

## IDIOM COMPREHENSION AIDED BY VISUALS: THE ROLE OF CONCEPTUAL REPRESENTATIONS

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- **ABSTRACT:** This study comprises a theoretical articulation between idiom comprehension, from the compositional perspective by Glucksberg (1993), Cacciari and Levorato (1998), Vega-Moreno (2003), Gibbs and Colston (2007), among others, and the conceptual representations of the Grammar of Visual Design by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), namely, the classificational, symbolic and analytical processes. An examination of multimodal texts, such as cartoons, comics and advertisements, was carried out based on a pragmatic standpoint and on the notion of *context* indicated by Koch and Travaglia (2015) and Koch (2016). The analysis revealed that conceptual representations, seen from the characters' arrangement in the frames, the sociocultural values fostered by the symbolic attributes, the mobilization of prior knowledge, and the perception of textual referents, to name a few, play a crucial role as a strategy for understanding idioms. This paper aims to expand the scope of investigations on idioms to the analysis of multimodal texts. At a pedagogical level, it also aims to instruct investigations on teaching materials in foreign and mother languages as well as to help language teachers tackle idioms in more contextualized ways in their classrooms.
- **KEYWORDS:** Idioms; Idiom Comprehension; Compositional Approach; Grammar of Visual Design; Conceptual Representations.

### Introduction

This investigation, derived from our doctoral thesis, expresses other views about the phenomenon of idiom comprehension in authentic texts, by proposing a theoretical intersection of studies on Phraseology, with an emphasis on idioms,<sup>1</sup> and on the Grammar of Visual Design (GVD). We accommodate the perspective of Text Linguistics (TL), in which all elements belonging to the text, including idioms, form an interconnected network of meaning. In such circumstances, we admit that idiom comprehension is given *during* the act of reading, based on the use of numerous strategies, from the

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<sup>1</sup> Brazilian Portuguese idioms used in this study are presented with their word-by-word translation and their equivalent expression/idiom in English.

establishment of analogies, the creation of phonological connections, the translation between idioms in the foreign language (FL) and in the mother tongue (MT), the assimilation of grammatical aspects (WRAY; BELL; JONES, 2016), to the recognition of associations between textual elements supported by referential clues, the use of prior knowledge and the perception of visual resources arranged in the text (SILVA NETTO, 2020).

We support our research on two pillars: the compositional studies in Glucksberg (1993), Gibbs (1993), Cacciari and Levorato (1998), Titone and Connine (1999), Vega-Moreno (2003), Gibbs and Colston (2007) and Vulchanova, Vulchanov and Stankova (2011) – from which we assume the idea that the constituent elements of an idiomatic structure play a fundamental role in understanding the general meaning – and in the conceptual representations described in the GVD by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), Fernandes (2009), Biasi-Rodrigues and Nobre (2010), Nascimento, Bezerra and Heberle (2011) and Araújo, Parente and Araújo (2019) regarding the classificational, analytical and symbolic processes. Thus, we aim to situate the analysis of the visual elements of the text as a strategy of idiom comprehension in which the mobilization of the reader's prior knowledge, the perception of textual referents, the arrangement of characters in the framing, the sociocultural values raised by the symbolic attributes, among others, play a crucial role in understanding idioms.

In the same note, the intended interface dialogues with and has consequences for the various spheres of FL and MT teaching-learning, whether in the preparation and evaluation of teaching materials; that is, in the analysis of the way in which textbooks show and manipulate idioms, as in the teachers' awareness of the more contextualized ways of approaching this content in the classroom.

## **The relation between context and compositionality**

The historical trajectory of research on idiom comprehension in the light of Psycholinguistics, both in FL and MT, reveals a multifaceted amount of methodological designs for data collection, whose research instruments manipulate idioms, not only in a decontextualized way (SWINNEY; CUTLER, 1979; GIBBS, 1987; NIPPOLD; MARTIN, 1989; CACCIARI; LEVORATO, 1989; LEVORATO; CACCIARI, 1992, 1999; CAIN; TOWSE; KNIGHT, 2009; VULCHANOVA; VULCHANOV; STANKOVA, 2011; SIQUEIRA *et al.*, 2017; SIQUEIRA; MARQUES, 2018), but also inscribed in prefabricated texts (ACKERMAN, 1982; GIBBS, 1987; NIPPOLD; MARTIN, 1989; CACCIARI; LEVORATO, 1989; LEVORATO; CACCIARI, 1992, 1999; NIPPOLD; RUDZINSKI, 1993; CAIN; TOWSE; KNIGHT, 2009). Take Fig. 1 as an example, where the expression *break the ice* is inserted in texts that condition its reading to a literal or idiomatic interpretation, followed by multiple-choice questions.

**Figure 1** – Example of prefabricated texts

**Appendix C. Example of a Literal context and of a multiple-choice task (Experiments 2 and 3)**

It was winter vacation and Katy was with her parents at a hotel in the mountains. Her mommy told her to go out and to make friends with other children. Katy went skating on a frozen lake and she played with other children. Katy came back to the hotel, and she told her mother that she broke the ice. What does “Katy broke the ice” mean?

Multiple-choice task:

Idiomatic: She made friends with other children.

Literal: She broke a piece of ice.

Associate: She enjoyed herself very much.

**Appendix B. Example of an Idiomatic context and of a multiple-choice task (Experiments 2 and 3)**

It was winter and Paul moved house and went to a new school. His mommy told him to make friends with his new class-mates. When he arrived at school, Paul lent his crayons to one of his classmates. Paul broke the ice. What does “Paul broke the ice” mean?

Multiple-choice task:

Idiomatic: He made friends with a class-mate.

Literal: He broke a piece of ice.

Associate: He told his mother everything.

