

# GIFs as Social Media Paralanguage

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## Abstract

The central aim of this article is to explore how GIFs interact with language to make meaning in social media posts, comparing their intermodal semiosis to that of emoji and other graphiconic resources in terms of their meaning potential and the typical patterning of their convergence with linguistic meanings. To achieve this, a dataset of 100 posts containing GIFs sourced from the X (formerly Twitter) social media platform was analysed using social semiotic multimodal discourse analysis. The results indicate that GIFs can realise most, but not all, of the intermodal semiotic dynamics described for emoji-language semiosis, and that further to these, GIFs realise meaning via references to shared cultural knowledge, paralleling discourse semantic meaning in written context, and forging inter- and intratextual references.

## Introduction

The increasingly visual nature of social media communication has led to a greater emphasis on images and other visual resources in social media posts (Adami & Jewitt, 2016). This trend reflects a broader shift towards an image-centric approach in digital multimodal practices (Stöckl, Caple, & Pflaeging, 2020). On many social media platforms, images and short-form videos are now the primary means of communication, with text taking a secondary role. In order to fully understand the meanings conveyed in social media posts, it is necessary to consider the relationship between written text and visual graphicons (Herring & Dainas, 2017; Herring et al., 2021; Herring & Ge, 2020), such as images, stickers, GIFs, and memes. These non-standardized graphical resources are increasingly used to create unique and creative content that goes beyond the limitations of standardized emoji characters. For example, stickers can include text and be positioned in various layouts relative to other elements within a post, while memes combine text and images to create a singular media object. This article focuses on GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format), a type of graphicon in raster file format (images built from pixels) designed to support simple low-resolution images in a limited number of colours that can be sequenced as frames to create moving images. Early examples of GIFs were in the aesthetic of clip art, often with transparent backgrounds so that they could be used with the existing backgrounds of, for instance, personal web 'homepages' that were popular in the late '90s (Eppink, 2014). With the advent of instant messaging and social media 'reaction GIFs' became part of the repertoire of resources for responding to communicative moves on social media posts (Church et al., 2023; Hautsch & Cook, 2021; Veszelszki, 2015), and in this sense were “designed to be shared.”

As a distinct semiotic technology, GIFs are defined by their depiction of a looped, filmic or animated sequence rarely longer than six seconds and the absence (as yet) of audio data. GIFs can

also be annotated with overlaid written text, which can serve various functions including subtitling depicted speech or meta-commentary by the GIF creators. Unlike a static image or a conventional narrative video, GIFs do not capture a single moment or follow a linear sequence of events.<sup>1</sup> As a result, they combine reference to the depicted subjects with a meta-textual awareness born of their infinite, timeless repetition (cf. Fan, 2022, p. 49's description of GIFs as "atelic containers"). GIFs are an especially rich semiotic resource on account of their embedded references to specific cultural knowledge (such as a clip from a well-known film) and the affordances of their continuous looping playback that borrows "a potentially subversive disappearance of authorship from sampling culture" (Jung, 2020, p. 103). The affordances of GIFs insofar as they interact with co-occurring language vary among communicative contexts wherein they occur, but they typically do not occur in-line with written language, and they occupy a relatively large portion of the screen on which they are viewed. In the context of the X (formerly Twitter) social media platform whence the posts comprising the dataset for this study were sourced, GIFs are always located below co-occurring written language in a single post.

These unique features have made GIFs a popular and engaging graphicon medium (Bakhshi et al., 2016), and they have accordingly attracted scholarly attention. Some studies have suggested that GIFs play a role in both representing an "embodied reenactment" of affect and action in a similar manner to quotation (Tolins & Samermit, 2016), while others have explored their polysemy, their function as demonstrations of cultural knowledge, and their role in the commodification of graphiconic resources (Miltner & Highfield, 2017). Work in pragmatics has suggested the echoic role that GIFs play in terms of conveying the attitudinal stance of the communicator (Sasamoto, 2023).

This body of work has produced valuable insights into GIF semiosis across linguistic traditions; however, to date there has been only limited investigation of GIFs from a social semiotic perspective. Principally, Gürsimsek (2016) presents an analysis of GIF design informed by social semiotic multimodal discourse analysis, outlining systems for describing GIFs' internal semiosis and observing how GIF creation constitutes a particular form of transmedia literacy wherein creators "do extreme close-reading of narratives, performances and settings in order to isolate specific moments that are GIF material" (p. 347) and "use various types of animated GIFs, such as reaction GIFs, to render their interests visually via the dramatically acted gestures and emotional expressions of the characters" (p. 348). While Gürsimsek's analysis is valuable in illuminating technical dimensions of GIF design and GIFs' internal semiotic resources, the research does not explore the relation between GIFs and co-occurring language (typically written text occurring within the same post as a GIF).

Consequently, the focus of this article remains unexplored. Aiming to address this gap in the research, in this study we conduct a social semiotic analysis of how GIFs make meaning in concert with co-occurring written language in social media posts. These relations are described according to the principles of social semiotic multimodal discourse analysis, which in turn is underpinned by Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter, SFL).

## Data and Methodology

The dataset for this study is a collection of 100 digital message exchanges containing at least one GIF, sourced from X, regarding the lawsuit and settlement between media corporation Fox News and electronic voting company Dominion. This lawsuit centred on an accusation of defamation made by voting machine company Dominion voting systems against television news network Fox News Channel and its parent company Fox corporation, arguing that their claim that Dominion voting machines had been rigged to steal the election from then-President Donald Trump in the 2020 US elections was false and thus defamatory. The lawsuit was settled on April 18, 2023, with Fox News agreeing to pay Dominion US\$787.5 million and acknowledging they broadcast false statements about Dominion. This subject was chosen as the thematic focus of the dataset due to its timeliness at the time of writing, prominence across social media, and the researchers' previous interest in social media discourse related to Donald Trump and US politics.

The dataset was sampled qualitatively in order to ensure that relevant posts were collected and to preserve the relevant message threads. Accordingly, data collection was primarily informed by purpose, whereby a particular search query was designed to isolate data relevant to the research aims. The search query consisted of the two keywords "Fox" and "Dominion," plus the specific search function for posts containing animated GIFs "card\_name:animated\_gif." The dataset was collected from May 29, 2023, to August 7, 2023, with the search query for relevant terms repeated until the required number of posts had been attained. The size of the dataset, comprising 100 posts, was decided on as a balance between data volume and dataset manageability – 100 posts (and their ensuing comment/reply threads) allowed the researchers to identify numerous dynamics of GIF-language interaction within the available time resources, but still allowed for thorough qualitative analysis. All posts that matched this query were included in the dataset, as researcher review confirmed all posts returned by the query were relevant to the thematic and modal focus of the project. As all posts contained both written language and a GIF, the dataset exemplifies the possible ways GIFs relate to co-occurring language.

