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Social media discourses as multimodal assemblages

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ABSTRACT

Situated within the overarching communicative practices shaped by multicultural discourses, this paper explores the interplay between linguistic and visual materialities of social media discourses to advance a social semiotic approach to contemporary communicative practices. We argue that social media users exercise agency in constructing distinctive patterns of meaning-making through language(s) and other semiotic modes, often expanding their multimodal potential rather than adhering to pre-existing systems. Our analysis reveals that social media discourses operate as assemblages of multisemiotic repertoires, privileging the visualization and generativity of meaning through integrating multiple resources. We contend that social media as a digital landscape provides a dynamic space for users to mobilize diverse semiotic resources, functioning as visually rich and socially embedded assemblages. We conclude that social media is intricately tied to its users' sociocultural knowledge and histories, collectively fostering and shaping the assemblages under contemporary communicative discourses.

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Introduction

Within the broader communicative practices informed by multicultural discourses, we use social semiotics to gain insights into how visual and linguistic resources are exploited on social media platforms to produce and consume meaning. This analysis is grounded in the recognition that human discourse has been re-conceptualised as a multi-faced (multimodal) integrated communicative event in which people accomplish social interaction through linguistic and other symbolic means and mediums, in particular historical and cultural relations (Shi-xu 2016). We argue that social media, viewed as an online linguistic landscape (henceforth LL), is characterized by material complexity and fluidity as social actors navigate various modes for meaning-making. Acknowledging the dynamic interplay of different cultural and linguistic elements that shape social media interactions, we argue that the resultant discourses are multimodal and cultural assemblages of various modes and resources. These include translanguaged texts, images and pictures,

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emojis and emoticons, social actions, current and historical events, space and place, all of which come together to make meaning.

While it would seem that any discussion of social media discourses lends itself to commonplace observations, Shi-xu (2024) advises, in his culturalist approach to discourse, that diverse cultural, historical, and power contexts shape communication. For this reason, we wish to highlight how Zambian social media users' cultural and historical embeddings are reflected in their social media discourses. A critical look at social media discourses mediated through the visual and linguistics resources of the Zambian social media actors points to how discourses are re-aligned as a 'range of linguistic, artefactual, historical and spatial resources ... in particular assemblages in particular moments of time and space' for meaning-making (Pennycook and Otsuji 2017, 448). Taking this view entails conceding to Shi-xu's (2016) call for the harmony of cultures, spaces, and the understanding of diverse meaning-making resources that find expression in Shi-xu's (2024, 11) observation that "communication is a social process which encompasses multiple elements and dimensions (e.g. language, gesture, technology, channels, time and place)."

Building on the aforementioned theoretical orientation and position, we will seek to address three interrelated objectives: (1) to explore how social media actors use agency to create meaning through a combination of linguistic and semiotic resources; (2) to show the sociocultural orientation to the production and consumption of social media discourses; (3) (2) to explore how social media spaces are assemblages that engender meaning-making. For ease of presentation, the paper is structured as follows; the next section discusses Zambia's language situation to implicate online language practices. This is followed by a discussion of social semiotics and cultural discourses in social media communication. The methodology is then presented, followed by the simultaneous presentation and discussion of the findings. A summary and conclusion are presented as the last section of the study.

A sociolinguistic pattern of Zambia: implications for social media communication

To gain insight into the languages, we are likely to find in use by Zambian actors on social media, there is a need to glimpse Zambia's sociolinguistic situation as this implicates language use on Facebook and WhatsApp. As is the case for many African countries that are home to Bantu languages, Zambia is a multilingual and multicultural country (Jimaima and Banda 2019). The diversity of language use in the dispersed localities of Zambia has been well-established and documented in the literature (Banda and Bellonon-jengele 2010; Simungala et al. 2023; Wakumelo 2013; Kashoki and Ohannessian 1978). English, a language that points to the country's colonial past, is the national official language. There are 72 ethnic groups and indigenous languages, reducible to about 26 linguistic clusters based on the degree of intelligibility (Wakumelo 2013). Beyond English as the national official language, seven indigenous languages have been officially legislated for regional use. Bemba is used in the Copperbelt, Luapula, Northern, Muchinga, and parts of Central provinces. Nyanja is used in Lusaka and Eastern provinces; Tonga for Southern and rural Central provinces; Lozi for Western province; and Lunda, Kaonde, and Luvale for North Western province (Banda and Jimaima 2017).