**Source:** Levorato, Nesi e Cacciari (2004, p. 313).

Due to the textual nature adopted for this study, in which the relationships of meaning comprised within authentic texts are established *in* and *by* the act of reading, our viewpoint on context differs from prefabricated texts, orchestrated for comprehension testing, as in Fig. 1. Our perspective is anchored on TL (KOCH; MARCUSCHI, 1998; KOCH; TRAVAGLIA, 2015), whose concept of *context*

[...] depends not only on textual characteristics, but also on the characteristics of the language users such as their goals, convictions and knowledge of the world, whether it is episodic knowledge or more general and abstract knowledge, represented in semantic or encyclopedic memory. (KOCH, 2016, p. 35, our translation).<sup>2</sup>

Among the factors that permeate the contextual elaboration, we highlight the *linguistic* one, whose elements “[...] serve as clues for the activation of knowledge stored in memory, constitute the starting point for the elaboration of inferences, help to grasp the argumentative orientation of the statements that make up the text, etc.” (KOCH; TRAVAGLIA, 2015, p. 71, our translation)<sup>3</sup> and the *world* or *encyclopedic knowledge*, defined as the knowledge “[...] stored in the memory of each individual, whether it is knowledge of a declarative type (propositions regarding the facts of the world), or of an episodic type (the socioculturally determined “cognitive models” acquired through experience).” (KOCH, 2016, p. 32, our translation).<sup>4</sup> As part of this pragmatic

<sup>2</sup> Original: “[...] depende não só de características textuais, como também características dos usuários da língua, tais como seus objetivos, convicções e conhecimento de mundo, quer se trate de conhecimento de tipo episódico, quer do conhecimento mais geral e abstrato, representado na memória semântica ou enciclopédica” (KOCH, 2016, p. 35).

<sup>3</sup> Original: “[...] servem como pistas para a ativação dos conhecimentos armazenados na memória, constituem o ponto de partida para a elaboração de inferências, ajudam a captar a orientação argumentativa dos enunciados que compõem o texto, etc.” (KOCH; TRAVAGLIA, 2015, p. 71).

<sup>4</sup> Original: “[...] armazenado na memória de cada indivíduo, quer se trate de conhecimento do tipo declarativo (proposições a respeito dos fatos do mundo), quer do tipo episódico (os “modelos cognitivos” socioculturalmente

perspective, that is, “[...] as a place of *referential extensions* or a *function of shared knowledge*” (ORTÍZ ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 176, author’s emphasis, our translation)<sup>5</sup>, idiom studies have close ties with language teaching and learning, since context, both in FL and MT, is the decisive factor for learners to understand the idiomatic meanings and underlying communicative functions (ETTINGER, 2008; NOGUEIRA, 2008; FONSECA, 2017; ROZENFELD, 2019).

**Figure 2 – Pop the question**



Source: Speed Bump<sup>6</sup>.

The discussion on Fig. 2 is underpinned by the reader’s world knowledge and by the linguistic point of view. According to Cacciari and Levorato (1989) and Lima and Feltes (2013), *frames*, arising from our encyclopedic knowledge, establish relationships with life experiences and settle in the long-term memory. This process, in turn, allows the generation of inferences and predictions about the associations of meaning between the visual resources, in which a couple is portrayed holding hands; the man on his knee and the woman with a look of surprise, and the idiom *pop the question*. Based on the linguistic perspective, in a one-to-one relationship in an authentic context, we emphasize the compositional character of the idiom under discussion, which reveals that the *pop* element denotes *asking a question suddenly*, while *the question* refers to a *marriage proposal* (GIBBS; NAYAK; CUTTING, 1989; CACCIARI; GLUCKSBERG, 1991; GLUCKSBERG, 1993; GIBBS, 1993; MCGLONE; GLUCKSBERG; CACCIARI, 1994; VEGA-MORENO, 2003).

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*determinados e adquiridos através da experiência*” (KOCH, 2016, p. 32).

<sup>5</sup> Original: “[...] como lugar de extensões referenciais ou função dos conhecimentos compartilhados” (ORTÍZ ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 176).

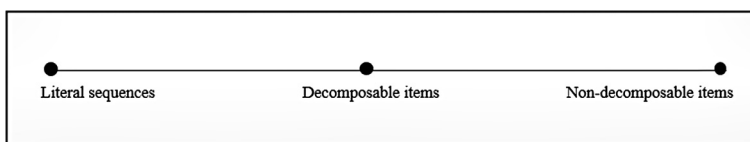
<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://www.cartoonistgroup.com/cartoon/Speed+Bump/2011-08-26/64750>. Acesso em: Aug. 9, 2022.

Idiom comprehension seen from a textual perspective, in which verbal and non-verbal elements in authentic texts form an interconnected network of meanings (SILVA NETTO, 2020), directly relates to the assumptions of the *compositional approach* (GLUCKSBERG, 1993; CACCIARI, 1993; CACCIARI; LEVORATO, 1998; VEGA-MORENO, 2003; GIBBS; COLSTON, 2007; VULCHANOVA; VULCHANOV; STANKOVA, 2011), in which

Idiomatic expressions exhibit a high degree of internal semantic structure, and literal processing does not stop when an idiom is encountered during comprehension. Much the same way that literal and other figurative aspects of language (e.g. metaphor) are comprehended, the compositional approach to idiom representation and processing is based on the notion that idiomatic meanings are built simultaneously out of literal word meaning and the specific interpretation of these word meanings within a particular context (TITONE; CONNINE, 1999, p. 1661).