The small size of the dataset was a function of the close discourse analysis that would likely be required in an exploratory study aimed at understanding the kinds of meanings that GIFs can make in the context of social media posts in which they are embedded. While a modest, purposively sampled dataset such as that employed in this study may not represent all possible semiotic interactions between GIFs and language, it provides a robust and achievable point of departure from which to map the general features of language-GIF semiosis. Posts selected for the dataset were anonymised by replacing the username and X handle with {Username} and {@handle}, respectively, and their profile image was hidden with a blue circle. While some users might still be identifiable via searches for the text within posts, those who have private profiles or who have deleted the posts will remain unidentifiable. Decontextualised links to the GIFs discussed in this article are included for the reader's reference.

The dataset was manually analysed and annotated according to a coding rubric, as per the general discourse analysis methodology outlined in Martin (1992) and Martin and White (2005) and later

adapted for multimodal texts in Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013). This rubric combines multiple discourse analysis methods drawn from social semiotics, all aimed at unpacking different dimensions of GIF semiosis:

1. **Convergence relations:** analysis of the semiotic relations established between the GIF and the body of the social media post. Three main kinds of relationship are considered: ideational concurrence, interpersonal resonance, and textual synchronicity, using a framework originally designed for work on emoji-text relations developed in social semiotics (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024; Logi & Zappavigna, 2021),
2. **Intersubjectivity:** analysis of the discursive mapping of voices and viewpoints across the GIF and body of the social media post through considering what we refer to as *discourse semantic parallelism*.
3. **Intertextuality:** analysis of the relations of the GIF to other texts both in terms of explicit intertextual reference and more implicit provenance.

Each of these methods is explained in the subsections below.

### ***Convergence Relations***

The first stage of annotation considered the kinds of relations that the GIFs made with the body of the tweet. This was guided by a system network developed in Zappavigna and Logi (2024) for exploring three kinds of convergence between emoji and their linguistic co-text: interpersonal resonance (construing attitudes and stances), ideational concurrence (construing experience) and textual synchronicity (organisation of the multimodal text). This network is shown in a simplified form to one level of delicacy in Figure 1. The concept of convergence was drawn from work on embodied paralinguage analysing interpersonal, textual, and ideational relations between spoken language, gesture, facial expressions, and phonology (Ngo et al., 2021).

The first system in the network, concurrence, is concerned with ideational relations involved in construing experience. The main distinction is between a graphicon which congruently 'depicts' a discourse semantic resource, e.g., a graphicon representing a [thing entity],<sup>2</sup> and a graphicon which incongruently 'embellishes,' e.g., a graphicon acting as a metaphor or emblem. The second system, resonance, is concerned with interpersonal relations enacting relationships. The central opposition is between graphicons which 'imbue' the linguistic text with interpersonal meaning (e.g., a graphicon targeting attitude at the co-text) and graphicons which enmesh with interpersonal meaning in the co-text (e.g., a graphicon echoing attitude also present in the co-text). The final system, synchronicity, is concerned with textual relations. The distinction here is between graphicons which are inset into the discourse semantic structure (e.g., playing a role in a figure) and graphicons which 'punctuate' that structure (e.g., breaking the text into parts). Given that GIFs and emoji have different affordances, it was expected that at more delicate levels the features which they can enact will diverge.

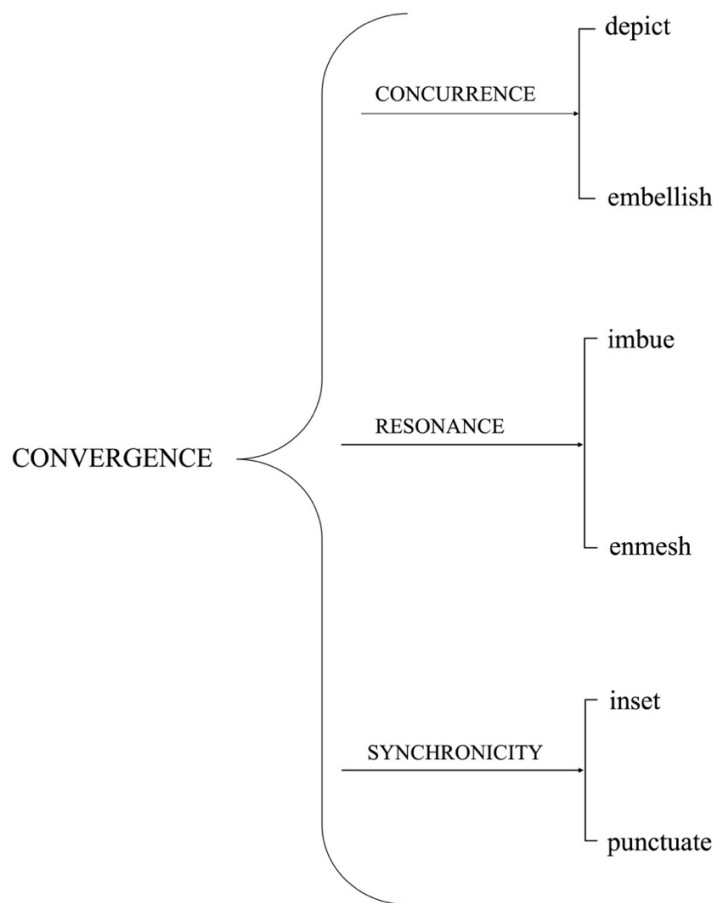


Figure 1. The convergence system, presented to one level of delicacy (adapted from Zappavigna & Logi, 2024)

Various features of the convergence model parallel descriptions of emoji functions in work informed by pragmatics. For instance, the [depict] and [enmesh] features, where graphicons realise meaning also realised in linguistic co-text, are similar to the ‘mention’ feature described in Herring and Dainas (2017) and Yus’ cyberpragmatic description of emoji functioning to “communicate the intensity of a feeling or emotion that has been coded verbally” (2016, p.19). Similarly, the [multiply] features, where graphicons diverge or reposition linguistic meaning, bear resemblance to Herring and Dainas’s ‘riffing’ feature, where graphicons make “a humorous elaboration on, play on, or parody of a previous graphicon or text comment,” (2017, p. 2188) as well as to Yus’s description of graphicons functioning to “contradict the explicit content of the utterance” (2016, p. 17). Finally, instances of the [imbue] feature echo Yus’s cyberpragmatic category of emoji functioning to “signal the propositional attitude that underlies the utterance, and which would be difficult to identify without the aid of the emoji,” (2016, p.16) as well as “to add a feeling or emotion towards the propositional content of the utterance (affective attitude towards the utterance)” (2016, p.18). While the social semiotic linguistic theory that underpins the convergence model diverges from pragmatics, it is encouraging to see work across linguistic traditions resulting in complementary descriptions of graphicon semiosis.

### *Intersubjectivity and Discourse Semantic Parallelism*

Our analysis was guided by our initial observation of how critical an intersubjective perspective appears to be in the meanings that can be made by GIFs. Like memes, they appear to be "viewpoint-driven multimodal constructions" (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017, p. 591). GIFs rely on the reader being able to unpack the play of voices in the text. This can involve mapping the linguistic and represented participants in the GIF onto any accompanying linguistic participants in the body of the social media post and potentially onto the author or themselves as reader. In other words, in order to understand a social value being negotiated in a GIF, for instance in terms of the target of its attitudinal stance, the reader needs to unravel who is the source of any linguistic or visual projection of speech or thought. We will refer to this mapping process as '*discourse semantic parallelism*' (see also Zappavigna, 2020, on reference resolution in memes). It involves the reader mapping the participants across a social media post so that the text is not only coherent but is internally cohesive in terms of:

1. **Sources:** The linguistic and verbal projection involved in constructing a voice and a viewpoint.
2. **Stances:** The attitudinal positions constructed.