A critical look at the seven (7) regional languages mentioned above shows that each region's language choice was based on how big an ethnic group is. Even though this has not been openly stated as a motivation for language zoning owing to tribal rivalry by speakers from different ethnic groups, it is indisputable. The Bemba language has 3,810,000 speakers, while Nyanja has 2,139,000 speakers. These two languages are singled out for further insights as they frequently appear in the data presented in the paper and are said to be the most widely spoken languages. Despite its relatively privileged position as the only national official language, the Central Statistics Office reports the use of English at 3.8% in urban localities, 0.2% in rural localities, and less than 2% as a percentage distribution of the population by the widely spoken language of communication. Bemba is the widely spoken language of communication in Zambia at 33.5%, with the same pattern prevailing in rural (22.5%) and urban (49.5%). Nyanja follows Bemba at 14.8%, making the two the most widely spoken languages in Zambia. This explains why the languages appear frequently on social media.

Zambia's sociolinguistic spectrum described above presents a complex reality regarding language use, multilingualism, and translanguaging, in which speakers employ several languages in different Zambian contexts. A typical Zambian social actor speaks at least two or more indigenous languages (Banda and Bellononjengele 2010). The multilingual practices observable on social media can best be captured under translanguaging, which refers to the language practices that allow for the simultaneous use of multiple languages. It has been said that translanguaging is when a multilingual person's full linguistic repertoire is used and honored, instead of trying to keep narrowly focused on a single language (Vogel and Garcia 2017). Translanguaging emphasizes the interconnected nature of language use and communication, advocating for the utilization of all available linguistic resources to create meaning, transmit information, and perform identities (Misir, H., & Işık). From a sociolinguistic perspective, Wei (2011) introduces translanguaging spaces as both a space for engaging in translanguaging and a space that emerges through translanguaging. From this perspective, as we shall show, social media should be seen as both a translanguaging and semiotic space.

Social semiotics and cultural discourse in social media communication

As language is not all there is to social media communication, we turn to social semiotics to understand the complexity and fluidity of meaning-making emanating from social media discourses. Social semiotics is an approach to communication that seeks to understand how people communicate by a variety of means in particular social contexts (Kress 2010; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). Social semiotics unravels how representations are (re)produced by and contribute to cultural settings, that is, to get at their social function and meaning potential in the communicative landscape (Jewitt and Henriksen 2016). A social semiotic theory, according to Kress (2010: 59), 'attends to general principles of representations: to mode, means, and arrangement.' The recognition of 'all socially organized resources that people use in meaning-making in a social semiotic framework emphasizes materiality, context as well as sociocultural knowledge as critical ingredients in producing and consuming meaning. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) weave a compelling social semiotic theory predicated on the sociocultural orientation in the production and consumption of meaning, and the argument that meanings arise from the people's shared

sociocultural knowledge and histories. Therefore, Kress (2010) is on point when he reminds us that meaning-making is a shared project among social actors with shared sociocultural knowledge and history.

The variety of resources assembled in social media discourses for meaning-making, particularly the visual, leads us to the discussion of multimodality. The term multimodality refers to the combination of multiple sensory and communicative modes, such as sight, sound, print, images, video, music, and so on, that produce meaning in any given communicative event (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006; Simungala et al. 2024). Multimodality is a theory that looks at how people communicate and interact, not just through writing (which is one mode) but also through speaking, gesture, gaze, and visual forms (Kress 2010). Multimodality, then, refers to the use of more than one mode of communication in a text to create meaning, as will be shown in the data presented in this paper. It draws on the interdependence of multiple modes to occasion meaning. Jimaima and Simungala (2019), following after Kress (2010), observe that multimodality assumes that all modes or semiotic resources are socially shaped over time to become meaning-making resources that articulate the (social, individual/affective) meanings demanded by the requirements of different communities.

