas (BAKHTIN, 1986; 1993), apresentamos alguns dos resultados obtidos em uma pesquisa etnográfico-digital (PINK et al, 2016), que teve por objetivo mapear o ciberespaço a busca de narrativas conectadas ao critério de pesquisa “#humansof”. Objetivamente, examinamos excertos de dois perfis sociais, “Humans of Curitiba” e “Humans of Ghana”. Embasando nossas interpretações no conceito de identidade narrativa (RICOEUR, 1991), nossa análise sugere que ambos os perfis empregam a narrativa transmídia (JENKINS, 2011) e a multimodalidade para construir histórias on-line sobre comunidades/pessoas locais que são/estão geográfica, social e culturalmente distantes. Simultaneamente, eles adotam a expressão “*humans of*” para estabelecer relações dialógicas/respostas ativas com o (original) projeto fotográfico “Humans of New York”, mobilizando interações discursivas em que/das quais emergem subjetividades. Esperamos que

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nosso trabalho possa contribuir para discussões atuais acerca da educação, especialmente aquelas dedicadas a perspectivas contemporâneas dos letramentos e às interfaces dialógicas estabelecidas entre a “sociedade da escrita” e a “sociedade digital”, como sugere Monte Mór (2017).

Palavras-chave: Dialogismo, Identidade, Narrativa multimodal, Tecnologias digitais.

1. Introduction

Narrating one's experiences and inner worlds outlined by beliefs, values and personal perceptions is a human act that has been long performed in different societies. Oral, written and/or visual texts have always been some of the ways in which communities disseminate their knowledge and/or share their hopes and expectations, (inter)connecting discourses. Lately, such narrative practices have relied heavily in the resources of the digital world.

Adopting a critical perspective to literacies, Monte Mór (2017) highlights that the current discussions developed in the educational field should acknowledge that we face a situation in which “the writing and the digital” societies merge, dialogically hybridizing social practices. Accordingly, Blommaert and Maly (2019) suggest that a great deal of the contemporary processes of socialization foster invisible lines drawn between communicative acts performed in and out of the digital universe, as “we live our lives in an online-offline nexus” (Blommaert & Maly, 2019, p.3).

Additionally, we understand that all discursive interactions are acts in which subjects employ utterances³ that are part of a chain in which a previous utterance always affects/results in/anticipates a forthcoming one. This also means that such communication acts are never about “individual acts” (Bakhtin, 1986). Subjects draw new conclusions about the world and the otherness when multiple utterances – originated from/located on different social spheres – meet dialogically, and a great deal of it is now happening in digitally mediated time-spaces.

Conceiving language (and life) in such a manner, we have chosen to observe a phenomenon that embodies relations among language, subjects, and cultures in an extremely particular way: we focus on mediatized and specific language manifestations in/throughout the digital Agora (Azzari, Andrade & Amarante, 2020).

In the face of it, this paper focuses on an excerpt of data gathered in a digital ethnography investigation (Pink *et al*, 2016) in which we mapped the cyberspace in search of multimodal narratives

³ In this paper, we assume a perspective to “utterance” as a broader concept which is contextualized in Bakhtin’s propositions about discursive genres (Bakhtin, 1986; Bakhtin, 2016). Therefore, “utterance” is not taken as a synonym of sentence or statement, but as a central component which materializes and organizes discursive acts/interactions.

connected to the criterion “#humansof”⁴. Specifically, we devote this paper to the discussion of two findings that we collected from different online media platforms dedicated to social profiles: “Humans of Curitiba”⁵ and “Humans of Ghana”⁶.

In the research context, the term “humans of” was first used in 2010 by the photographer Brandon Staton in a worldly-known photographic project entitled “Humans of New York”⁷. It is a verbal-visual narrative dedicated to telling life stories of residents of New York city. His work has shown the potential to portray subjectivities as it discloses texts which (re)present/(re)construct different identities. The multimodal narratives construed within Staton’s project aim to encompass life experiences, portray perspectives about the world and register human emotions.

As we see it, Staton's work has effectively started a series of multimodal narratives which, in turn, have come to bring various other utterances together, ones that are connected to several discursive spheres and that – by appropriating/adopting the expression “#humansof” – have engaged in responsive “acts” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 15) that answer to Staton’s utterances, as it is shown in a myriad of examples we managed to find across the cyberspace.

Hereafter, we closely examine two of those projects we found in order to analyze the discursive interconnections materialized in utterances that, from our point of view, refer to means in which subjectivities/identities of the people/communities from Curitiba and Ghana, which are spotted by them, are constructed and/or represented, i.e., we observe discursive acts that are always performed from/by a certain enunciation position which is always assumed by a subject when they utter (and “become”) in such acts.