In other words, the approach adopted for this study admits that most idiomatic meanings are motivated by several factors, such as metaphorical ones (GIBBS, 1993; CACCIARI, 1993; CACCIARI; GLUCKSBERG, 1995; GIBBS *et al.*, 1997; ROCHA, 2013), and also the fact that the elements that compose idioms denote varying salience<sup>7</sup> degrees, by which a compositional analysis operates. Therefore, idioms comprise a highly heterogeneous group of structures with different levels of compositionality (GIBBS; NAYAK; CUTTING, 1989; CACCIARI; GLUCKSBERG, 1991; GLUCKSBERG, 1993; LEVORATO; CACCIARI, 1999; VEGA-MORENO, 2003, 2005), as shown in Fig. 3.

**Figure 3** – *Continuum* of compositionality



**Source:** Silva Netto (2020, p. 43).

Concerning Fig. 3, which tackles the *continuum* of compositionality, we highlight the fact that the occurrences of linguistic structures lie somewhere between the extremes, namely, the literal sequences as in *writing an email* and non-decomposable or non-compositional items. The specialized literature on the compositional approach, however, predicts the existence, although very rare, of non-decomposable idioms (GLUCKSBERG, 1993; TITONE; CONNINE, 1999; GIBBS; COLSTON, 2007; VEGA-MORENO, 2005), as demonstrated in Fig. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Salience*, according to Gibbs (1993), refers to the probability that a word shares the same semantic field as its idiomatic referent, as in the idiom *pop the question*, shown in Fig. 2.

Figure 4 – *Bater as botas*<sup>8</sup>



Source: Tito<sup>9</sup>.

The idiom *bater as botas* has always been advocated as a non-compositional structure; that is, its elements do not denote any salience degree and, consequently, no meaning is extracted based on the analysis of its parts in isolation. Studies point out, however,

[...] that many non-analyzable idioms, even ones thought to be most fixed or frozen such as “kick the bucket”, still retain some slight degree of compositionality. For example, people judge the phrase “kick the bucket” to be more appropriate in a context where the person died quickly, as opposed to dying in a longer, protracted manner. This intuition is motivated by the semantics of “kick” which alludes to a fast, sudden action. In this way, people appear to be analyzing some aspects of the word meanings even in non decomposable or non analyzable idioms. (GIBBS; COLSTON, 2007, p. 826).

The compositional approach makes the study of idioms viable not only anchored in salience degrees, but also in the role that an authentic context plays in the process of idiom comprehension. Thus, in Fig. 4, whose strip describes the dialogue between the *grandson* and the *grandmother*, we observe that the meaning of the expression *bater as botas* transits between literal and idiomatic, derived from the textual clues. A succinct analysis of the first two frames reveals that the understanding of the expression discussed herein is carried out in its literal interpretation, on the basis of the images of the boots and of the grandson’s speech, whose content denotes his lack of knowledge about the idiomatic meaning of the expression. On the other hand, when we look at the third frame, in which the grandson explains the reason why he would rather his

<sup>8</sup> *To knock the boots meaning to kick the bucket.* First frame: Grandma Ana Conda, would you kick the bucket for me? Second frame: Why do you want me to kick my bucket? Third frame: Because Uncle Edibar said that when you kick the bucket, he’ll take me to Disneyland. Our translation.

<sup>9</sup> Available at: <https://principetito.blogspot.com/2019/08/batendo-as-botas.html?sref=pi>. Access on: Aug. 9, 2022.

grandmother "to kick the bucket", the meaning of the expression is reconfigured in an idiomatic structure; the contextual clues promote information retrieval based on the reader's world knowledge, such as the fact that *Uncle Edibar* does not like his old mother and waits for her death, which can be inferred through the homophone and pejorative association between the personal name *Ana Conda* and the *anaconda* snake. The misunderstanding observed in Fig. 4 is analyzable and explained by the context, as it

[...] determines the fixation of meaning in a concrete situation. This context-determining function is very effective, so much so that we can even make mistakes, depending on the level of understanding of those involved in the act of communication: the interlocutor will generally correctly understand what his partner wants to express and will try to give feedback (a response) to the utterance emitted by the interlocutor using another expression that matches the context and the utterance. It may also happen that, despite having used the correct expression, the contextual determination is incomplete and the interlocutor does not understand what his partner meant. Then, there is a misunderstanding. (ORTÍZ ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 182, our translation).<sup>10</sup>

We also highlight the relationship between the comic strip humor and the grandson's ingenuity shown in the first two frames. It is argued that the critical period for understanding idioms begins at around six to seven years of age (CACCIARI; LEVORATO, 1989; CACCIARI, 1993; LEVORATO, 1993; VULCHANOVA; VULCHANOV; STANKOVA, 2011), stage in which children construct meanings based on the sum of all the elements of any linguistic sequence, carry out a superficial language analysis and exclusively consider the concrete, as opposed to the abstract, meanings of an expression (LEVORATO, 1993). Therefore, the comic content of Fig. 4, as a direct reflection of the introductory periods of idiom comprehension, is introduced when the grandson confuses Uncle Edibar's real intentions about his grandmother's death and the action of *bater as botas* in its literal interpretation.

On a similar note, taking into account the few strategies employed by children during the critical period of idiom comprehension, the use of authentic contexts rich in linguistic clues is highly necessary, since it

[...] provides background information for a hypothesis about the idiom's meaning, it aids the memory search or information that could serve

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<sup>10</sup> Original: "[...] determina a fixação do significado numa situação concreta. Essa função determinativa do contexto é muito eficaz, tanto que, inclusive, podemos errar, dependendo do nível de compreensão dos envolvidos no ato de comunicação: o interlocutor, geralmente, compreenderá corretamente o que o seu parceiro quer expressar e tentará dar um retorno (uma resposta) ao enunciado emitido pelo interlocutor utilizando uma outra expressão que combine com o contexto e o enunciado. Também pode ocorrer que apesar de ter utilizado a expressão correta a determinação contextual seja incompleta e o interlocutor não compreenda o que o seu parceiro quis dizer. Então, se produz o mal-entendido" (ORTÍZ ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 182).

to define the figurative meaning, and it provides the material for the appropriate inferential processes. (LEVORATO, 1993, p. 105).