In the present undertaking, we look at the constituents of social media discourses as assemblages best captured under the umbrella of social semiotics and multimodality. Pennycook (2018) reveals that the term assemblages developed from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 88), whose focus was an 'assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another' as well as a 'collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies.' In this way, assemblages are understood as 'ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts,' as 'living, throbbing confederations' (Bennett 2010, 23). When tagged as semiotic, assemblages 'allows for an understanding of how different trajectories of people, semiotic resources and objects meet at particular moments and places, and thus helps us to see the importance of things, the consequences of the body, and the significance of place alongside the meanings of linguistic resources' (Pennycook 2017, 269). It is the thinking of Pennycook (2018) that semiotic assemblages describe the way things are brought together and function in new ways and provide a way of thinking about 'distributive agency' (Bennett 2010, 21), which can enable us to envisage how agency, cognition, and language can all be understood as distributed beyond any supposed human centre.

The exposition of social semiotics and multimodality in the preceding paragraphs highlights the centrality of the cultural context in defining and shaping meaning-making practices. It is clear that communication is never neutral or universal but rather embedded in specific sociocultural settings that influence how signs are produced, interpreted, and circulated. In this connection, we turn to Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS), an evolving, culturally inclusive paradigm that enriches our understanding of communication by rooting it in cultural and historical contexts. In a way, insights from CDS and social semiotics give rise to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006, 35) notion of sociocultural orientation to meaning-making. They demonstrate that 'the place of visual communication in a given society can only be understood in the context of, on the one hand, the range of forms or modes of public communication available in that society and, on the other hand, their uses and valuations.' In this way, the shared social-cultural

orientation to meaning-making enables actors to consume and appropriate social media discourses composed of various assemblages as cultural discourses.

In his critique of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Shi-xu (2024, 11) argues that CDA “uses Western values and stances as universal – without taking into consideration local cultural systems and traditions.” He proposes and advocates for CDS because the global communication system is also culturally organised, consisting of diverse and competing discourses, hence cultural discourses. Thus, because of these shared cultural discourses, hence the sociocultural orientation, we argue that social media actors possess the agency to create unique patterns of meaning-making rather than conforming to a ready-made system. No doubt, communication on social media is predicated on local cultural context feeding into a global context. The resultant products of social media communication are cultural discourses that relate to the complex intersectionality of modes within a given landscape. This points to how linguistic (and semiotic) resources, activities, and socially construed spaces are linked to function in a new manner. It is especially important to discern how the combination of resources at play are interwoven and intersect at a particular moment in time (Pennycook 2018) when actors decide to enact social media postings.

Methodological insights: the data on social media

Social media has emerged as a significant data source for communication research, complementing traditional methods like surveys and experiments. McKenna, Myers, and Newman (2017) observed that the emergence of social media on the Internet provides qualitative researchers with a new window into people’s outer and inner worlds, experiences, and interpretations. According to Liang and Zhu (2017), Social media allows researchers to collect data unobtrusively and automatically, providing a more objective and reliable dataset. Undeniably, as used in this study, social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook are major data sources that present unique opportunities for qualitative researchers to explore new dimensions of user behavior and interactions (McKenna, Myers, and Newman 2017). To capitalize on the potential of social media data, qualitative researchers should consider specific strategies and methodologies. With all the opportunities social media provides, Lunnay et al. (2015) qualitative research presents unique ethical challenges that researchers must navigate. They advise that researchers must ensure participant welfare and confidentiality when collecting social media data while addressing the challenges and overall ethical concerns.