In our effort to map the cyber arena, during a four-month period, in 2020, we employed different searching tools such as hashtag trackers, which allowed us to find around 409 different forms of sociocultural manifestations connected to the use of “#humansof” that are supported by different media/platforms. However, wishing to offer a closer look into our findings, we selected only two examples to discuss based on the following criteria: both profiles held narratives found in two of the most recurrently media identified in our search (*Facebook* and *Instagram*), and both findings proved to resort to multimedia narrative practices and multimodal language. Moreover, although both samples were connected by the common use of “humans of”, each of them is representative of points of view of/from local

⁴ The research was partially financed by FAPESP, grant process n. 2020/13927-9.

⁵ Available from: <https://www.instagram.com/humansofcuritiba/?hl=pt-br> and <https://www.facebook.com/humansofcuritiba>

⁶ Available from: <https://www.instagram.com/humansofghana/> and <https://www.facebook.com/humansofghanaofficial/>.

⁷ Available from: <https://www.humansofnewyork.com>. Access: 26 July 2021.

people/communities which are geographically, socially, and culturally distant and distinct, and that stem from the different positions assumed by the subjects in the examined utterances.

Our qualitative interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006) is grounded on a dialogic perspective of language and discourse (Bakhtin 1986, 1983). It also takes into consideration Ricoeur's (1991) concept of narrative identity and Jenkins (2011) and Gosciola's (2012) considerations about transmedia narratives. Other remarkable contributions to our analysis come from discussions offered by Monte Mór (2017) about multimodality and meaning-making processes in the digital society and by Lundby (2008) about storytelling in digital media.

Assuming the relationships amongst languages, cultures, and subjects from a sociohistorical viewpoint and due to the up-to-date nature of our proposal, we believe that this work might contribute to the study of sociocultural manifestations in which (multimodal) narratives are seen as a material mean in which identities might be accessed.

We also hope to pitch in contemporary discussions performed in the educational field, especially those which are dedicated to the understanding of the different roles and places occupied by the digital universe in our current lives. In view of this, it might be of interest to those working with contemporary perspectives of literacies and the (dialogical) interfaces between "the writing society and the digital society", which are concepts we borrow from Monte Mór (2017).

Finally, we believe it can also contribute to the understanding of the applicability of digital ethnography as a resourceful methodology to support investigations aimed at the comprehension of current sociocultural manifestations.

2. Literature review: grounding our discussion

According to Bakhtin (1986, p. 60), "all the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language", though the nature and forms of language use are as diverse as the areas of human activity. During human activities – ones that need to be studied within the scope of their own respective and specific conditions, such as their social sphere, and communicative goals – interlocutors bring unique utterances together. Those utterances are composed by the sum of different elements: the choices and uses of lexical, phraseological, and grammatical language resources (the underpinning language structure), the compositional structure, the theme, and particular (interlocutors') styles. All combined, those elements constitute the speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986). From a dialogic point of view, speech genres are perceived as highly heterogeneous utterances – which are organized/performed in a (more or less) stable manner – as they are constituted by/in different sorts of discursive interactions.

Moreover, Bakhtin (1986, p.63) also explains that language becomes a part of life throughout its utterances, as much as life penetrates language amidst them. A crucial and undeniable consequence of this is that language is seen as a hybrid field where both internal and external forces collide: internal language structures and organization, cultural intersections, life experiences and ideologies (all traits pertaining to discourse), reflect and refract the acts performed by humans in different social contexts.

Within all one might have felt, thought, conceived, and perceived about the world around them, emerges a space for their own subjectivity to be formed – and for utterances to be established (Bakhtin, 1986). In addition, such space is designed within the encounter with/of other utterances, where dialogic relations are built within. Thus, utterances/discourses are always dialogically connected, in a responsive and active chaining process.

Simultaneously, we must acknowledge that utterances are results of/part of acts performed by subjects who always assume axiological positions in/from a certain *locus*. It means that, in their own turn, utterances combine several elements, meanwhile they intercross, combine and/or diverge from previous/future utterances. According to Brait (2006), languages are always ‘made brisk’ by its users, i.e., subjects ‘in charge’ of an utterance are the ones who are responsible for mobilizing the extraverbal elements (experiences, feelings, perceptions, ideologies), which are gathered in meaning-making processes. As we see it, dialogical relations “(...) must clothe themselves in discourse, become utterances, become the positions of various subjects expressed in discourse (...)” (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 183). As a result, dialogical relations are formed in the connections established to the otherness(es).

As suggested by Jordão (2007, p. 21), adopting a discursive approach to language in communicative interactions means to conceive that the values attributed to things are not innate to it, as they express outer perceptions that are artificially attributed to a certain object, and that are viewed through “discursive lenses”. From this point of view, language is understood as “(...)an instance for meaning making”, one in which subjects explain and manifest the world around themselves based on the (discursive) lenses they wear. Conversely, “(...)people always have *experiences* of a reality [that are] culturally and socially construed”⁸ (our translation, emphasis from original).