We reaffirm the relevance of authentic contexts, such as the comic strips and the cartoons listed in the scope of this article, for idiom comprehension in FL and MT in the perspective of the compositional approach. In fact, multiple strategies for the construction of idiomatic meanings are potentially utilized during the act of reading, such as the application of linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge, in addition to the perceptions about the visual resources of the text, whose appreciation is carried out in the following section, in line with the GVD theories about the conceptual representations.

### **Visual aids as an idiom comprehension strategy**

Idiom comprehension aided by visual resources permeates the notion of multimodal texts; that is, verbal writings mediated by other semiotic modes (ARAÚJO, 2011), such as the comic strips and cartoon genres. In such a way, it is fair to say that the images that make up authentic texts are vital elements for understanding the relationships of meaning expressed in the textual texture, as observed in Fig. 2 and 4, in which the visual resources provide clues for understanding the idioms *pop the question* and *bater as botas*, respectively. Likewise, we emphasize, in accordance with Cunha (2017, p. 27, our translation), the fact that

[...] the multimodal genre is qualified by the use of various language resources in a comprehensive way, prioritizing the expansion of communication that works in a network system, whose function corresponds to the integration in order to facilitate interpersonal and intertextual communication, making, therefore, the texts not only more attractive, but also aggregating elements of meanings and intentions that refer to the producer and their social, historical and cultural context.<sup>11</sup>

The intended interface of multimodal genres – in the view of Eisner (1989, 2005), Almeida (2011) and Holanda (2011) – with idiom comprehension places idioms in a pragmatic sphere, in which phraseologisms are inscribed in the more varied discourses in society (MONTEIRO-PLANTIN, 2012) and are diffused through all types of textual genres (ETTINGER, 2008; SZYNDLER, 2015; TERMIGNONI; FINATTO,

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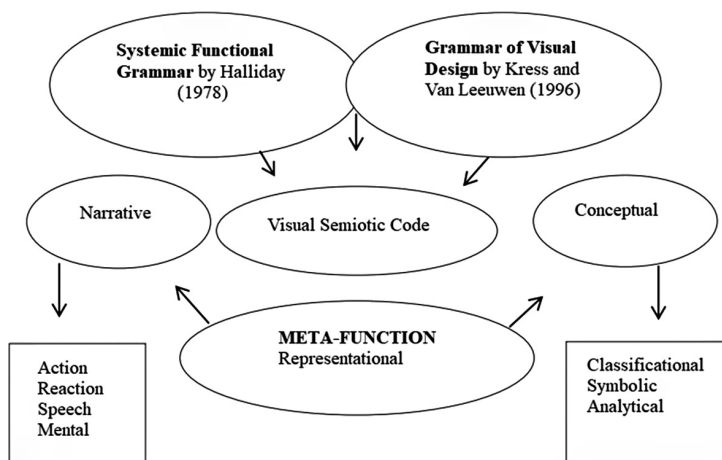
<sup>11</sup> Original: “[...] o gênero multimodal qualifica-se pela utilização de vários recursos de linguagem de forma abrangente priorizando a ampliação da comunicação que funciona em um sistema de rede, cuja função corresponde à integração de modo a facilitar a comunicação interpessoal e intertextual, tornando, portanto, os textos não somente mais atrativos, mas também agregadores de sentidos e intenções que se remetem ao produtor e seu contexto sócio-histórico-cultural” (CUNHA, 2017, p. 27).



2017), whose understanding accommodates the reader’s social, historical and cultural environment. By way of illustration, Curiel (2021) describes how images in cartoons in Spanish, combined with idioms, help to build textual understanding through prior knowledge about the Spanish Civil War. Comics, as another example of a multimodal text, and consistent with Mendonça (2008), Xavier (2014, 2016) and Cani (2019), among others, denote a language full of semiotic resources, verbal and non-verbal, whose functions encompass the representations of orality marks and narrative elements (CUNHA, 2017) which, in turn, allow the sharing of socially established knowledge, beliefs and moral values (SOUZA MELO; RODRIGUES, 2013). Thus, the notion of multimodal text adopted in this essay corroborates the relationship between authentic contexts and the idea of compositionality.

From an analytical point of view, according to Silva Netto (2020), the pragmatic relationship between multimodal texts and idiom comprehension comprises the investigation of a series of strategies during the act of reading, such as the use of contextual and encyclopedic knowledge, the translation between FL and MT and the perception of visual resources arranged in the text, to name a few. Regarding the last strategy, image-mediated idiom comprehension is anchored in the representational meta-functions of the GVD.

**Figure 5** – Elements of the representational meta-function



Source: Tamanini and Costa (2021, p. 155).

Representational meta-functions are classified into *narrative*, in which “[...] the participants are somehow interacting with each other, indicating action” (ARAÚJO; PARENTE; ARAÚJO, 2019, p. 716, our translation),<sup>12</sup> whose scope accommodates the

<sup>12</sup> Original: “[...] os participantes estejam interagindo de algum modo entre si, indicando ação” (ARAÚJO; PARENTE, ARAÚJO, 2019, p. 716).

study of actional, reactional, speech and mental processes (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006; FERNANDES, 2009; ALVES BARBOSA; SILVA, 2014; ALVES QUEIROZ, 2020), and *into conceptual*, in which

[...] the focus is on the attributes and identities of the participants. Some specific characteristics allow us to identify conceptual representations, namely: a) disposition of participants in taxonomies; that is, groupings by category; b) presentation of the participants in a part/whole relationship; c) absence of vectors; d) absence or minor background detail, which directs the focus to the participants and their attributes. (NASCIMENTO; BEZERRA; HEBERLE, 2011, p. 536, our translation).<sup>13</sup>

Even though we understand the relevance that narrative representations play to idiom comprehension in multimodal texts (SILVA NETTO, 2020), we will deal exclusively with the three conceptual representations listed in Fig. 5, *classificational*, *analytical* and *symbolic* processes, in the intersection with idiom comprehension.