We will examine discourse semantic parallelism by drawing on the results of the relevant concurrence and resonance analysis outlined in the previous section.

### *Intertextuality and Provenance*

Also important to understanding the meanings made in GIFs is unpacking the intertextual references they often feature. This may take the form of an explicit reference to another text such as a film or television program. The semiotic effect of these inclusions is that, for a viewer familiar with the text referenced in a GIF, and in addition to whatever textual or visual embellishments a GIF might contain (such as caption text or other graphical elements), any meanings associated with a source text or a particular represented character will also contribute to the GIF's semiosis. GIFs may also include more implicit reference to the general 'vibe' of a type of genre, style, or era rather than to any particular text. We will analyse these kinds of references using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) notion of provenance:

In the case of provenance, individual signifiers are associated with 'where they come from,' and meaning is made on this basis, that is, by reference to ideas and values associated with that context. Needless to say, such associations can differ according to context, although an increasingly globalized popular culture will make many of them widely understood, creating a kind of lexicon of semiotic clichés. (van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 99)

The definition of recurring, recognisable signifiers as 'cultural clichés' is especially valuable here, as particular scenes/characters from a relatively small number of source texts seem to dominate in

GIFs used in social media posts: According to Giphy (one of the main website databases of GIFs), of the 25 most popular GIFs of 2022, nine were sourced from films and television programs, and a further eight from live sport broadcasts (Giphy, 2022). This suggests that many GIFs emerge already laden with source text specific meaning that informs their use even before they might become well-known to viewers unfamiliar with the source. Of course, not all viewers of GIFs will be familiar with their provenance, and this in turn will impact their interpretation. As we will discuss in the Section, ‘Intertextual Analysis’ below, this also carries implications for how GIFs can be used to selectively include or exclude segments of their potential audience.

## Analysis

As noted in the section ‘Convergence Relations’ above, the first step of our analysis consisted of exploring the extent to which GIFs can realise the intermodal semiotic relations outlined in

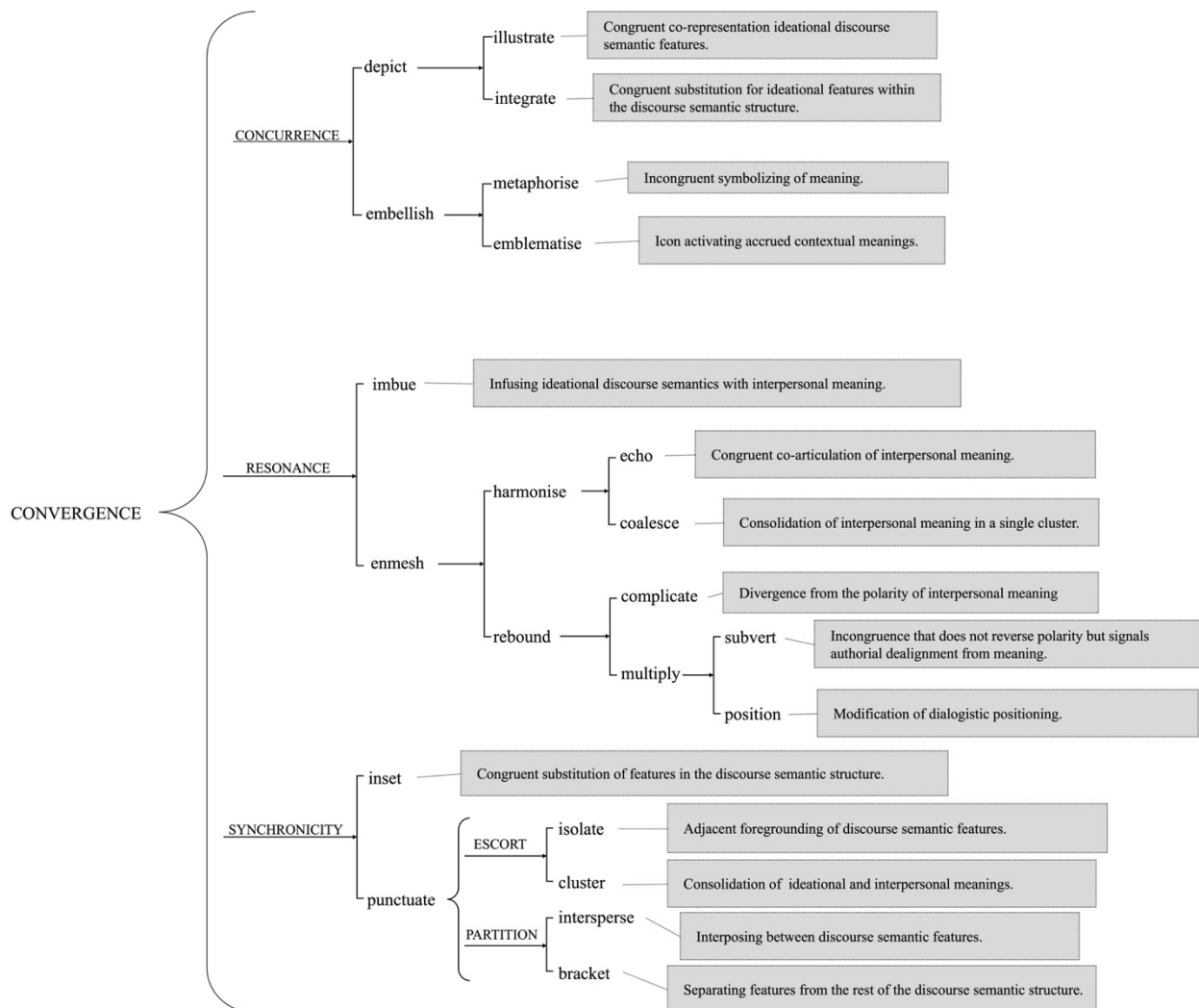


Figure 2. The system network of emoji-language semiosis (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024)

Zappavigna and Logi's (2024) research on emoji-language semiosis. This allowed for a preliminary comparison to be made between the modes and identified points of difference that could then be further investigated. Overall, GIFs appear to be able to realise most, but not all, of these relations. In particular, the formatting conventions of the X platform resulted in limited realisation of synchronicity relations, which in turn impacted the realisation of some resonance features. Therefore, the discussion below will focus on regions of divergence between emoji-language and GIF-language semiosis, and it will ellipise instances where the intermodal meaning potential of the two modes corresponds. The full system network of emoji-language relations is presented for the reader's reference in Figure 2. This figure contains an explanation of each feature in the grey squares adjacent to feature names.

### ***Convergence Analysis***

We begin our analysis by comparing relations between GIFs and linguistic texts within posts with the relations between emoji and linguistic text explored in Zappavigna and Logi (2024). As outlined in Zappavigna and Logi (2024), these relations are divided by metafunction, with interpersonal and ideational meaning-making features drawn from the discourse semantic stratum of the SFL model of language.