Focusing on discursive interactions established in digital environments, Jordão (2007) points out that language manifestations in digital environments offer the potential to expand intercultural and transcultural exchanges, as geographical borders are no longer the single most important element used to define culture, for instance.

⁸From the original: “As pessoas têm *experiências* de uma realidade sempre construídas cultural e socialmente...”.

All in all, we consider that online environments allow utterances to stem from different social, geographic, and personal backgrounds. They offer time and space for subjectivities to be materialized in different (forms of) narratives. In consequence, it also makes it possible for us to observe the dialogic relations that result from the dialogues established amongst different utterances.

When it comes to style, multimodality is certainly one of the most distinguishable features of the narratives found in the cyberspace. Although the use of multimodality is not exclusive to the digital ethos, it has certainly regained its force throughout the use of digital devices, as Monte Mór (2017) states. The author explains that it is a feature that enhances the different ways in which subjects engage in meaning-making processes in the “digital society”. Complementary, Gosciola (2012) suggests that multimodality is an important element in “transmedia narratives” because it might encourage sensitive and emotional reactions on viewers, as it results from a combination of auditory, visual and/or other modalities.

Recalling his own original ideas about transmedia narrative, Jenkins (2011, n/p) informs us that the term “transmedia” can be simply defined as “across media”. According to the researcher, his definition takes into consideration the idea that “convergence” refers to “a set of cultural practices”. As transmedia narrative revolves around telling stories across different media, the author highlights that it is also important to notice that “(...)each medium makes its unique contribution to the unfolding of the story”. These conceptual ideas help us understand why social profiles such as *Humans of Curitiba* and *Humans of Ghana* would resort to building up their narratives in multiple digital platforms.

Discussing the construction of (auto)biographic spaces, Arfuch (2010) explores the idea that it is by observing narratives that one might spot how identities are closely related to time and experience. The researcher also states that narratives are also *loci* for the knowledge one has obtained through past occurrences, which usually contributes to shaping one’s perceptions of the present too. In this sense, Arfuch (2010) grounds her ideas on the concept of “narrative identity” that was coined by Ricoeur (1991).

According to the French philosopher, not only are narratives material elements that allow us to access identities, but they are also acts of interpretation, i.e., narrating (one/the other) is interpreting (someone/oneself/something). Ricoeur (1991) explains that although it is not possible for us to directly access someone’s identity (not even our own), it is through the narrative function that we *read* ourselves/the other and then build up our identity interpretations. Additionally, the philosopher affirms that it is the narrative identity that keeps both the character and the permanence of a self together in time.

Having said that, we recall Blommaert & Maly (2019) who state that the interconnectedness between sociocultural practices that happen within the digital and those that take place outside it allow us to draw “invisible lines” – ones we believe that are noticeable in our data. Assuming such a perspective, we think that the utterances we analyze in this work are extracts from larger narratives which materialize

“narrative identities” that mix up the digital and the non-digital spheres, thus making it possible for us to access close-related feelings, ideologies, and discourses.

Teetering those “invisible lines”, the subjects in charge of the utterances in our *corpus* actively share knowledge, perceptions, and experiences. In our opinion, it means that

conceiving being dialogically means that reality is always experienced, not just perceived, and further that it is experienced from a particular position. Bakhtin conceives that position in kinetic terms as a situation, an event, the event of being a self (Holquist, 2002, p.20).

It also implies that the narrative function – which is mobilized by the utterances/speech genres – provides us with the material means we need to identify the dialogic relations as well as to reach out for such identities/selves – what we propose to do in this manuscript by performing an analytic *act*, an event in which we (the researchers) add our own interpretations to the already complex and hybrid combination of interpretations/points of view that embody our data.

All in all, *realities* in our data emerge from *experience* at its utmost meaning – the act of actively engaging in discursive interactions – thus, it implies that subjects assume axiological positions in their utterances.

3. Methodology and procedures

As previously stated, the data excerpt we present in this paper is part of a larger set of results of an investigation in which we employed Digital ethnography (Pink et al, 2016). There is no final consensus to define “ethnography” – as some definitions tend to be more open and others more prescriptive as Pink *et al.* (2016, n/p.) explain. Based on a series of studies previously carried on in different fields (such as anthropology and the social studies), the authors affirm that ethnography is an "interactive-inductive" type of research, "that evolves in design through the study", being flexible enough to fit in the researcher's needs and perceptions. It acknowledges both the roles of theory and of the researcher, viewing humans simultaneously as part object/part subject.