The first subclassification of the conceptual representations, the classificational process, represents the participants in a relatively symmetrical way, highlighting their common characteristics (NASCIMENTO; BEZERRA; HEBERLE, 2011), belonging to the same class, order or category (ALMEIDA, 2006) and performing the function of subordinate – common characteristics – in relation to another superordinate participant – higher category (TAMANINI-ADAMES, 2011; FERNANDES; ALMEIDA; SILVEIRA, 2019; LENDL, 2019). Furthermore, depending on the way the participants are distributed in the frame, the classificational process is subdivided into *covert taxonomies* and *overt taxonomies*. While overt taxonomies “[...] present the participants grouped in tree structures, in which there is a superordinate element and subordinate elements that are structured in only one or several levels” (SOUSA ROCHA, 2016, p. 32, our translation)<sup>14</sup>, *covert taxonomies*, focus of this essay, are

[...] visually realized by a symmetrical composition. The Subordinates are placed at equal distance from each other, given the same size and the same orientation towards the horizontal and vertical axes. To realize the stable, timeless nature of the classification, the participants are often shown in a more or less objective, decontextualized way. The background is plain and neutral. Depth is reduced or absent. The angle is frontal

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<sup>13</sup> Original: “[...] o foco são os atributos e as identidades dos participantes. Algumas características específicas nos permitem identificar representações conceituais, quais sejam: a) disposição dos participantes em taxonomias, ou seja, grupamentos por categoria; b) apresentação dos participantes em uma relação parte/todo; c) ausência de vetores; d) ausência ou menor detalhamento do pano de fundo, o que direciona o foco para os participantes e seus atributos” (NASCIMENTO; BEZERRA; HEBERLE, 2011, p. 536).

<sup>14</sup> Original: “[...] apresentam os participantes relacionados por estruturas em árvore, nas quais existe um elemento supraordenado e elementos subordinados que são estruturados em apenas um, ou vários níveis” (SOUSA ROCHA, 2016, p. 32).

and objective. And frequently there are words inside the picture space. (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 79).

In order to discuss the way in which classificational processes contribute to idiom comprehension, let us analyze Fig. 6, taken from the *Monica's Gang* comics, entitled *Collections* and whose composition accommodates the idiom *amores platônicos*.

Figure 6 – *Amores platônicos*<sup>15</sup>



Source: Sousa<sup>16</sup>.

By way of contextualization, Fig. 6 belongs to a comic book about the collections of the characters of *Monica's Gang*, a composition that shows Monica and her respective collection; namely, *amores platônicos*. Thus, the analysis of the classificational process of this figure is based on the framework in which the characters *Reinaldinho*, *Fabinho* and *Bernardinho* are represented and how this organization serves as a textual clue for understanding the idiom under discussion. We argue that, derived from the arrangement in which the boys are shown; that is, symmetrically, at the same distance from each other and highlighted by a simple and neutral background, this classification process entails a covert taxonomy, in which these characters are linked to the same subordinate class, order, or category. The idiom comprehension strategy shown in Fig. 6, therefore, results from the identification of the associative relationship between the subordinate and superordinate elements – the recognition that the characters *Reinaldinho*, *Fabinho* and *Bernardinho* are part of the concept, or textual referent,<sup>17</sup> of *amores platônicos*. In the same note, and through inferential procedures as well as a compositional reading, it is true to say that: (i) the most salient element of this idiom is the word *amor*, as it informs the global meaning of the expression – a fact that is endorsed both by the facial expression of the character Monica as well as the representation of a heart in the frame

<sup>15</sup> *Platonic love*. No talking about platonic love! Our translation.

<sup>16</sup> Available at: [https://monica.fandom.com/pt-br/wiki/Reinaldinho?file=Amores\\_Plat%25C3%25B4nicos\\_Cole%25C3%25A7%25C3%25B5es\\_M%25C3%25B4nica\\_1\\_Panini\\_pg\\_38.png](https://monica.fandom.com/pt-br/wiki/Reinaldinho?file=Amores_Plat%25C3%25B4nicos_Cole%25C3%25A7%25C3%25B5es_M%25C3%25B4nica_1_Panini_pg_38.png). Access on: Aug. 9, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> The notion of textual referent adopted for this paper derives from TL, in which the term *referencing* “[...] is a discursive process and that referents are objects of discourse, an aprioristic ontological status does not fall within its scope” (KOCH; MARCUSCHI, 1998, p. 175, authors’ emphasis) and “[...] highlights the highly dynamic character of the construction process of the referents of a text” (CAVALCANTE; CUSTÓDIO FILHO; BRITO, 2014, p. 27).

of the figure, and (ii) the textual referent of the idiom *amores platônicos* is anchored in the boys as subordinate elements.

Conversely, although we emphasize that the classificational process described is of paramount importance for idiom comprehension, it is necessary to apply another visual analysis so that we can recover the full meaning of the expression in Fig. 6, as in the reaction process of the gaze mismatch between the boys and Monica, thus ratifying the meaning of the idiom *amores platônicos*, whose definition is given in terms of *unattainable* or *impossible love*.

**Figure 7 – More than meets the eye**



Source: United Nations (2021).

The second subclassification of the conceptual representations, the analytical processes, aims to represent “[...] certain elements in the image focusing on its parts or as a whole [as a way to reflect] the goals of those who build the text and produce certain effects on those who consume this text” (NASCIMENTO; BEZERRA; HEBERLE, 2011, p. 538, our translation),<sup>18</sup> in addition to the fact that “[...] there is neither a vector (narrative process) nor a compositional symmetry and/or a tree structure (classificational process)” (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 89). Therefore, the relation expressed in analytical processes is based on a part/whole structure, in which the term *carrier* is given to the represented element and the diction *possessive attribute* to each of its components (TAMANINI-ADAMES, 2011; ALVES BARBOSA; SILVA, 2014; LENDL, 2019).