Beginning with a comparison of GIF-language and emoji-language realisations of textual meaning, the most immediate observation is that in the dataset analysed here, the affordances of the X platform restrict the positioning of larger media elements such as GIFs to below the body text of a post. This contrasts with the unrestricted positioning of emoji in-line with written language and has a substantial impact on the possible textual relationship between GIFs and the rest of a post. As noted in Zappavigna and Logi (2024), larger media located at the bottom of social media posts realise the Information value feature of 'New,' summarising and reinforcing the central message or issue of the post (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Moreover, the comparatively large size and higher contrast and colour saturation of these media elements renders these the most salient features in the post, thus further foregrounding the meanings they construe. In terms of the system network of options for emoji-language textual meaning, GIFs' restricted positioning limits their ability to realise the [inset] relation with co-text, where they adopt a functional role in the clause grammar; this can only occur when they replace the lexical item(s) at the end of a clause, as can be seen in Figure 3. Here the written text in the GIF '*Are you serious?*' functions as the projected speech in the second line of the written co-text. While this does qualify as a realisation of the [inset] feature as described based on emoji-text semiosis, it is worth noting that this example relies on text within the GIF to play a role in the grammar of written-co-text, and thus constitutes a somewhat less intermodal semiotic phenomenon.





Figure 3. *Are you serious?* GIF inset into linguistic co-text (T12)

In terms of the [punctuate] branch of graphicon-language synchronicity, the layout restrictions on GIF placement preclude realisation of the [escort: isolate] feature, as the GIF (in its entirety<sup>3</sup>) cannot selectively interact with individual linguistic resources as emoji can. GIF placement at the end of a post does however allow for realisations of the [punctuate: cluster] feature, whereby a GIF compounds and consolidates meanings realised earlier in a post (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024). Thus, in T38, shown in Figure 4, we can see that the positive affect realised linguistically earlier in the post by the lexical item *'lucky'* is summarised and reinforced in the GIF via the depiction of the emblematic gesture of crossed fingers.



Figure 4. *Fingers crossed excited* GIF clustering at the end of a social media post (T38)

As for the second branch of [punctuate] features: [partition: intersperse], wherein emoji “interrupt a social media post at the points most commonly associated with traditional punctuation” (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024, p.82), and [partition: bracket], where emoji are repeated at the beginning and end of a post, these interactions are also precluded by GIF layout restrictions.

Turning now to ideational concurrence, GIFs were found to realise the full range of features identified for emoji-language interaction. In the interests of conciseness and maintaining focus on the main aim of this article, we will not describe how GIFs realise the features of intermodal concurrence.

As for interpersonal resonance, we can see that GIFs are able to realise most, but not all, of the features noted in emoji-language interaction. The sole divergence between GIF and emoji intermodal meaning potential with regards to interpersonal meaning was found in the realisation of the echo feature. This feature describes the punctuation of written language with emoji in proximity to lexis they resonate with; the layout restrictions of GIFs on the X platform preclude this.

### ***Beyond Emoji-Text Relations***

As the results of the previous section suggest, in the dataset analysed here GIFs realise most of the semiotic relationships with written co-text that emoji can. However, examination of the dataset revealed a number of further possible interactions between GIFs and language that rely on particular affordances of GIFs that emoji do not share. These include specific cultural knowledge activated by GIFs’ intertextual references, the mapping of participants engaged in social media interactions onto participants represented within GIFs, and the ensuing implications of these features for the coherence and cohesion of social media texts including GIFs. These aspects of GIF semiosis will be defined and illustrated in the following subsections via discussion of an exchange featuring two GIFs (T52 and T53) drawn from the dataset (Figure 5). Before proceeding to these subsections, however, a brief discussion of the more superficially evident features of GIF-text interactions in the exchange will be outlined.

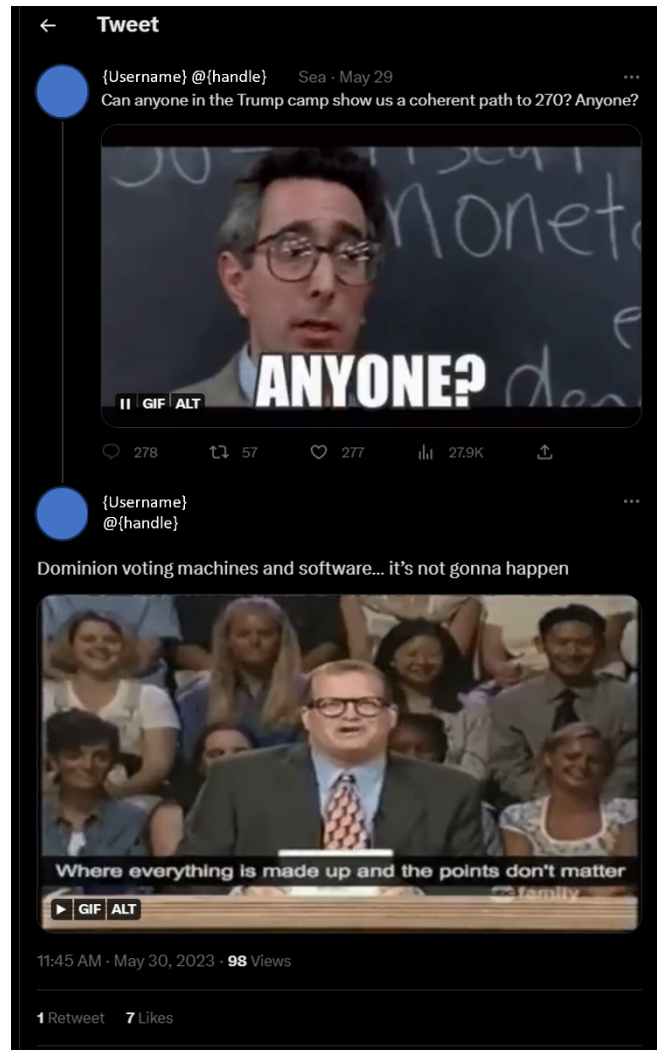


Figure 5. An exchange featuring GIFs: *Anyone?* and *Whose Line is it Anyway?* (T52 and T53)

The first post in the exchange is a tweet about how Donald Trump, an aspiring candidate in the 2024 US Presidential election, might be able to gain the 270 votes in the US electoral college needed to win the election. GIF-language relations in this exchange span interpersonal, ideational and thematic meanings, however the most obvious meanings to address in this section concern interpersonal resonance. Thus, in the first post, the interpersonal rhetorical effect of the ‘*Anyone?*’ verbiage in the written text is picked up and repeated in the GIF caption. In isolation, this minor clause serves to illustrate that the preceding question, “*Can anyone in the Trump camp show us a coherent path to 270?*”, is intended rhetorically.<sup>4</sup> The implicit answer ‘No’ realises the [deny] feature of the interpersonal discourse semantic Engagement system, contracting the heteroglossic space by shutting down the possibility of an affirmative response. Specifically, by repeating the question in ellipsed form, the ‘*Anyone?*’ verbiage evokes a context wherein the question’s addressees have not answered because they cannot provide a response, in turn inferring that ‘there is no path to 270.’ Collectively, these resources would seem to be realising a nested instance of [Engagement: deny / proposition: existence of a coherent path to 270 for Trump].