Digital ethnography invites the exploration of the differences that emerge from the presence of the digital universe in our lives: (new) technologies offer (new) ways of engaging with emergent research environments, and it consequently leads to shifts in the practices, as well as in the ethnographers' point of view and performance throughout an investigation. Pink *et al* (2016, n/p) resort to Marres (2013) to affirm that to conduct research that contemplates a digital sociology is not only about "theorizing the digital society, and not just about applying methods to analyze digital social life." Instead, the authors assume that "the relations between social life and its analysis are changing in the context of digitalization, and

digital sociology offers a way of engaging with this". From this perspective, the interest of the investigation lies on how the *digital* has become a (large and consistent) part of our social scope.

Therefore, we performed a digital ethnographic investigation to understand in which ways and to what extent the term “#humansof” might have been (re)appropriated all over the world. First, we aimed to identify, quantify, and classify profiles which are publicly shared in open media resources. To do so, we employed a set of tracking and database tools, such as *Google Trends*⁹, *All hashtag*¹⁰, *Buzzsumo*¹¹ and *Top Hashtags*¹².

Google Trends is a tool that shows the most popular terms searched within the *Google* search toolbox and it generates graphics that include the search frequency of a specific criterion in several parts in the world. Based on it, we found out that from October/2019 to October/2020 one of the top 5 searching criteria results in the WEB were related to the “Humans of New York” project. When the low search volume regions were included in the results, the tool identified 126 regions in the world in which “humans of” had been looked for and it was also possible to notice that manifestations connected to *Humans of New York* are amongst the top 5 searches, which proved its relevance and presence in the digital arena.

Other findings which entailed general data were also obtained with the use of WEB searching tools provided by *Google*, *Bing*, and *Yahoo*. Then, to narrow down our results, we resorted to *All hashtag*, *Buzzsumo* and *Top Hashtags*, as they are tools that can unveil quantities and occurrences, amongst other hashtag traits.

All in all, the combination of the results obtained with the different searching tools revealed that “humans of” is a vastly used expression within the cyberspace. It also showed us that it was mostly recurrent in social profiles established on 4 different digital media platforms: *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube*. Then, we made use of the internal search tools available in each media to run in-depth investigations to try and locate social profiles that employed/appropriated the expression “humans of” in their titles. The findings showed us that its use was more relevant to our investigation in two platforms dedicated to social media: *Facebook* and *Instagram*. For instance, a search performed with *Top-Hashtags* resulted in 12,000 content-related findings on *Instagram*.

Distinguishably, these platforms feature different uses, but both *Facebook* and *Instagram* are essentially photo and text-sharing spaces (although they also allow videos to be posted). This leads us to reflect upon the multimodal ways in which the messages and meanings related to “#humansof” are uttered

⁹ Available at: <https://trends.google.com.br/trends/explore?date=2019-10-31%202020-10-31&q=humans%20%2B%20of>. Access in November 2020.

¹⁰ Available from: <https://www.all-hashtag.com/>. Access on July 30th, 2021.

¹¹ Available from: <https://buzzsumo.com/>. Access on July 30th, 2021.

¹² Available from: <https://top-hashtags.com/>. Access on July 30th, 2021.

and, as it will be shown next, it also contributes to understanding how the narratives on several “#humansof” manifestations are often transmedia, as they are construed through different mediatic spaces.

Actually, it is also worth mentioning that we found out that during the pandemic (considering the period from October 2019 to October 2020) the engagement levels with “#humansof” had increased. We think that, for once, it might probably be deemed to the fact that people would have spent more time navigating online during that period, but this information becomes more relevant as it also reveals that during the pandemic profile pages associated to “human of” had been updated. Even though lots of the sociocultural practices photographed/filmed/narrated in such online profiles take part in offline environments, the profile managers have likely re-signified posts and formats. Our results also showed that several new profile pages had also emerged in the occasion, some of them to serve purposes specifically linked to the pandemic, as it is the case of *Humans of Covid-19*¹³, a profile created to tell stories of frontline health professionals in London.

In order to spot dialogic relations and to exploit how it can help us identify and interpret emerging subjectivities/identities in the narrative excerpts collected from *Humans of Ghana* and *Humans of Curitiba*, we looked into some aspects such as: i) size of the verbal narratives; ii) localities in which the pictures would be taken; iii) prominent facial expressions; iv) whether the narrative is written in first person or if it shows verbal accounts in-between quotation marks; v) which topics were frequently addressed, and iv) if there was an identification of a photographer/someone in charge of the profile (see Table 1). These aspects have proved to be relevant as, on a deeper level (and combined), they represent utterance units that reveal the enormous chain of discourses in which these narratives are built on.

Having said that, the next part of this paper is dedicated to our discussion of the excerpts of the two selected profiles, based on data we collected from their public pages located on *Facebook* and/or *Instagram*.