Armed with the above insights, this study adopted a qualitative research approach, which is defined as a systematic, subjective method to describe life experiences and assign them meaning. Creswell (2007) noted that qualitative research is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. This approach was appropriate for capturing individual and collective interpretations of communication on social media. Data were sourced from two popular social media platforms, Facebook and WhatsApp, over 1 week, utilizing the researchers’ networks on Facebook and WhatsApp. This entailed tracking the postings of participant’s social media actions and collecting data of interest to the study. As will be noticed, the dates on the data, particularly the months and years, are all different because of this tracking of participants. The data consisted of screenshots (67 in total)

of chats, posts, and user comments. These were collected in citation form and carefully anonymized by blurring profile pictures and user identifiers, which aligned with the ethical requirements set by Facebook's Southern Africa Regional Office.

To gain an in-depth understanding of assemblages and the sociocultural orientation of social media discourses, 32 participants (20 females and 12 males) aged between 16 and 30 were purposively selected as active social media users. Online interviews with selected participants were conducted on WhatsApp. This had to be done as guided by Branthwaite and Patterson (2011), who stated that qualitative research emphasizes the significance of conversation to gain authentic insights into thoughts and behaviors. The analysis followed Androutsopoulos' (2008) methodological framework, which combines sociolinguistic and discourse analysis with ethnographic techniques, enabling a systematic observation of online discourse as both screen-based content and social practice. Each screenshot was analyzed by identifying and interpreting the multimodal features embedded in the discourse to explore meaning-making in digital communication. Grammarly was used to edit and proofread the article. In what follows, we present and discuss the study's findings categorized according to the emerging themes.

Social media actors' agency in meaning production and consumption

This section explores how social media actors use agency to create meaning through initialisms and translanguaged discourses by combining linguistic and semiotic resources. To this end, we present screenshots that illustrate instances of what we refer to as assemblages of multiple resources deployed for meaning-making by social actors on social media. Therefore, we do two things. First, we make a case for social media actors' agency to recreate available linguistic resources into 'initialisms,' assembled as meaning-making tokens with other semiotic resources. Secondly, we argue that the assemblages of language(s) and other modes show how semiotic resources complement each other for meaning-making and point to the visibilisation of translanguaged social media discourses. This entails that we lean towards García and Wei's (2014, 40) position that 'all translanguaging is multimodal' and signals a 'trans-semiotic system with many meaning-making signs, primarily linguistic ones that combine to make up a person's semiotic repertoire.' Therefore, communication on social media ought to be taken as a social practice, an integrated social and spatial activity that has been disinvested into multiple discursive modalities. From the analysis in this section, we agree with Shi-xu's (2016, 12) CDS assumptions that "communication is a global system of verbal interaction in which people use language and other media purposefully and consequentially in particular historical and cultural relations."

In [Figure 1](#), we use a Facebook thread in which Facebook users wish a named person a happy birthday. Of interest to this discussion are ways in which Facebook users elected to abbreviate the phrase 'Happy Birthday' as 'HBD', 'Hbd', and 'hbd'. These are used with other resources of translanguaged texts of full-fledged words and other multisemiotic modes, particularly for **B** and **C**. While it can be argued that the abbreviations are common practice, we believe that the different renditions of Happy Birthday don't conform to 1 pattern, showing individualized creativity that transcends normative expectation. Social actors operate 'always from their own positionality' as 'language ... users have the capacity to create their own patterns and to expand the meaning-making



Figure 1. Initialisms as semiotic assemblages.

potential of a given language, not just conform to a ready-made system' (Adami and Sherris 2019, 13). This suggests that communication is neither universal nor culturally neutral. Instead, it is part of a global system comprised of culturally diverse ways of conveying meaning, shaped by how individuals perceive and feel their messages will be understood within their specific cultural contexts (Shi-xu 2024).