Fig. 7, one of the many postcards produced by the United Nations with the purpose of dealing with issues related to racial discrimination, fosters a discussion on how analytical processes act as a tool for idiom comprehension. In its composition,

<sup>18</sup> Original: “[...] determinados elementos na imagem com foco em suas partes ou em seu todo [como forma de refletir] os objetivos de quem constrói o texto e produz[ir] determinados efeitos naqueles que consomem esse texto” (NASCIMENTO; BEZERRA; HEBERLE, 2011, p. 538).

we observe visual elements – the image of a black man with a simple background, centralized and at social distance from the reader – and verbal texts – the multiple-choice question *What do you see? Doctor, taxi driver or human rights activist* and the idiom *more than meets the eye*. In this example, the way the man was portrayed expresses an emotional rather than a representational value, as his gaze “[...] addresses the viewers and establishes an imaginary relationship with them, while more schematic analytical pictures invite impersonal, detached scrutiny.” (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 89). Therefore, as it is an awareness campaign against racism, the framing expressed by the postcard, as informal and inviting to readers, is justified.

Similarly, the description of the analytical processes based upon the carrier – the black man – and upon his possessive attributes, constitutes a way to achieve not only the communicative objectives intended with the campaign against racism, but also as a means of grasping the relationship between verbal and non-verbal text. Regarding the possessive attributes shown in Fig. 7, we highlight the skin complexion and eye color, the dreadlocks, the size and shape of the lips and nose. All of these possessive attributes are, to some extent, stereotypes of black people. It is also observed that all the aforementioned characteristics are solely and exclusively related to the appearance of the man portrayed, with no obvious connections with any other spheres of his personal and/or professional life. However, in view of the fact that racial prejudice operates in accordance with sensitively observable attributes, such as skin, eyes and hair color, the constitution of racism via stereotype

[...] appears as a belief, an opinion, a representation regarding a group and its members; while prejudice designates the attitude adopted towards the members of the group in question [...] the stereotype of blacks, the Japanese or Germans is the collective image that emanates from them and the set of characteristic traits attributed to them. Prejudice is the tendency to judge unfavorably a black, a Japanese or a German, simply because they belong to a group. (AMOSSY; PIERROT, 2010, p. 39, our translation).<sup>19</sup>

In this way, the United Nations campaign denotes in the composition of the postcard the multiple-choice question *What do you see?*, which encourages discussion about the judgment, whether religious, social or moral, supported by physical traits; that is, the impossibility of assuming the man’s profession based on his attributes. Furthermore, the compositional idiom *more than meets the eye*, highlighted in capital letters and in bold at the end of the text, accommodates the aspects that permeate the definition

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<sup>19</sup> Original: “[...] aparece como una creencia, una opinión, una representación a un grupo y sus miembros; mientras que el prejuicio designa la actitud adoptada hacia los miembros del grupo en cuestión [...] el estereotipo del negro, del japonés o del alemán es la imagen colectiva que circula de los mismos, el conjunto de rasgos característicos que se les atribuye. El prejuicio sería la tendencia a juzgar desfavorablemente a un negro, un japonés o un alemán por el solo hecho de pertenecer a un grupo” (AMOSSY; PIERROT, 2010, p. 39).

and occurrences of racial prejudice that are frequently evidenced in society. Thus, we argue that the visual clues, comprised in the analytical processes, the verbal resources and the world knowledge about stereotyped racism inform the meaning of the idiom under discussion which, in context, fulfills the social function of raising awareness about prejudice on the basis of color and race.

The third and last subclassification of the conceptual representations, the symbolic processes, is responsible for the inferences made by the reader during the act of reading visual texts (BIASI-RODRIGUES; NOBRE, 2010), whose composition is manipulated – size, color, position in the framing, lighting, silhouettes, among others – in order to favor the participants and their characteristics in the visual representation (ALMEIDA, 2006; LOVATO, 2010). Regarding the participants of the symbolic processes, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) classify them as a *carrier*, whose meaning or identity is constituted in the visual relationship, and a *symbolic attribute*, the participant who represents the meaning or identity. In addition, the symbolic processes, from an analytical perspective, are subdivided into two types: *symbolic suggestive* and *symbolic attributive* (TAMANINI-ADAMES, 2011; ALVES BARBOSA; SILVA, 2014; SOUSA ROCHA, 2016; FERNANDES; ALMEIDA; SILVEIRA, 2019). The first subdivision expresses, “[...] in addition to the carrier, elements from which meanings could be attributed to that constituent, the symbolic attributes” (BIASI-RODRIGUES; NOBRE, 2010, p. 97, our translation),<sup>20</sup> while the second subdivision “[...] presents only one participant, the carrier, who would already have an intrinsic concept/meaning whose knowledge would be prior to the viewer of the image”. (BIASI-RODRIGUES; NOBRE, 2010, p. 97, our translation).<sup>21</sup> It is noteworthy that

Human participants in Symbolic Attributive processes usually pose for the viewer, rather than being shown as involved in some action. This does not mean that they are necessarily portrayed front-on and at eye level, or that they necessarily look at the viewer, even though all of these will often be the case. It means that they take up a posture which cannot be interpreted as narrative: they just sit or stand there, for no reason other than to display themselves to the viewer. (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 105).

As for the symbolic conceptual processes in Fig. 8, a children’s advertisement for an *Uncle Scrooge* magazine, we discuss how the carrier and their attributes serve as visual clues for understanding the idiom *pão-duro*, highlighted in capital letters at the top of the image.