4. Discussion

Our findings point out to the fact that most of the “humans of” manifestations we identified in cyberspace aim to tell stories about life experiences, perspectives, the subjects’ ideas about the world, and/or their dreams. Quantitatively speaking, most results were located on *posts* publicly shared by profile pages found on *Instagram* (74%), and *Facebook* (56%)

Discursively speaking, we conceptualize *posting* as the act of creating and spreading utterances in a digital media/platform. In terms of style and design, posts shared on *Facebook* usually sport verbal,

¹³ Available from: <https://www.instagram.com/humansofcovid.19/?hl=pt>. Last access: July 26th, 2021.

visual or audiovisual elements that are either employed individually or in combined forms, while posts on *Instagram* often favorite visual or audiovisual texts that might be combined with shorter verbal subtitles that can also include image signs, such as emojis. On their own, the affordances offered by the platforms to their users expose a controversial and often confusing relationship between humankind and technology. As Monte Mór (2017) explains, humans are at the same time the producers of the mechanisms that allow technology to work and the ones that have their own senses and self-expressions either expanded or limited by the uses allowed by the settings (and algorithms) of such technologies.

In consequence, the utterances spotted in the extracts we hereby analyze are frequently composed within the stylistic needs/requirements offered by the digital media in which they are shared. On the one hand, this might explain the choices that subjects make when they decide to construct transmedia narratives. Consequently, it is fair to say that technological affordances are highly related to the uses of aspects such as multimodality.

In general, our data points out an outstanding role of multimodality in meaning-making processes in both *Humans of Ghana* and *Humans of Curitiba* profile posts. As observed by Monte Mor (2017), it is something common nowadays, as multimodal texts have been privileged when technological devices are in use. Gosciola (2012) also reinforces that multimodality enhances different sensory perceptions and experiences in the readers/interlocutors. That is precisely one of the reasons why we believe that life-experience narratives connected to “humans of” are so wide-spread: they are meant to connect people’s emotions by evoking different life stories. They also allow subjectivities to emerge from posts that resonate with subjects in a reading position, i.e., interlocutors might exercise alterity when reading such posts and/or feel connected with the stories experienced by the others.

Humans of Ghana and *Humans of Curitiba* large assortment of multimodal narratives are composed by a series of posts that resort to verbal-visual texts to create an overall panorama of cultural, social, and experiential events that are important aspects of any identities. The posts also materialize a large discursive chain constituted of polyphony and heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1986).

Overall, both social profiles present subjects that are often photographed with their city posing as background scenery, so that the posts emphasize cultural and/or personal elements such as clothes, facial expressions, and/or the local landscapes. The visual portrayal of a geographical location and personal traits such as particular fashion style, combined with verbal texts (often characterized by personal accounts) contribute to the construction of “narrative identities” (Ricoeur, 1991) that are simultaneously individual and social. They are individual since subjects spotted in posts are either accompanied by self-elaborated or reported accounts that broach particularities, such as their personal stories, tastes, etc.

However, they are collective as well, as those subjects are often inserted in larger, broader social spheres, i.e., open/public landscapes – since streets, signs, monuments, and vivid colors are elements often explored by the visual texts that connect those “humans” to a location/city (see Fig. 1). This also exposes how the offline universe is mobilized in the online practice, since that the actions subjects perform and/or the events they relate to in their own cities are the basis for the construction of vast, widespread “humans of” narratives in cyberspace.

In terms of style and content, *Humans of Curitiba* and *Humans of Ghana* present significant similarities in the way their narratives are built, as we summarize in Table 1.

Table 1. General comparison between the profiles

HUMANS OF CURITIBA	HUMANS OF GHANA
Mix: shorter and longer narratives	Mix: shorter and longer narratives
Pictures taken in the city and its landscapes	Pictures taken in the city and its landscapes
Facial expressions in the visual texts show a variety of feelings	Facial expressions in the visual texts shows predominantly smiley faces
Direct quotes are occasionally used	Direct quotes are predominantly used
The focus in verbal texts varies between the photographer's and the subjects' perspectives	The focus in verbal texts is always on the portrayed subjects' own perspectives
Topics discussed include life experience, dreams, ideas, hardships and joys	Topics discussed include life experience, dreams, ideas, hardships and joys
Person/entity responsible for the project is identified as Gustavo Jodarky (photographer)	Person/entity responsible for the project is not declared by the profile's administrator(s)

Source: Prepared by the authors for this paper.

The narrative identity reached out through the features presented in a story that someone tells us is an interpretation that shows us how those subjects dialogue with their own personal experiences (Ricoeur, 1991). Simultaneously, it also points out to cultural elements a subject is surrounded by. These individual-collective representations exemplify how several utterances are merged and how they dialogue amongst themselves.