In terms of features in the emoji-language system network, this would constitute an instance of the [position] feature, as the GIF interacts with language to introduce a new perspective into the text: that no one in *'the Trump camp'* can *'show a coherent path to 270.'* Furthermore, because specific interpersonal meaning is mirrored across modalities, this post realises an example of the [echo] feature. This analysis relies on the atomisation of the GIF into constituent elements; if we relate specific elements of a GIF to written co-text, we can find more specific interpersonal relationships among GIF and linguistic elements. However, when we take each mode as a composed whole, these finer relationships are aggregated into simpler, less delicate semiotic interactions. While pursuing analysis of individual elements within and across modes is both relevant and intriguing, it dramatically increases the complexity of potential analysis; moreover, it risks eclipsing the importance of the primary interactions across modes by paying overly granular attention to the interactions among isolated elements. For this reason, while we note that this is likely a fruitful direction for further research (note also Gürsimsek, 2016's valuable contribution in analysing internal GIF semiosis from a social semiotic perspective), we will address this type of atomised analysis only in service of describing the collective semiosis across modes.

Returning to the most superficially evident interactions between language and GIFs in this exchange, we can see how the GIF in the response to the original post also primarily realises interpersonal resonance with the linguistic co-text. Here, the written text begins with a reference to *'Dominion voting machines and software'* whose meaning can only be abductively deciphered.<sup>5</sup> To do so, a reader would need to be familiar with accusations of electoral fraud levelled at Dominion (a company providing electronic voting machines) in the 2020 US presidential election, and therefore might infer that pro-Trump Republicans would regard the use of these machines/software as responsible for preventing Donald Trump from winning the election in 2024. The written text of the post can be rendered to illustrate this conditionality as: *'[if] Dominion voting machines and software [are used, then] [Donald Trump's election victory in 2024]'s not gonna happen'*; accordingly, the written verbiage can be coded as realising an implicated instance of negative [appreciation] targeting Dominion voting machines. The GIF in the second post most obviously resonates with this negative [appreciation] via the bottom caption, which reads *'everything is made up and the points don't matter.'* Read in the context of the written co-text, this verbiage can be interpreted as implying that, due to the use of Dominion voting machines, the results of the election are made up and the votes do not matter, which also realises an instance of invoked negative [appreciation] targeting Dominion voting machines. Thus, the GIF in this post similarly coalesces the interpersonal meaning realised in the written co-text.

It is also worth noting here how the reference to Dominion voting machines in this post constitutes an example of iconisation, characterised by Martin (2019) as a process whereby the conceptual meaning of an event or entity is backgrounded, and its axiological value to the members of a particular community is foregrounded. In this case, the reference to Dominion elicits generalised scepticism for the fairness of the 2020 election among Trump supporters that goes beyond the alleged failures of electronic voting machines. Of course, as a reader familiar with the texts referenced in either or both the first and second post will know, specific cultural information

associated with the source texts shown in the GIFs is contributing substantially to their semiosis; it is to this dimension of GIF meaning that we turn in the following section.

### *Intertextual Analysis*

As noted in the preview of this subject in the discussion regarding GIF realisations of the [coalesce] feature outlined in the ‘Convergence Analysis’ section above, GIFs often include excerpts from well-known popular culture texts such as films and television programs. Moreover, these excerpts typically include recognisable representations of protagonists/characters from the texts. Both posts in the exchange in Figure 5 illustrate the powerful meaning potential inherent in textual provenance. The GIF in the first post includes an excerpt taken from the 1986 film *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (Hughes, 1986) that portrays a high school teacher asking if any of the students in the class can answer a question. Here we can see how familiarity with the cultural knowledge associated with the GIF’s provenance (i.e., the specific scene in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* whence the GIF is taken) allows for it to be interpreted as realising negative evaluation of the post’s addressees by conflating them with the addressees of the teacher’s question in the GIF. This knowledge itself occurs at both a general and a specific level: At a general level, the GIF evokes the stereotype of a demoralised teacher confronted by students’ (who are not shown in the GIF) apathy.

It is worth noting here the link with Zappavigna’s (2020) work on image macro memes. Zappavigna observes, “Where the represented participants are not identifiable as a known public figure, they are likely to be interpreted as representing a subject position ... allowing the text to play with meanings about what are views commonly held by this type of persona” (2020, p. 218). At a specific level, the text *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* centres on students’ boredom and frustration with education. In both instances, there is an implied negative [affect] attributed to the students who are the addressees of the teacher’s question in the GIF. Moreover, the negative [facial affect] of the teacher, seen most clearly in the outward sloping eyebrows and minimal animation of the face while speaking, further contributes to the students’ negative evaluation, as they are positioned as the triggers of the teacher’s negative affect (cf. description of facial expressions realising SPIRIT UP/DOWN features in Ngo et al., 2021). As will be explained in the following section, the participants in the GIF are conflated with the post’s author and addressees; thus, the attitudinal implications of the GIF’s provenance are mapped onto the interactants and referents of the written co-text.

The GIF in the second post comprises an excerpt from the opening sequence of the United States version of the theatre sports television show *Whose Line is it Anyway?* (Leveson & Patterson, 1998-current) where the host (Drew Carey) would begin each episode with a scripted welcome that described the program as per the written text shown at the bottom of the GIF: “The show where everything is made up and the points don’t matter.” As discussed above, this GIF [coalesces] with linguistic negative [appreciation] for the ideational target ‘*Dominion voting machines and software.*’ This is due to the conflation of a US presidential election where Dominion voting machines (a referent recovered from the field of US presidential elections established in the

original post) are used with a game where ‘*everything is made up and the points don’t matter,*’ thus implying that the results of the election are made up and the number of votes doesn’t matter. Also noteworthy here is that the attitudinal polarity of the evaluation of the television show portrayed in the GIF is reversed in the context of this post: in the context of *Whose Line is it Anyway?* the improvised, chaotic skits and arbitrary scoring are considered assets that made the show entertaining; these same attributes undermine the credibility of an election. This suggests that the evaluative meaning potential of cultural references contained in GIFs is not fixed, but rather that it will respond to the field and tenor of the post wherein the GIFs occur.

Discussion of how provenance invests GIFs with meaning drawn from the cultural knowledge associated with the texts they reference prompts consideration of how certain GIFs themselves become iconic over time (cf. Bakhshi et al., 2016). By this we mean that in some instances, a GIF text itself might become so widely recognisable that it eclipses or absorbs the provenance of embedded texts and the literal interpretation of its depicted ideational and interpersonal meanings to realise specific axiological meaning among interactants familiar with it. An example of such GIF iconisation is the ‘Michael Jackson eating popcorn’ GIF, which contains an excerpt from the 1982 music video *Thriller* depicting the pop star eating popcorn and smiling while sitting in a cinema (Figure 6). Here the provenance of the sampled text could bring to bear considerable associated meanings spanning Michael Jackson’s music career and the controversy surrounding allegations of child sexual abuse. However, instances of this GIF encountered over the course of this research suggest this provenance-related meaning is rarely if ever relevant to the GIF’s use. Moreover, even the depicted ideational and interpersonal meaning of the GIF (the process of eating popcorn and the positive [affect] of smiling) are backgrounded to the specific connotations of the GIF’s iconic meaning, which indicates a social media post’s author’s enjoyment of some event, often centring on conflict or misfortune affecting a community the author is critical of. This meaning seems to have become relatively stabilised and universal, hence our proposal that the GIF functions as an icon.

