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Wordless Picturebooks as Resources for the Construction of the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies. The Case of Migrants, by Issa Watanabe

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Abstract

This article presents the study of *Migrants* (2019), a wordless picturebook by Peruvian author Issa Watanabe, developed to answer the following research question: *To what extent can this visual text become a resource for the learning of multiliteracies?* A visual discourse analysis of the narrative was performed, focusing on the identification of key meanings and semiotic resources used in their visual construction. Our findings unveil the prominent role of semiotic resources such as anthropomorphism, vectors, colours, position and unboundedness of the page frame, in the visual realization of key meanings such as diversity, journeys, death, and empathy. Upon these findings, we present *Migrants* as an extraordinary literary text to initiate children in learning the visual mode, one of the multiple modes currently used in the representation of meaning. We discuss our findings with reference to the main question leading the study, the pedagogical conceptualizations endorsed by the multiliteracies theoretical framework and other relevant research. While the study suggests that wordless picturebooks are called to play a prominent role in the construction of

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the multiliteracies pedagogical agenda, it furthermore points to the potential of the pedagogy of multiliteracies in the conceptualization of literary pedagogy itself.

Keywords Wordless picturebooks · The pedagogy of multiliteracies · Visual narrative analysis · Grammar of visual design · Visual mode · Multimodality

Introduction

When we, the authors of this article, first came across the award-winning book *Migrants* (2019) by Peruvian award-winning author/artist Issa Watanabe, we were drawn by the captivating representation that this wordless picturebook offers of the well-known dramas of many migrants' stories.

Watanabe is the daughter of an illustrator mother and a poet father, with a degree in Literature and Fine Arts. Since 2010, she has received several awards for her artistic and socially sensitive work, with emphasis on graphic arts involving drawings and illustrations. Her work in contexts of social exclusion and high social vulnerability has earned her awards from *La Caixa Foundation - Obra Social Forum* (Spain). She also won the Grand Prize of the *BIBF Ananas International Illustration Exhibition Jury*, Beijing 2020, for the drawings in her series "The Long Journey", which was exhibited at the *Bologna International Children's and Youth Literature Fair* in 2018.[1] Her production of illustrated books has also received several awards, such as Best Illustrated Book awarded by the Economic Culture Fund of Mexico, for *Más te vale Mastodonte* (2013), written by Micaela Chirif.

According to Issa Watanabe, the first drafts of *Migrants* were inspired by the work of photojournalist Magnus Wennman portraying Syrian children who were victims of war, as well as by her own witnessing of the arrival of a young migrant from Mali in Europe after crossing the Mediterranean Sea, when she was living in Mallorca, Spain. Her sensitivity for migration was certainly also influenced by her own family history, being born in a family of migrant background originating in Japan.

As can be learned in an interview for the newspaper *La Vanguardia*,[2] Watanabe used illustrations and collages of thirty-eight different characters to compose the visual narrative. In a further interview for *Deutsch Welle*,[3] Watanabe comments on how the narrative tells a very dramatic migrants' story, both for children who have and have not lived through migration experiences.

Right from the cover (and also portrayed in the endpapers), we follow a group of migrants determinedly walking in a threatening scenario: a dark forest with leafless trees. There are adults, children, male and female, forming a very diverse group of individuals, as can be seen by their body features, clothes and belongings. The title page features the antagonist of the narrative (Death) wearing a colourful garment, riding on a plumbeous ibis (or blue ibis), an endangered species in some parts of

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Fig. 1 A group of migrants walks in a frightening scenario. Death joins the group. © Issa Watanabe, *Migrantes*, Portuguese edition by Orfeu Negro (2021) (original: Libros del Zorro Rojo, 2019)

Fig. 2 The migrants endure a turbulent sea crossing. Death follows them safely on the wings of the blue ibis. © Issa Watanabe, *Migrantes*, Portuguese edition by Orfeu Negro (2021) (original: Libros del Zorro Rojo, 2019)
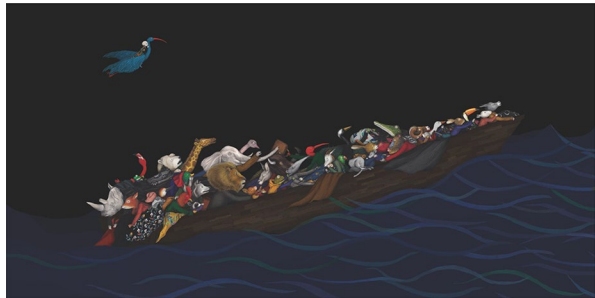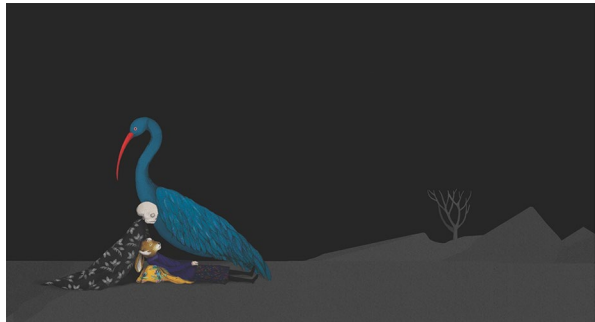
Fig. 3 A woman migrant dies. Death cradles her head. © Issa Watanabe, *Migrantes*, Portuguese edition by Orfeu Negro (2021) (original: Libros del Zorro Rojo, 2019)

South America. In the initial pages, we learn that Death joins the migrant group. She carries a lost bag (Fig. 1).