In **C** of Figure 1 above, we notice that 'hbd' is accompanied by translanguaged discourses of Nyanja and English; '*man mwakula manje no more roasting people apa manje*' translated as 'happy birthday man, now you have grown so do not shout at people unnecessarily.' In this way, the assemblage of 'hbd' and the meaning of the Nyanja/English translanguaged discourses draws attention to a societal expectation that growth in age demands high levels of maturity, as seen in the use of the discourses 'mwakula manje', which means now you have grown. Similar discourses are seen in Figure B, line 2 above, where we have 'mwakula nomba' in Bemba. Like the Nyanja discourses, these also mean 'now you have grown.' What we observe in Figure 1 above reflects and mirrors multilingual practices rooted in everyday face-to-face interactions among Zambians (Jimaima and Simungala 2025). Zambia's sociolinguistic reality described earlier heightens multilingualism, where actors often shift between multiple languages in daily conversations (Banda and Bellononjengele 2010). From what we have seen, this reality rematerializes on social media as users seamlessly integrate multiple languages within single posts, comments, or chats, sometimes even blending them within the same sentence or phrase, as illustrated by B and C of Figure 1 above.

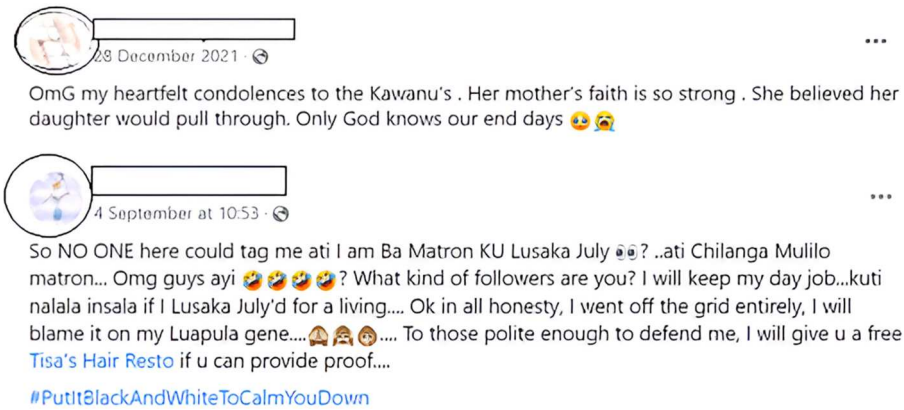


Figure 2. Assemblages of multilingualism and multimodal repertoire.

In **Figure 2**, we notice another unique pattern of initialisms of ‘Oh My God!’. Two forms are observable: ‘OmG’ and ‘Omg’. In this case, OMG expresses a feeling of surprise. In ordinary usage, OMG uses an exclamation mark, as in ‘Oh My God!’. However, we do not see the appropriate punctuation mark in the data collected. This means that to read and understand social media-based discourses such as OMG, it is always important to contextualize such initialisms and read them together with any accompanying semiotic resources, especially the visual ones. When we subjected the data to the participants, they reported that the appropriate emoji accompanying OMG is often the one in **Figure 3** below.

We observe that the different renditions of ‘Oh My God!’ are often enmeshed with the emoji in **Figure 3** above to create a purposeful assemblage of semiotic materials to produce the authorial intent of users. Combining emojis and the initialism ‘OMG’ communicates a kind of surprise and shock. Viewing these discourse pieces as assemblages entails transcending the limited observable linguistic features and semiotically exploring the complementary affordances of multimodality with which the linguistic materials are deployed. As guided by Pennycook (2018), the notion of assemblages expands the semiotic inventory. It relocates repertoires in the dynamic relations among objects, places, and linguistic resources, emergent from the interactions between people, meaning-making resources, and space. From the Figures in this section, we note that individual



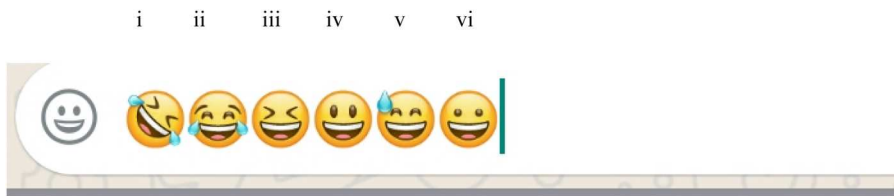
Figure 3. Emoticon expressing surprise and shock.

positionality in meaning-making leads to spatial repertoires amenable to social media uptake. These linguistic and multisemiotic resources are at the actor's disposal online.