A notable constant component in the photographs we analyzed is the focus on facial expressions. Quite often, subjects have their pictures taken from unusual angles, probably because they are meant to look spontaneous and/or emotion-evoking. Subjects may be portrayed as sad, happy, curious, confused, confident, thrilled, thoughtful, tired, etc.

Remarkably, the ways in which the subjectivities are portrayed reveal the photographer's and/or the post enunciator's own “discursive lenses”, i.e., perceptions, ideals, and feelings that might include

(but not necessarily) stereotyped concepts of culture, and tabus. Added up, all of it constitutes a set of elements that are at stake. Enunciators make stylistic choices that will directly affect the meanings made in the narrative, as that is one important element of the discursive genres that implies the locutor's points of views – the axiological positions they assume in the utterances they make – as Bakhtin (1986, 2016) explains. Consequently, utterances as the one represented in Figures 1 and 2 might cause a sense of (dis)identification between the subjectivities that are being (re)presented and the ones of those who interact/dialogue with those narratives. Nonetheless, even though they are inserted within the same discursive scopes (life experiences, dreams, hardships), it is possible to observe that the profiles studied differ in some important ways (which will be further discussed in the lines that follow).

Figure 1. Screenshot - a post in Humans of Curitiba (*Instagram*)



Available from: https://www.instagram.com/p/CKwX8ZjFHod/?utm_medium=copy_link . Access: July 26th, 2021.

"Humans of Curitiba" profile pages available on *Instagram* and *Facebook* were created in July/2014 and are managed by the independent photographer Gustavo Jodarky. In general, the narratives construed on both platforms are mostly composed of pictures and verbal texts. The pictures usually focus on a person (or people) in specific geographical locations, whilst the verbal texts that constitute the comment/description part of the posts vary on composition and form (e.g., Fig. 1 and 2). Some of the verbal texts are written in first person (direct speech) and presented in between inverted commas (quoting someone's else speech), whilst others are written in first person by Jodarky, as he takes charge and becomes the one who is fully *telling the story* of the photographed person with visual-verbal texts – sometimes he even claims the authorship with the statement "written by Gustavo Jodarky" (see Fig. 1 and 2). Additionally, there are some posts in which the verbal texts are simply captions written by Jodarky to inform where such a person was photographed/seen.

Concerning the verbal text illustrated by Figure 1, we want to highlight another identifiable phenomenon. Even when the photographer is narrating the experiences told by the subjects who were photographed (“I lost everything my friend... it’s been a while since my son was adopted by another family because, as you can see it, I have no means to raise him”)¹⁴ these views might often be entangled with Jodarky’s own perceptions and narrative style: verbal texts are built through the use of short sentences, beginning with gloomy information and ending with uplifting ones.

In the post portrayed by Figure 2, the narrative is constituted by a photograph that is accompanied by a verbal text that offers us Jodarky's impression about the frame he captured.

Figure 2. Screenshot - a post in *Humans of Curitiba* (Instagram)



Available from: https://www.instagram.com/p/CKwX8ZjFHod/?utm_medium=copy_link. Access: June 2nd, 2021.

We notice that although Jodarky presents the reader with a picture that leaves a quite large scope for imagination – a wrinkled hand, a wedding ring and a crackled cement pathway, altogether maybe representing an older self, the passage of time, commitment and the steadiness of life – the photographer also states that "there was no interest to find out the story behind it (...) but I had many possibilities to imagine one"¹⁵. Even if it may be deemed as poetic, the short visual-verbal accounts captured on Figures 1 and 2 are still good samples of cases in which it is (in fact) the photographer's own subjectivity that is accessed by the narrative function.

Moreover, either it may be consciously done or not, in Figure 2 it is Jodarky’s choice of words that shows us that the subject's own life story is uttered as less important, less needed, less visible – the focus “*zooms in*” on the photographer's perceptions, metaphorically and literally speaking.

¹⁴ From the original “Perdi tudo meu amigo (...). Há um tempo meu filho foi adotado por outra família. [sic] Pois como você pode ver não tive condições de cria-lo”.

¹⁵ From the original: “Não tive interesse em conhecer a história por trás, mas tenho mil possibilidades de imaginar uma”.

At an interview available from the pages of the profile on both platforms¹⁶, Jodarky affirms that “through simple accounts and photographs”, he “passes around” experiences lived by “invisible” people “who would not be regularly noticed by us due to our everyday rushes.” In the verbal text that composes the post on *Instagram*, Jodarky informs that “*Humans of Curitiba*” is a documental project that “eternalizes” more than 700 people around the city of Curitiba, in Brazil.¹⁷

Jodarky’s lexical choices (in the video and in the verbal descriptions in his posts) give us a glimpse of the “discursive lenses” he seems to be looking through. According to Jordão (2007), it is by understanding language as discourse that we can identify that we attribute values and views to cultural aspects which are not pre-established or innate to them. In consequence, discourses are always related to subjectivities, to the positions taken by the subjects in an utterance and according to the lens one uses to perceive the world. In this sense, we understand that even though Jodarky operates in the online universe aiming to enhance voices from constantly marginalized and “invisible” subjects (as he refers to them) actually, he divulges/engages with colonized and hierarchical discourses (Menezes de Souza, 2010) that are (also and foremost) typically founded in discursive practices in the offline universe.