As part of their migration, the group endures a turbulent sea crossing, while Death takes a safer passage, observing them from the wings of the blue ibis (Figure 2).

The dramatic episode ends with the death of an adult female migrant, who is left for Death's contemplation (Fig. 3).

After the death, the migrants resume their walk towards what they hope to be their desired destination. In this arrival, children take the lead (Fig. 4).

Migrants has been published in different countries (18 editions and 17 translations), receiving several awards in Latin America and Europe. It was awarded the Best Picturebook 2022 by the *National* Foundation of Children's and Youth Books

Fig. 4 The group of migrants resumes their walk towards a hopefully better destination. © Issa Watanabe, *Migrantes*, Portuguese edition by Orfeu Negro (2021) (original: Libros del Zorro Rojo, 2019)

(FNLIJ) in Brazil, Slovenia's *2021 Zlata Hruska* (Golden Pear) for Best Children's and Young People's Literature, the *Socières* 2021 grand prize (France) in the Fiction Category, the Llibreter Prize 2020 for the Best Illustrated Volume (Spain), the *Banco del Libro de Venezuela Prize* for the Best Visual Narrative 2020, the *White Raven 2020* (Internationale Jugendbibliothek) for Picture Books, and was nominated one of the Best Illustrated Volumes of 2020 by *Kirkus Reviews*.[4]

As literacy teachers and researchers, it immediately came to mind that *Migrants* can be called upon to play a prominent role in the construction of the multiliteracies pedagogical agenda. As we will make clear below, the pedagogy of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996; Kalantzis and Cope, 2012) offers a set of conceptual tools for the construction of a renewed literacy pedagogy, in which multimodal meaning-making is the prominent learning object, with *Migrants* as an extraordinary literary text for children to be initiated in learning the workings of one of the multiple modes currently used in the representation of meaning (Kress, 2010); namely the visual mode. This is the key point that we put forward in this article.

Our arguments come from a visual discourse analysis of the book that we performed in order to answer the following key research question: *To what extent can this visual text become a resource for the learning of multiliteracies?* In the first section below, we begin by framing our study with considerations about wordless picturebooks and the pedagogy of multiliteracies. We then describe our methodological procedure, including the description of the analytical approach for *Reading Visual Narratives* that we used to perform the visual discourse analysis of the text. We then present our main findings, describing how a set of prominent semiotic choices converges in the visual construction of key narrative meanings such as diversity, journeys, death and empathy. We finally discuss our findings with reference to the main question leading the study, the pedagogical conceptualizations endorsed by the multiliteracies theoretical framework and other relevant research.

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[4] Data obtained from: https://wordswithoutborders.org/contributors/view/issa-watanabe/

Migrants as a Wordless Picturebook

Migrants is a wordless picturebook. In Emma Bosch's definition (2018), a picturebook is defined as a "story composed of fixed, printed, sequential images, consolidated into a book structure whose unit is the page and in which illustrations are paramount and text may underlie" (p. 191). In wordless picturebooks, "apart from the title, the name(s) of the author(s), and the credits, no other words appear on the pages of the book" (Bosch, 2018, p. 191). In wordless picturebooks, the visual narratives are usually organized in double pages (Garcia, 2020), as in the case of *Migrants*. The book can furthermore be considered an original *dramatic wordless picturebook* because "in dramatic picturebooks the characters have to face problems such as loss, loneliness, poverty, and death. These are works that aim to move the viewer by appealing to their sensitivity and feelings" (Bosch, 2018, p. 195). In literary scholarship, picturebooks have been studied from an art and play perspective, being considered a significant resource "both for the socialization of young children and for introducing them to the principles and pleasures of literacy and literature" (Painter, 2018, p. 420). Evelyn Arizpe, et al. (2013), for instance, state that many such works are "created with aesthetic and playful intent, which make use of artistic and literary features that invite reading and re-reading of their multiple layers of meaning" (p. 34). Painter (2018) furthers extends these approaches by exploring the visual-verbal interplay in meaning making in picturebooks, discussing multimodal discourse analysis as tool to examine the meaning making process involving visual and verbal semiotic modes.

Apart from its originality, *Migrants* is not an isolated case in the Latin American literary context. In effect, several picturebooks have been published since the late 20th century in different Latin American countries. A very good example is one of the most awarded picturebooks in the world: *Cena de Rua* [*Street Scene*], by Angela Lago (1994), which narrates the actions of a poor child who sells products at the traffic lights in a sequence of eleven images. Lago's visual narrative is poetic and deals very sensitively with problems of big cities, such as social inequality and child labour. The choice of darker shades of colour definitely reveals this work as a dramatic picturebook, bringing meanings such as fear, loneliness, and anguish. In one of her interviews, the author comments that "there was no chance to make this book by using words" (Araújo, 2008, n/d). In line with this, Lee (2012) states that "it seems like picturebooks say: 'I'll show you. Just feel it'" (p. 148). *Migrants* is also one such instance.