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<sup>20</sup> Original: “[...] além do portador, elementos a partir dos quais se poderiam atribuir significados àquele constituente, os atributos simbólicos” (BIASI-RODRIGUES; NOBRE, 2010, p. 97).

<sup>21</sup> Original: “[...] apresenta apenas um participante, o portador, que já teria um conceito/significado intrínseco, cujo conhecimento seria prévio ao expectador da imagem” (BIASI-RODRIGUES; NOBRE, 2010, p. 97).

Figure 8 – *Pão-duro*<sup>22</sup>



Source: Uncle Scrooge<sup>23</sup>.

Fig. 8 shows the character *Uncle Scrooge* casting a glance at the reader; he is centered on the image, statically, and with a cheerful face. The identification of this character as the carrier of the symbolic process is supported by his denomination;<sup>24</sup> that is, it is primarily based on the relationship between the text and the reader's world knowledge. When applying this encyclopedic knowledge to the reading of the advertisement, we are able to retrieve certain characteristics inherent to the carrier such as the fact of being a selfish and arrogant millionaire, which directly corroborates the other visual elements included in the image, the symbolic attributes. These attributes, in turn, in addition to being conventionally associated with symbolic values (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006), act in the "[...] establishment of inferences and metaphorical relationships that help in the comprehension of the visual text" (BIASI-RODRIGUES; NOBRE, 2010, p. 107, our translation).<sup>25</sup> Thus, the pool of gold coins, the dollar signs on the edge of the pool and on the character's bathing suit as well as the dollar bill stamped on the buoy, are symbolic attributes of wealth and power. It is also valid to argue that the most prominent shades in the advertisement – green and gold – harmonize not only with the identity of the carrier and with the other attributes of the image composition,

<sup>22</sup> *Hard bread* meaning *tightwad*. Don't be a tightwad! Lower left corner: Save a little bit of your allowance and enrich your leisure time with the millionaire adventures of Uncle Scrooge. Lower right corner: Every month in the newsstand. Our translation.

<sup>23</sup> Available at: <http://www.forumch.com.br/topic/17988-quadrinhos-gibis/page/144>. Access on: Aug. 9, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> *Denomination*, in this study, takes into consideration the varied encyclopedic knowledge, in which "[...] each character has their own name, and each name does not serve them simply as a label; because they are characters enshrined by the public, such names also serve to characterize them along with their personality, their qualities, their flaws, their quirks, etc." (XAVIER, 2014, p. 11).

<sup>25</sup> Original: "[...] estabelecimento de inferências e relações metafóricas que auxiliam na própria compreensão do texto visual" (BIASI-RODRIGUES; NOBRE, 2010, p. 107).

but also, mainly in advertising, are full of socially and culturally ingrained symbolic values (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006).

The verbal clues gathered in Fig. 8 also play a vital role in understanding the text. It is evident, in the lower left corner of the advertisement, the fact that the referential expressions *allowance*, *enrich* and *millionaire adventures* substantiate the textual meaning established with support in the analysis of the symbolic processes of the image. As part of the verbal clues, we observe the idiom *pão-duro*, in capital letters, in the imperative phrase *Não seja pão-duro!* As a way for the reader to make sense of this idiomatic structure, an analysis of the verbal and non-verbal elements of the advertisement is necessary – world knowledge about the character portrayed in the image, the meanings expressed by the attributes and the referential clues evidenced in the verbal text. If the reader manages to mobilize all these factors, they will possibly hypothesize about the semantic field to which the idiom under discussion belongs and, perhaps, perceive the paradoxical relationship between the identity of the carrier – miser – and the argumentative value bestowed in the advertisement, *buy the magazine*.

## Perspectives for the teaching of idioms

The applications of the perspective shown, the result of the intersection of compositional theories for the study of idioms and the conceptual processes of the GVD, unfold, primarily, in didactics of phraseology, whose

[...] mission consists in that phraseologisms are recognized, learned and used as polylexical units with their own meaning, and that what was learned can be applied appropriately to the communicative situation. An important purpose of the didactics of phraseology is to discover the particular intentions of the sender. (ETTINGER, 2008, p. 96, our translation).<sup>26</sup>

Although the relevance of the teaching and learning of phraseological units (PU), such as idioms and collocations, is currently recognized, research in the field of phraseodidactics reveals that, in MT, the teaching of this type of lexicon is still entrenched with prejudice (NOGUEIRA, 2008), given that one thinks, erroneously, that phraseologisms are typical of popular speech and, consequently, do not deserve a prominent place in school planning (GONZÁLEZ-REY, 2004) and are sometimes treated only as figures of speech (ROZENFELD, 2019). In FL, in turn, phraseology teaching is seen as a puzzle (FONTES, 2016), and commonly associated with adjectives, such as *tedious*, *complex* and *ineffective* (ETTINGER, 2008; NOGUEIRA, 2008).

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<sup>26</sup> Original: “[...] misión consiste en que os fraseoloxismos se recoñezan, aprendan e empreguen como unidades poliléxicas con significado propio, e que o aprendido se poida aplicar con adecuación á situación comunicativa. Una finalidade importante da fraseoloxía é descubrir as intencións particulares do emisor” (ETTINGER, 2008, p. 96).