In the video interview, it is also possible to notice that Jodarky attributes the idea of “invisibility” to subjects as “a result of life” (in a very generalized way). However, it should be firstly said that no existence is invisible *per se* – subjectivities might *be turned invisible* through processes of hierarchy status that foster social inequalities and prejudice. Moreover, in the excerpt analyzed, Jodarky includes himself into a “we” category (people “we usually don’t see”) – which probably inserts him and “us” in a privileged group, one that *is neither* invisible nor *made* invisible.

Consciously or not, by classifying subjects as *invisible*, and not as *made invisible*, Jodarky assumes a “locus of enunciation” (Menezes de Souza, 2010) that characterizes him as a privileged white, middle-class man in charge of a camera, of digital media and of words. And assuming language from the point of view we adopt in this work, it also leads us to interpret that some of the excerpts we collected from *Humans of Curitiba* do reflect and refract such characteristics and social strands, as they feature all the lenses – the one’s from a camera as well as the discursive ones – through which humans of Curitiba are portrayed by Jodarky’s work. Hence, grounded on Bakhtin’s ideas (1993), we may affirm that *Humans of Curitiba* is a dialogical and responsive act to the large, multiple and polyphonous discursive arena that is brought alive as subjects manifest their thoughts about the world.

¹⁶ The researchers are responsible for translations of texts from the data that are published in Portuguese. The whole video can be accessed on https://www.instagram.com/tv/Bwo85DalRjx/?utm_medium=copy_link.

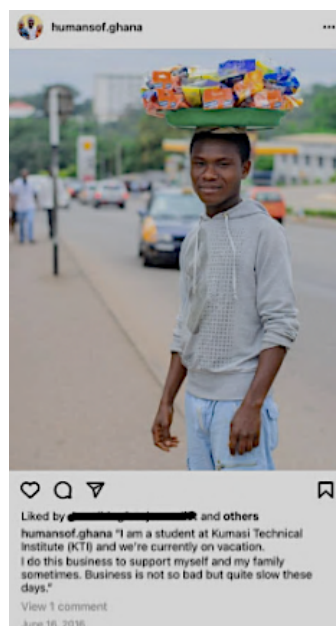
¹⁷ From the original: “Conheça [sic] o projeto documental Humans of Curitiba. Mais de 700 pessoas eternizadas nas ruas da cidade.”

Accordingly, *Humans of Ghana* stages a very similar scenario, as it also sports narratives that constitute shared spaces in which identities and discursive practices emerge, and it echoes many different voices, perceptions, and experiences in utterances that are dialogically constituted. However, it also presents a remarkable difference when compared to *Humans of Curitiba*.

Posts from *Humans of Ghana* are composed by photographs accompanied by verbal texts that are written in first person and stated between quotation marks – so they appear to be windows to the *exact* words that were (supposedly) uttered by the subjects they portray. However, the narrative construed throughout the posts in the profile pages are divulged by a significantly *undetected* author, as the profile is neither divulged as a project nor linked to a specific person/page administrator (e.g., a photographer like noticed in *Humans of New York* and *Humans of Curitiba*). It means that no one claims the authorship of *Humans of Ghana*, although it is a public profile that must certainly have someone in charge of its posts, both on *Instagram* and on *Facebook*. To our mind, there are clear consequences of such a choice, and one of them is that the creators of *Humans of Ghana* seem to have a desire to focus on the personal accounts of the subjects they portray, hence why they prefer to use direct speech (i.e., verbal texts in between inverted commas).

However, it is important to acknowledge the fact that those personal accounts are also components that are mobilized in the posts to sustain multimodal narratives. It implies that the photographs are elements that are always and necessarily in dialogue with other voices (and their discourses), as the images and the verbal texts come from different enunciators. Dialogic relations are clearly intrinsic to words, as Bakhtin (2016) affirms, but it can also be seen in the polyphony instituted by the dialogue between a photographer/the photographers (as we are not aware of who actually took the pictures, it might be the work of a single person or of multiple people), and the subject(s) who are portrayed – and whose subjectivities emerge when we add up the verbal personal accounts to the visual elements in the posts.