GIFs may not be able to attain the degree of iconicity found in other symbols such as religious icons, which invoke highly specific community-related meanings (e.g., the Christian ‘fish’ symbol, which promotes the dogma of accepting Jesus Christ as lord and saviour), however there is a valid comparison to be made between iconic GIFs and modern idioms such as ‘Adulting’ or ‘Keep it 100,’ where the (indecipherable) superficial meaning of the lexis is backgrounded to the iconic meanings of behaving responsibly and competently or staying true to one’s values, respectively. In the case of the Michael Jackson eating popcorn GIF, we might speculate that the popularity of *Thriller* and the popstar himself have contributed to the GIF’s widespread use, but regardless of (or despite) this, the GIF has achieved a status where even those unfamiliar with its provenance are able to interpret it as realising the specific meaning into which it has crystallised; the graphicon has become an icon.



Figure 6. A still from the *Michael Jackson eating popcorn* GIF

An aside relating to the Michael Jackson eating popcorn GIF that merits attention is its relevance to the phenomenon of digital blackface described in work across graphiconic resources (Davis, 2022; Erinn, 2019; Green, 2006; Matamoros-Fernández, 2020). Digital blackface refers to instances where texts including GIFs, memes, and TikTok dances “perform heightened emotions, evoke humor, and appropriate Black vernacular for non-Black users seeking to garner the cultural capital associated with Black expressivity” (Davis, 2022, p. 31). Accordingly, a digital-blackface informed critique intersects with our analysis of how the Michael Jackson eating popcorn GIF has become iconic: alongside specific ideational, interpersonal, and providential meaning, the authorship of this graphicon has been backgrounded to its iconic usage. This GIF by no means constitutes the most illustrative example of digital blackface in the meme catalogue; however, discussion of its evolving usage would not be complete without addressing this dimension of its cultural context.

Further to the interactions among discourse semantic features described above, the use of GIFs that require familiarity with specific cultural knowledge would seem to contribute to the rhetorical effect of these posts by establishing criteria for in/out grouping. By employing GIFs, the authors of these posts implicitly exclude viewers unfamiliar with particular cultural references from participating in discussion ensuing from the posts. In the case of the posts analysed here, the GIFs refer to popular film and television texts published in the United States (and anglophone world more broadly) in the late 1980s and 1990s; consequently, we might loosely define the in-group for whom these references are recoverable as English speakers who possess the means to access film and television and were born sometime before the mid-1970s. Thus, by defining and exclusively addressing a particular in-group, these GIFs function as social bonding resources that establish solidarity among in-group members, as per the interpersonal system of Involvement, which “portrays the writer’s social identities and identifications, and create bonds of affinity with the projected reader primarily on the basis of their reciprocal identities and affiliations” (Isaac, 2012, p. 35). This characterisation of GIF use as an Involvement resource is consistent with Isaac’s description of how figurative language is used in academic writing:

I extend Martin's Involvement framework (1994, in Eggins & Slade 1997, Martin & White 2005) by the inclusion of figurative language, particularly irony and understatement, and other cultural references that signal the writer's intercultural competence and project the writer and imagined reader – and potentially the addressed reader – as sharing membership of a particular discourse community, background knowledge and/or ideologies. (Isaac, 2012, p. 35)

### *Discourse Semantic Parallelism*

A second feature of GIFs that sets them apart from emoji in terms of how they relate to written co-text concerns their potential for being metaphorically interpreted as depicting interactants referenced in social media texts. By this we mean that in some instances, the depicted characters in GIFs can be interpreted as representing the interactants referenced or implied in the written text, including a post's author or addressee. We define this interactional dynamic as 'discourse semantic parallelism' rather than simply 'participant parallelism,' as although elements within the GIFs primarily parallel participants in written co-text, this parallelism realises discourse semantic features across metafunctions, and thus should not be constrained to the ideational meaning implicated by participant parallelism. This is especially clear in cases where GIFs include written text that closely corresponds to the linguistic part of a post, but it can also occur when GIFs do not include written text.

The typical composition of GIFs as brief (usually no more than six seconds) videos that infinitely repeat appears to enhance their ability to be flexibly interpreted and mapped onto ideational meaning in the written co-text. This compositional characteristic functions to abstract them from the specific ideational meaning represented in the GIFs and instead foregrounds interpersonal meaning that can be applied to ideational events and entities in the linguistic text. Ideational meaning in the GIFs is thus divorced from an original or specific context and can be redeployed in the context of the social media post. Viewed in terms of where GIFs fit on the spectrum of figurative visual genres, we can interpret this as representing GIFs' indeterminate verisimilitude: They are neither a static photorealistic image, a frozen snapshot of a specific moment, nor do they depict a sequence of events unfolding linearly in a conventional order (such as a narrative video text) (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024). Thus, GIFs combine reference to the subjects they depict with the meta-textual awareness provoked by departure from any particular generic schema and the timelessness of infinite repetition. Fan likens the effect of these to visual nominalisation, and consequently defines GIFs as atelic containers:

What an atelic visual container enables is the cyclic processing of GIF content as visual nominalization: first, a recognition of the process, the participant(s), and the circumstance; next, an attuning to the process in an abstract manner; then, a consideration of the process in relation to the discourse setting the GIF may appear in. (2022, p. 49)



Fan's description of GIFs as abstracted nominalisations prompts a fruitful consideration of how GIFs are on the one hand context-independent and, on the other, able to elicit meanings from very specific cultural contexts. While these two affordances might appear to be at odds, it is in fact precisely GIFs' adaptability to different discourse contexts that makes their activation of provenance so productive: both specific and flexible, GIFs can reference and isolate a particular bundle of cultural meaning and then inject it into a completely unrelated setting. The potential for humour, irony, and semiotic art here is clear.