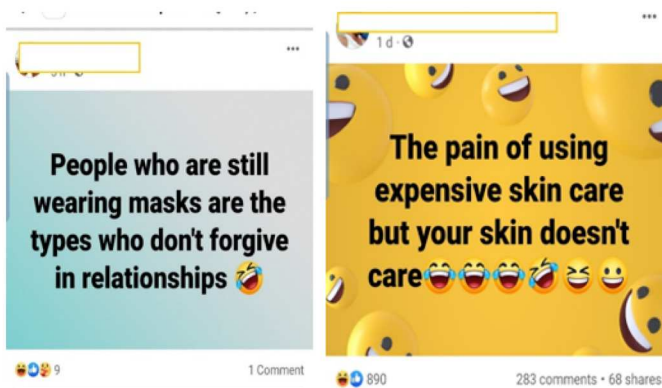
The sociocultural orientation of social media discourses

In this section, we address the sociocultural orientation to the production and consumption of social media discourses, acknowledging that meanings arise from users' shared sociocultural knowledge and histories. This shared sociocultural knowledge and history underscores the centrality of culture in communication (Kress 2010). In line with this view, Shi-xu (2023) observes that one of the new theoretical advances in communication studies is the re-emergence of consciousness of culture. The consciousness of culture makes the production and consumption of meanings on social media a shared project (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). To illustrate this, we turn to Figure 4 below, where we examine emoticons as multimodal illuminations that are pictorial representations of facial expressions consumed as assemblages through a sociocultural orientation. Each emoticon, with its visual variations, represents different degrees of expression. Leveraging the multimodal affordances of platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, we demonstrate how the pictorial configuration of emoticons allows for a range of meanings, depending on how social media users combine them with other meaning-making resources.

Figure 4a presents various emoticons used to express laughter in different contexts. To situate these emoticons within actual communicative practice, we refer to Figure 4b,



(a)



(b)

Figure 4. a. Emoticons expressing laughter. Pictorial icon drawn from displaying various degrees of laughter. b. Emoticons expressing laughter.

where the first screenshot shows a Facebook status update that reads, 'People who still wear masks are the types who don't forgive,' followed by a laughter emoticon. The post and subsequent reactions feature multiple laughter emoticons, illustrating how users engage with and interpret the message. To understand why the laughter emoticon is used at the end of the status, we draw on Liang (2021), who emphasizes the importance of contextual awareness in interpreting meaning-making practices. In this case, the post is situated in the post-COVID-19 context, where restrictions have been lifted, and wearing masks is no longer a societal requirement. The laughter emoticon thus complements the sarcastic tone of the message, highlighting a shared understanding among users that wearing masks in this period is unnecessary. This example illustrates how emoticons are visual supplements and context-sensitive semiotic resources that reflect shared socio-cultural knowledge and contribute to the layered meanings in social media discourse.