Figure 3. Screenshot - a post in *Humans of Ghana* (*Instagram*)



Available from: <https://bitly.com/bK6Nw> Access: June 2nd, 2021

The post that we present as a screenshot in Figure 3 is composed by a photo of a young man in the foreground, while the urban city is a blurred context in background. By racking the camera focus from background to foreground, the photographer's perspective contributes to solidify our perception that the narrative emphasizes the subject rather than the place where he is/belongs to – what is also reinforced by the fact that the personal account is presented *verbatim*, thus putting a premium on the subject's own voice when wording his life experiences. However, it also inspires further (discursive) readings/interpretations.

From a Bakhtinian point of view, subjects are “unfinished”, and it is by taking position on the “act” that they “become” in the world (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 31), hence our focus on the verbal-visual portrayal of the human (of Ghana) who stars in Figure 3.

The young man sporting a timid smile to the camera describes himself as a student on vacation who is selling groceries on the street “to support myself and my family sometimes” (ref. to Fig. 3). A tray full of colorful items seem to fit the urban landscape and to add “some grace” to the fact that he is a young student who is trying to make a living out of reselling goods without any sort of social/working protection. Moreover, as a myriad of colors arise from the packages, the visual text ends up calling our attention to the student's ability to balance the merchandise on his head, which may contribute to stigmatizing poverty and to romanticize the student's life experiences. Working hard at a young age is not an option for him, it is done out of necessity, thus why the subjectivity emerging from the multimodal narrative represented by Figure 3 is not one of a hero who fights hard to overcome his difficulties, but one of a young student whose social opportunities were cut short.

If the multimodality in the post (Fig. 3) is meant to provoke the reader's sensations and enhance perceptions – as Gosciola (2012) suggests – it is also a means to highlight the words in the boy's account: "(...)business is not so bad, but slow these days" – which means he acknowledges the fact that he is not making as much money as he expected (and certainly needed to). Dialogically, it seems fair to affirm that while the goods he is selling are all full of colors, his personal reality seems to be rather gloomy.

5. Last remarks and closing ideas

The excerpts observed in both profiles rely on visual elements that are often relatable to, and that mostly disclose a chain of utterances in dialogue with the subjectivities that come out of it. Connecting to the profiles as part of a bigger and broader utterance, those visual texts are meant to make meanings out of humans of Curitiba's and humans of Ghana's narrative identities. Thus, the "humans of" designation is very representative, as it compiles and interconnects utterances that aim to build a database on humanity in a certain locality, a representation of what it means to be a "human" in a certain geographic location and in a specific time period, meanwhile it is also devoted to telling what it means to be a human in each one's individual spheres of experience and existence.

The examination of the verbal texts in the data sample has unveiled some style patterns such as the use of quotation marks, verbs in past tenses, frequent pauses (dot or commas) and a need to resort to descriptive scenarios. All these linguistic signs are then combined in utterances that describe life experiences which stem from another previous narrative event. According to Arfuch (2010), present perceptions are narrated through the knowledge obtained by past events – which drives identity to be narrated in the present amidst the perceptions of the past.

All in all, it appears that the creators of such profiles might be the co-creators of a net of multimodal and transmedia narratives that (altogether) aim to divulge stories of people around the world that identify themselves and/or are identified by as *humans of* a certain place or of subjects that connect themselves by commonly shared characteristics. Added up, *Humans of Ghana* and *Humans of Curitiba* – and so many other profiles alike – can provoke a large assortment of perceptions and feelings, while they also foster/sustain discourses, exposing ontologies and ideologies.

As visually attractive and poetic as the narrative construed in *Humans of Curitiba* can be, the exam of Jodarky's words – see the excerpt represented by Figure 2, for instance – shows that (in what might be a legitimate attempt to shed light to human beings of Curitiba) there are times in which the photographer ends up silencing them twice. If they were "*invisible*" in the offline universe (as Jodarky claims them to be), they are brought to the digital arena to be (ironically) turned into silent illustrations to the photographer's words, thus being once again "*invisibilized*". The "same difference", only that now those

subjectivities are *made invisible* in the online world too. We think that such findings are certainly a point of interest to language educators as well.

In the light of the concept of Literacies proposed by Monte Mór (2017) and Menezes de Sousa (2011), we deem it relevant to the educational field to consider multimodal/transmedia narratives not only from a reading and writing perspective of literacy and texts, but also as sociocultural manifestations that take place in a society that is still centered on writing practices but that is also permeated by digital ones. It is also important to highlight that digital literacy, for instance, is not only about teaching and learning how to *perform* with/in digital spaces, but that it has also to do with learning to *critically interpret* what happens in such online time/places – something we believe that one is better prepared to do when language is taken from a discursive point of view. In this sense, our research highlights digital narratives that could contribute to discussions in language education once they are appreciated as social practices that are deeply intertwined with discursive (colonial) constructions from the offline world.

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