As noted in Zappavigna and Logi (2024), "the predominantly interpersonal meaning realised by GIFs, as well as their frequent depiction of a sentient body part, serves to foreground a particular viewpoint. Due to the relation of projection between the avatar/username/handle and the body of the post, this viewpoint will usually be that of the author of the post." This kind of participant parallelism is clearly illustrated in the first post of the exchange, where the concluding word of the written text, 'ANYONE?', is repeated in the GIF's lower caption, and the lip movements of the represented participant suggest this word is spoken twice by them. As noted above, this GIF appears to be primarily modifying and foregrounding interpersonal meaning, in particular heteroglossic and attitudinal features of the post. To do so, however, the intermodal resonance between GIF and written language seems to step through a process whereby ideational entities across modes are conflated, so as to allow for interpersonal meaning to be transduced. We use the term 'transduce' here as defined by Kress (2012, p. 43) to refer to "the change from meaning expressed in one mode to meaning expressed in another mode." As such, for this text we are concerned with how different modes contribute complementary meanings by employing their distinct affordances.<sup>6</sup>

The conflation applies to two parallel sets of participants: the author of the post and the represented participant (the teacher) in the GIF; and the addressee of the post (the 'Trump camp') and the (implied) addressee of the represented participant in the GIF (the students). This participant parallelism is realised by the corresponding arrangement of participant roles in the speech functions of the GIF and linguistic text: The author of the post is conflated with the teacher in the GIF as they are the askers of questions, and members of the Trump camp are conflated with the students as they are the addressees of the questions. Therefore, the negative evaluations made of the students in the GIF are transduced onto members of the Trump camp, resulting in a realisation of the intermodal coupling [ideation: members of the Trump camp / attitude: -ve affect/judgement].

Discourse semantic parallelism is less clearly illustrated in the second post of the exchange, but nonetheless does contribute to the intermodal semiosis between language and GIF. In this instance, it dovetails with the connotations elicited by the provenance of the text referenced in the GIF. Thus, when the US elections are conflated with a game show where 'everything is made up and the points don't matter,' a reader can abduce that the negatively evaluated Dominion voting machines are being blamed as the cause of the election's unfairness. A secondary vector of parallelism unfolds between the represented participant in the GIF and the author of the post. Further to the mapping of negative attitude from the GIF to the interactant noted above, the

conflation of these entities also serves to imbue the author of the post with the authority and status enjoyed by a game show host (within the context of the game show). This parallelism implicitly targets the author of the post with positive [judgement]; moreover, by equating the author with a social actor who has access to privileged information, this parallelism also indirectly positively appreciates their verbiage.

Viewed from the perspective of SFL metafunctions, this dynamic of discourse semantic parallelism realises and reflects ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning. Perhaps most foregrounded of the metafunctions in this dataset, ideational meaning is realised insofar as two separate ideational entities are superimposed, with processes and qualities associated with one transduced to the other. Parallelism then extends into interpersonal meaning, as the association of entities can also be guided by consistent ideational prosody among them, as can be seen with how speech function roles determine the pairings of participants in text (T52). Textually, discourse semantic parallelism constitutes a kind of intermodal Identification, whereby once a parallel is established, all subsequent references to a particular participant will simultaneously refer to its associated entity. Viewed holistically, discourse semantic parallelism can be described as an intermodal allegory where avenues of semiotic exchange are established among otherwise unrelated referents, allowing meaning to be freighted between them. As noted above, the interaction among texts and textual elements originating in disparate contexts affords vast possibilities for semiotic multiplication.

A further noteworthy aside relating to intersubjectivity within GIFs is that by affording opportunities for social media users to merge their own voices with those of personae represented within them, GIFs constitute a resource for realising the kind of blended impersonation described with regards to stand-up comedy performances in Logi (2021). In the context of stand-up comedy, blended impersonations appear to be primarily motivated by the competing semiotic demands of construing an impersonated scenario and maintaining rapport with the audience. In GIFs, however, blended impersonation appears to function more as a resource for ‘colouring’ the post author’s verbiage with interpersonal meaning realised within the GIF, typically via the facial expressions and broader tenor features associated with a GIF’s provenance.

### *Cohesion and Coherence*

The final region of semiosis evident in GIF-language interaction that diverges from emoji-language semiosis and merits investigation is the intermodal realisation of textual meaning. In particular, when taking into account GIFs’ rich potential for intertextual reference, we can see how GIFs and written co-text interact to realise relations both inter- and intra-textually.

As noted in the discussion of intersubjectivity and discourse semantic parallelism in the Section, ‘Intersubjectivity and Discourse Semantic Parallelism’ above, some relations between GIFs and language require a certain degree of semiotic labour from the reader so as to render the text both coherent and cohesive (Zappavigna, 2020). For instance, as Zappavigna (2020) notes in their discussion of image macro memes, if a “reference is unresolved in the body of the post, this will

be a text-intertext relation and rely on the reader’s knowledge of the intertextual meanings in the context in order to make the text cohesive” (p. 216). The same principle applies to GIFs; indeed, GIFs push this referential mapping even further.

The primary vector for GIF-language reference is the discourse semantic parallelism discussed above. This resource contributes meaning in texts only when a viewer is able to supply the necessary textual bridge between entities or participants that are being associated; in our dataset (and our experience with social media generally), we have not encountered any instances where a social media post includes an explicit explanation that the represented participants in a GIF should be interpreted as representing an interactant or entity in the written co-text. Thus, we can surmise that embedded into GIFs’ micro-genre conventions is a kind of ‘hungry’ intratextual reference that scopes backwards over linguistic co-text in search of entities or referents that can be associated with participants represented within the GIF.

This principle is pushed even further when we consider the role of provenance in the textual meaning realised by GIF-language interaction. Provenance brings to bear all the associated cultural meanings a viewer associates with a particular GIF, typically via the sampling of a well-known text such as a film or television program. And, as discussed in our exploration of participant parallelism in (T52) with regards to the provenance of the *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* reference in the GIF, these associations can extend beyond the participants depicted in a GIF to include proximal participants, such as the students to whom the teacher is speaking in T52. Thus, the referencing unfolding in an instance such as (T52) steps through a number of stages, as outlined in Figure 7, with the putative viewer first recognising the excerpt in the GIF as a reference to a text (1), then recalling meaning associated with but not shown in the GIF (2), and then mapping this meaning onto referents within the linguistic co-text. As such, language-GIF reference that spans the provenance of a text referenced in a GIF would appear to include both references to referents within and beyond the text, weaving together complex inter- and intratextual meanings.