Some of the emoticons presented earlier in Figure 4a above are further contextualized in the remaining and second screenshot of Figure 4b, where they appear in context. These emoticons are gradable synonyms of laughter, each representing varying intensities of amusement and emotion. For instance, emoticons (i) and (ii) in Figure 4a above are typically employed in contexts where something is perceived as extremely funny, thus conveying intense laughter that gives rise to tears. In a similar fashion, emoticon (v) is often used to express laughter to the point of physical exhaustion, sweating, fatigue, etc. These nuanced expressions of laughter underscore the users' ability to draw on a shared sociocultural knowledge base, which informs their understanding of emoticons as cultural discourse. Social actors intuitively recognize the facial expressions embedded in emoticons, associating them with emotional states such as laughter or happiness. This shared understanding is culturally situated and visually reinforced by the design of the emoticons themselves (cf. Kress 2010; Shi-xu 2024). Similarly, due to their familiar shape and culturally embedded meaning, emoticons like the heart symbol culturally signify love or affection. These examples highlight how emoticons function as multimodal semiotic resources whose meanings are co-constructed through sociocultural orientation and visual recognition.

The explanation above also applies to other emoticons, such as those expressing happiness through 'Smileys,' representing varying degrees of smiling ranging from smirk and grin to simper and beam. Social media actors were observed assembling and using these emoticons contextually, selecting particular 'Smileys' to reflect specific social meanings. Similarly, emoticons that convey sadness operate on a scale of emotional intensity, signaling feelings such as disappointment, disapproval, or a bad mood. The choice of emoticon in each instance is shaped by the sociocultural context, where meaning arises through the interaction of visual symbols and shared cultural knowledge. As previously noted, social media discourses are assemblages socioculturally produced and consumed within a cultural context – times and places. This underscores the central role of sociocultural history and collective understanding in interpreting meaning on social media (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006).

Space as an assemblage of context on social media

In this section, we turn to the contribution of space as an assemblage that affords an opportunity to display meaning-making resources on social media. In particular, we

examine how the social media space is an assemblage that enables the production and consumption of meaning by displaying multilingual, multimodal, and socioculturally informed resources. Thus, looking at Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4 above and Figure 5 below, we see how space provides opportunities for intermingling trans-languaging, images and pictures, emojis and emoticons, social actions, and current and historical events in meaning-making instances. In particular, our understanding of space refers to social media as affording actors opportunities to display meaning-making resources in context visually. This then brings into the spotlight a 'spatial turn', one in which there is a recognition that space is not only physically (materially) but also socially constructed through online affordances such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

Space, as Scollon and Scollon (2003) put it, is (an) important (assemblage) in understanding the social meanings of discourses which, in our undertaking, relate and extend to the material spaces of Facebook and WhatsApp. As unrestricted space, Facebook space can be considered a semiotic canvas on which social actors come to inscribe their feelings, aspirations, fears, and joys. With this in mind, space engenders semiotic assemblages as it offers a platform on which assemblages are enacted and upheld. We view space as a particular moment and place, socially constructed on social media to make meaning. 'The notion of assemblages allows for an understanding of how different trajectories of people, semiotic resources, and objects meet at particular moments and places (Pennycook 2018, 86)' and it is in online spaces that the multilingual and multimodal repertoires are creatively crafted and converge to make meaning as assemblages of social media discourses.

Further, it is space that privileges the role of context in the production and consumption of meaning. This means the online space, particularly social media, is context-sensitive for appreciating assemblages. For this reason, Caffarel (2006; 2) notes that 'meanings do not exist before the wordings that realize them as they are formed out of the impact between our consciousness and its environment.' Thus, the consciousness and the

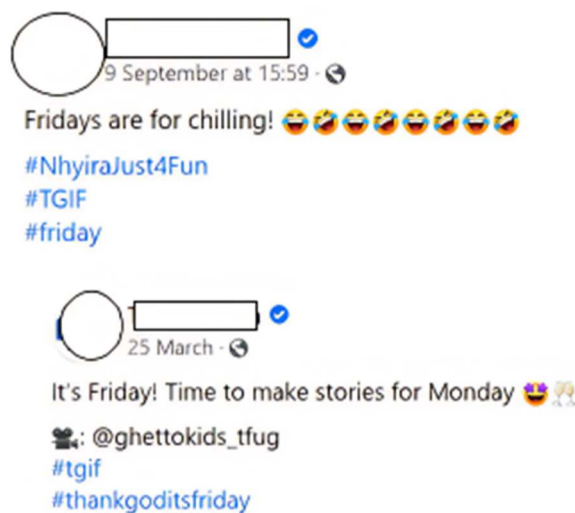


Figure 5. Assemblages multimodal repertoire.