As a reflection of these problems, phraseology didactics researchers point out that the materials adopted in the MT and FL teaching plans do not distinguish among the numerous types of PU (NOGUEIRA, 2008) and show them in a secondary and marginalized way from the rest of the content (FERREIRA; GUIDOTTI, 2020). Furthermore, the presentation of PU is usually observed in a decontextualized way in lexicographic works (ORTÍZ ALVAREZ, 2000) and in textbooks (NOGUEIRA, 2008; ETTINGER, 2008; LIMA; ORTÍZ ALVAREZ, 2011; LÓPEZ VÁZQUEZ, 2011), found in lists (NOGUEIRA, 2008) or in cloze activities (LIMA; ORTÍZ ALVAREZ, 2011). Another criticism of the teaching materials evidenced in the literature on phraseodidactics concerns the lack of guidelines for the teacher on how to approach and work with phraseologisms (TEER; BEVILACQUA, 2018). We also emphasize that some teachers choose not to approach these structures in class (ARCTICO *et al.*, 2015) due to lack of knowledge and preparation (GONZÁLEZ-REY, 2004; VIEIRA, 2018).

There are, on the other hand, several modalities of approaching the teaching of PU in the classroom, such as the didactic proposals of Aguilar Ruiz (2013), Regufe (2016) and Barros (2017), the most effective being those that make use of contextualized activities (FONSECA, 2017; ROZENFELD, 2019), such as reading, since this practice is feasible to

[...] help [learners] activate the knowledge they already have on the subject from the context and which can be presented through verbal or non-verbal elements, from predictions and inferences, or how to make use of their previous knowledge about the topic. (LIMA; ORTÍZ ALVAREZ, 2011, p. 82, our translation).<sup>27</sup>

We highlight, most notably, the investigations in phraseodidactics that dealt with the reading of images as a vehicle for idiom comprehension. The teaching proposal of Aguilar Ruiz (2011) uses drawings and comic strips as teaching materials, with support in which students try to explain the idiomatic meanings of the text. In Veiga (2014), students are asked to make up a sentence based on an image; this sentence should contain an idiom discussed during the lessons. Oliveira (2015) suggests an activity by way of reading comic strips from which the students explain the meanings of the idiom. In the second part of this activity, students are instructed to create a story in which the idiom studied in the classroom is used. Arctico *et al.* (2015) use comic strips to contextualize the teaching of idioms. Finally, Vieira (2018) elaborates guidelines for the creation of a blog for consulting phraseologisms and, in some of the examples given, makes use of images associated with these lexical units.

Even though these works play a fundamental role in the contextualization of teaching by use of multimodal genres, they fail, without theoretical support, to

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<sup>27</sup> Original: “[...] ajudar [os aprendizes] a ativar os conhecimentos que já têm do tema a partir do contexto e que podem ser apresentados através dos elementos verbais ou não verbais, das predições e inferências, ou como fazer uso de seus conhecimentos prévios sobre o tema” (LIMA; ORTÍZ ALVAREZ, 2011, p. 82).

define criteria for systematic learning; that is, they do not define a methodology of analysis that is capable of working with the students on how the visual elements relate to context, idiomatic meaning and communicative goals. This is the gap that the intersection of compositional theories for the study of idioms and the conceptual processes of the GVD intends to fill. In a pragmatic view, as we postulate that idiomatic structures, as well as all elements of language, are part of a communicative context, they also establish relationships of meaning *in* and *from* the text. Therefore, the text promotes idiom comprehension supported by a series of analysis criteria. We may take, for example, the paper by Silva Netto and Monteiro-Plantin (2018), who investigated how the meanings of the idioms *Greek god* and *ebony god* were constructed in erotic tales by means of TL analysis criteria – of referential expressions – and the study by Curiel (2021), in which the author analyzes cartoons, from the Spanish Civil War period, which contain idioms and how the reader’s prior knowledge supports idiom comprehension. The examination of these relationships of meaning, supported by visual resources, is feasible through the lens of the representational processes of the GVD, whether of a narrative (SILVA NETTO, 2020) or conceptual nature, which is the focus of this article.

The prospects for future research examine the way in which teaching materials, in both MT and FL, express phraseologisms in multimodal texts; that is, whether these books give learners the means to understand the relationships between verbal and non-verbal resources in a text. Furthermore, this paper instructs, evidently, the development of other teaching materials, such as those in lexicographical works intended for phraseology. We also emphasize that the analysis of conceptual processes applied to idiom comprehension can be used by teachers, not only during their classes, when discussing the communicative objectives underlying commercials, posters, advertisements, among other genres of great circulation in society, but also as a way to guide teachers to develop, in school planning, more contextualized and systematic teaching activities.

SILVA NETTO, J. W. Compreensão idiomática mediada com recursos imagéticos: o papel das representações conceituais. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v.66, 2022.

- *RESUMO: Este trabalho sugere uma articulação teórica entre a compreensão de expressões idiomáticas (doravante EI), na perspectiva composicional de Glucksberg (1993), Cacciari e Levorato (1998), Vega-Moreno (2003), Gibbs e Colston (2007), dentre outros, e as representações conceituais da Gramática do Design Visual (doravante GDV), quais sejam, os processos classificatório, simbólico e analítico, de Kress e Van Leeuwen (2006). Adotam-se o ponto de vista pragmático e a noção de contexto, de Koch e Travaglia (2015) e Koch (2016), para melhor acomodar as apreciações acerca dos textos multimodais elencados, como as charges, os quadrinhos e os anúncios publicitários. A análise revelou que as representações conceituais, vistas desde a disposição das personagens no enquadramento, os*

*valores socioculturais suscitados pelos atributos simbólicos, a mobilização de conhecimentos prévios e a percepção dos referentes textuais, para citar alguns, desempenham um papel crucial como estratégia de compreensão idiomática. Com efeito, este ensaio visa a expandir o escopo das investigações sobre EI para as análises de textos multimodais e, em uma esfera pedagógica, instruir investigações, tanto sobre os materiais didáticos em língua estrangeira e materna, como também objetiva auxiliar os professores de língua quanto às modalidades mais contextualizadas de ensinar as EI em sala de aula.*

- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Expressões idiomáticas; compreensão de expressões idiomáticas; abordagem composicional; gramática do design visual; representações conceituais.*

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