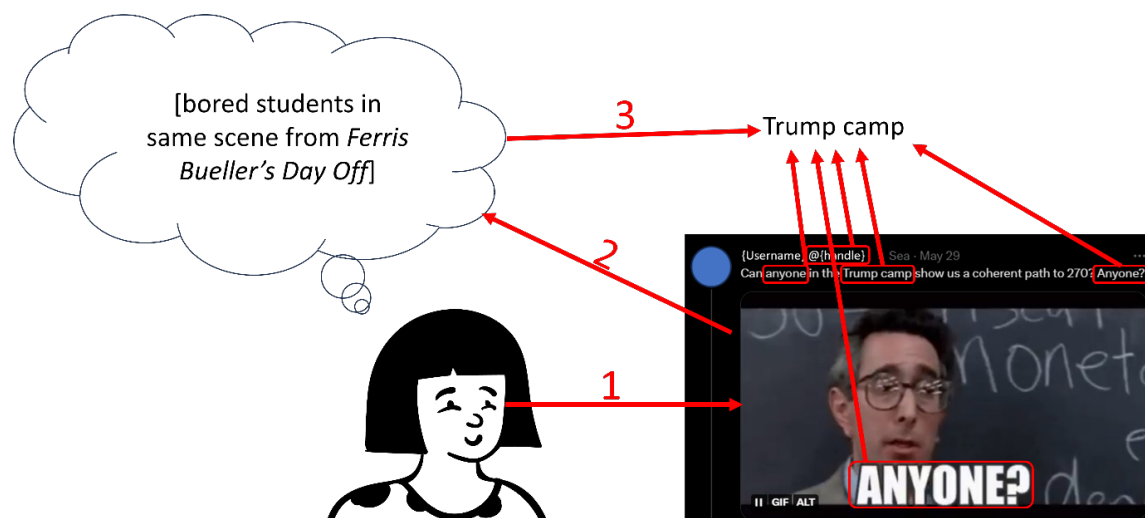


Figure 7. referencing indexing provenance in a GIF

## Conclusion

This article has presented a social semiotic analysis of how GIFs interact with language to realise meaning in X posts. Applying a discourse analytic methodology to a dataset of 100 GIFs, we began with a summary of how GIF-language semiosis compares with emoji-language semiosis as outlined in Zappavigna and Logi (2024), noting that GIFs can realise many but not all the intermodal relations with language that emoji can. We then proceeded to propose three regions of intermodal semiosis distinct to GIFs: intertextual semiosis associated with cultural texts sampled in GIFs, as per the principal of provenance; discourse semantic parallelism, in particular insofar as represented participants within GIF texts semiotically ‘map’ onto participants and interactants realised by linguistic co-text; and cohesion and coherence, whereby both visual and linguistic grammar can be applied to interpret how elements within GIF-language social media posts interact to make textual meaning.

Over the course of describing these regions of interaction, we also noted how the surface ideational meaning of GIFs is often backgrounded to their associated provenance or iconic meaning, and how this can in turn function as a resource for demarcating in- and out-groups defined by familiarity with specific cultural knowledge. Another noteworthy observation concerns how discourse semantic parallelism serves to blend or multiply the perspectives realised in a social media post, comparable to the practice of impersonation employed by stand-up comedians (Logi, 2021). Lastly, we outlined how the convention of paralleling represented participants in GIFs with interactants and entities realised via linguistic co-text constitutes a particular relation of reference between GIFs and language, which can be pushed even beyond the boundaries of an individual social media post to scope over meaning associated with a GIF via the provenance of a referenced cultural text. As such, GIFs can simultaneously engage in intertextual and intratextual relations which bring to bear a prodigious volume of cultural and intermodal meanings.

In concert, these features invest GIFs with impressive and unique meaning potential, seemingly surpassing that of other graphiconic resources described to date. In particular, the compounding layers of meaning afforded by linking ‘out’ to specific references in the catalogue of shared cultural knowledge and ‘in’ to meanings made by co-occurring language positions GIFs as a semiotic fulcrum spanning local and global meanings. In turn this allows for the deployment of GIFs to simultaneously signal irony, subversion, and humour – among the most valued practices in the social media semiotic economy – and reinforces community bonds with an ambient audience demarcated not only by agreement with the comments made via the GIF, but also by their shared possession of cultural knowledge required to decode it. As such, surface meaning can be infinitely de- and re-contextualised via reference to a shared cultural text that (re-)frames it, all while filtering the audience to include only the desired in-group. If we consider the evolution of social media from their early days as forums for the uncritical sharing of personal data to their current status as arenas where reputations are made and ruined, culture wars are fought, and elections are won or lost, then the emergence and precipitous rise in popularity of GIFs can be seen as the state-of-the-art in the arms race for concise, mordant critique. We might therefore also speculate that

this semiotic productivity and flexibility is the crucial factor in the ongoing popularity and proliferation of GIFs in digital media contexts.

In terms of how these results relate to the literature about GIFs, this research both confirms and expands on recent studies. For example, the description of GIFs' semiotic affordances outlined here dovetails with the taxonomy of motivations for using GIFs described in Church et al. (2023); in particular, the categories of emotive quality, humour, cultural connection, and maintaining relations identified by Church et al. are supported by GIFs' rich potential for interpersonal meaning and cultural reference. The role of intertextual reference and cultural knowledge in GIF semiosis described here as provenance also confirms the findings of Miltner and Highfield (2017), who describe GIFs as "at the root of digital cultures" (p. 9). The centrality of interpersonal meaning to GIFs' usage is further supported by Bakhshi et al.'s (2016) observation that GIFs depicting faces were more likely to be shared; in turn, this suggests that the GIF-language dynamic of discourse semantic parallelism, in particular where participants map across GIF and written text, is highly valued among GIF users. More broadly, the conceptualisation adopted here of GIFs as a paralinguistic mode that makes meaning in convergence with language advances the greater intermodal project of mapping digital paralogy, both GIFs themselves (cf. Tolins & Samermit, 2016) and other modes (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024). However, while this study builds upon and confirms findings from earlier research, it also contributes a novel, systematic, and theoretically cohesive framework for describing GIF-language semiosis underpinned by social semiotic multimodal discourse analysis.

An obvious limitation of this research arising from the social media platform whence the dataset was collected is that as other platforms (such as Facebook Messenger, Instagram, and WhatsApp) impose different restrictions on the placement of GIFs in relation to language, some of the results of the analysis presented here will not be transferable to GIF-language semiosis on those platforms. As noted in the methodology section, we are conscious of the limited scale and variety in our dataset, and we hope only to provide a point of departure for other scholars exploring GIF use in other contexts.

But the primary limitation of this research is, perhaps encouragingly, the very complexity of the GIF mode. As mentioned in passing in the section 'Beyond Emoji-Text Relations' above, while the analysis of interaction between GIFs and language undertaken in this article largely considers each mode as a composed whole, it is possible to further unpack the semiosis of GIFs by applying a more granular lens to how different elements combine to construe a GIFs' semiosis. As stated, we have refrained from this level of detail as it would require more space than this article affords, but we are sanguine about the potential such an analysis holds in giving a fuller account of how GIFs make meaning. Consequently, we conclude this somewhat preliminary exploration of GIF-language semiosis by both reflecting on the unique and impressive semiotic productivity that GIFs demonstrate, as described in this article, and expressing our curiosity to see how future research can add to it.

## Notes

1. Semiotic technologies are defined here as “technologies designed to enable and constrain people’s ability to make meaning and participate in various social practices” (Djonov & van Leeuwen, 2018, p. 642).
2. Square brackets denote technical terms in SFL theory or from the emoji convergence network.
3. See discussion in the section ‘Beyond Emoji-Text Relations’ on how individual GIF elements can interact with individual linguistic resources.
4. ‘270’ is a reference to the number of electoral votes required for a candidate to win the US Presidency.
5. Bateman and Wildfeuer (2014) describe abduction as “‘reasoning to the best explanation.’ That is, rather than starting from a premise and deducing logically what follows, one attempts to explain a relationship by hypothesising a further fact or situation that would make the relationship follow as a matter of course” (p. 61).
6. The term 'affordance' encompasses the actions a user can undertake with a technology. Initially introduced by Gibson (2014 [1979]) within his theory of human perception, it has found extensive applications in domains like design (Norman, 1988) and human-computer interaction (McGrenere & Ho, 2000). In the realm of digital technologies, it plays a pivotal role in deciphering how technology influences social interactions (Hutchby, 2001) and, reciprocally, how social interactions influence technology.

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