sociocultural environment enable the productivity of semiotic assemblages as meaning-making instances. Consequently, instances of communication (be it on social media or anywhere else), according to Caffarel (2006), cannot be dissociated from the environment (situational, cultural, social) in which it unfolds. Thus, multilingual and multimodal repertoires operate in context, and this accounts for why Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) recognize context as an essential principle by developing an 'ecological' theory of language – one in which language is always theorized, described, and analyzed within an environment of meanings. In this way, a given assemblage, as seen from the screenshots of Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4 above, is interpreted by reference to their semiotic habitat.

Summary and conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, we draw three interrelated conclusions on social media discourses as multimodal assemblages. Firstly, by arguing that social media discourses are assemblages of multilingual repertoires expressed through translanguaging practices, we point to a complex relationship between offline, person-person language practices and online ones. The deployment of Bemba and Nyanja, the most widely spoken indigenous languages, alongside English, shows that multilingualism is a normative practice and not an exception. Writing on the heterogeneity of language use in digital discourse, Lepänen, Kytölä, and Westinen (2017) showcase how multilingualism is a natural aspect of human communication. Multilingualism can manifest as switching to a particular language or blending various languages and styles. For social media discourses, we have spotlighted translanguaged discourses of English, Bemba, and Nyanja, framing multilingualism as a standard feature of offline and online communication. We acknowledge the complexity of meaning-making from various resources assembled in translanguaged discourses. By looking at the examples given, we have demonstrated that 'all translanguaging is multimodal' and signals a 'trans-semiotic system with many meaning-making signs, primarily linguistic ones that combine to make up a person's semiotic repertoire.'

Arising from the reality that translanguaging is related to social, cultural, and political issues and the fact that many actors from diverse contexts and backgrounds are involved in social media communication, Han (2020) calls for the need to look beyond the discourse products to the discourse processes. In this regard, the second conclusion the study has drawn is the centrality of the sociocultural in social media discourses. Shi-xu (2024) is on point when he reveals that diverse cultural, historical, and power contexts shape contemporary communication, and we find no exception in the social media landscape. For this reason, we have highlighted how Zambian social media users' cultural and historical embeddings are reflected in their social media discourses. We have argued for a sociocultural orientation to meaning-making. According to Kress (2010), meaning-making processes draw on socially organized resources that actors use in context and are predicated on sociocultural knowledge. This makes the production and consumption of social media discourses a shared project among social actors with shared sociocultural knowledge and history. In this way, the shared sociocultural orientation to meaning-making enables actors to consume and appropriate the various semiotic discourses assembled in time and space.

Finally, from the foregoing discussion, we have noted how the social media space comes with freedoms, as actors assemble and craft their means for meaning-making

without adherence to prescribed norms, as seen in how initialisms are deployed with full-fledged words and other multisemiotic modes. This is the totality of semiotic resources people use when communicating, such as speech, image, text, gesture, sign, gaze, facial expression, posture, and objects, all of which are afforded opportunities to appear in time and space by social media, as an assemblage in itself. By grouping the emoticons based on related or 'sameness' of meaning, we see the relationship of synonymy with emoticons that belong to the same category, have different shades of meaning, and are gradable when placed on a scale. Thus, like Lyons (1995) argued that there are no absolute synonyms semantically as one context in use is not identical to another context, we have noted that it is the context of use that determines what emoticon to use depending on, for instance, the degree of sadness which is gradable from being sad to being extremely sad. To consume the gradable emoticons, we have argued for sociocultural orientation (Kress 2010; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006) meaning-making that is necessitated by space, which is not only physically manifested but also socially constructed on social media.

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