Many of the wordless picturebooks published in Latin America can also be characterised as cross-generational and cross-cultural, especially those in which readers need to activate a complex network of cross-cultural and intertextual knowledge. This is the case of the Brazilian wordless picturebook *Bocejo* [Yawn] 2012) by Renato Moriconi and Ilan Brenman. Throughout the work, the reader finds historical characters and various cultural personalities that are featured on the right pages of the wordless picturebook. In order to make meaning, the reader needs to activate intertextual relationship with biblical scenes, European works

of art, film scenes and personalities (such as Einstein, Charles Chaplin or Neil Armstrong). In each discrete image, the characters are yawning. However, when the sequence of scenes is read altogether, a visual narrative comes up, bringing many elements of human history. Making meaning of wordless picturebooks is therefore no simple endeavour (Bosch, 2018). Commenting on his picturebooks, such as *The Rabbits*, *The Red Tree*, *The Arrival*, the Australian artist Shaun Tan (2013) states that the most interesting thing in wordless picturebooks is "to see how images refracted by one experience are received through the lens of another" (p. xiv), highlighting how the reader needs to make multiple connections without the support of the conventions of the verbal mode (oral or written).

However demanding the reading of wordless picturebooks may be, its educational import is indisputable (Crawford and Hade, 2000; Jalongo, et al., 2002). With Katie Sciurba et al. (2021) who consider that picture books have the potential to serve as mechanisms for "the process of retelling, in humanizing ways, problematic discourses related to people who are systemically oppressed" (p. 412), we argue that, in educational contexts, reading wordless picturebooks, such as *Cena de Rua* [*Street Scene*], by Brazilian Angela Lago (1994), *Tengo Miedo* [*I'm scared*], by Colombian Ivar da Coll (2012), *Seca* [*Drought*], by Brazilian André Neves (2001), to name some further Latin American instances, can enable greater reflection on issues of the utmost importance for today's children's and youth's education. A similar claim has been made by Deliman (2021) as "utilizing picturebooks as tools for reimagining a more inclusive world can often be the opening needed for children to become inquirers of their own learning and curious investigators advocating for change" (p. 46). While this is clearly the case for *Migrants* (2021), we consider the educational potential that can be found in this picturebook goes still/yet further.

The Pedagogy of Multiliteracies

The pedagogy of multiliteracies is generally presented as "an agenda for the future of education, reclaiming educational processes and systems that are in many respects very different from those of the recent past" (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012, p. 28). It was conceptualized by The New London Group (1996), which, by the end of the 20th century, brought together a number of prominent literacy researchers and educators sharing concern for rising transformation literacy practices. Their original program manifesto for a new pedagogy was developed on the basis that "The world was changing, the communications environment was changing, and […] literacy teaching and learning would have to change as well" (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009, p. 165). The rise of the information economy, increasing social diversity and the growth of digital communication technologies are key societal challenges sustaining the highly influential New London Group's call for pedagogical transformation in the literacy curriculum. The ultimate aim of such renewal is to empower students to participate in the multiplicity of communicative practices (i.e., the multiliteracies) situated in these new contexts, dominated by new (or renewed) meanings and new (or renewed) communicative intentions, shaped in new (or renewed) textual formats and represented according to the new material possibilities (affordances) of meaning

representation offered by digital media. Consequently, a transformed pedagogy, with a renewed content ('the *what*') and renewed learning processes ('the *how*'), has been extensively demanded (New London Group, 1996, 2000; Cope and Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis and Cope, 2012; Pereira, 2020; Pereira et al., 2022). (Wordless) Picturebooks have been acknowledged as having a renewed and very important role in the construction of this new pedagogy of multiliteracies (Small and Callow, 2021; Reyes-Torres and Portalés-Raga, 2020; Painter, 2018; Callow, 2013; Painter et al., 2012). In this article, we aim to contribute to such understanding by focusing on the particular case of *Migrants*.

Informed by a semiotic understanding of communication, the multiliteracies agenda has assumed an expanded conception of the traditional object of literacy learning, now including the learning of multimodal meaning making (Kress, 2015, 2010; New London Group, 1996). In multimodal texts, multiple modes, such as the verbal (oral and written), the visual (static and moving images), sound and music intermingle in the construction of multimodal ensembles (Kress, 2010). Although texts have always been multimodal, multimodality has become one of the key textual features in multiliteracies due to the digitalization of communication (Rowsell et al., 2013; Kress, 2010; Jewitt, 2008; Walsh, 2008). The complex orchestration of modes in digital texts requires the use of new multimodal meaning making skills (Kress, 2010; Serafini, 2014).

In this context, rising attention has been specifically given to the visual mode (Kress, 2003, 2010, 2015; Serafini, 2014). One of the most influential works was the *Grammar of Visual Design* (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), offering a powerful metalanguage to describe the sets of resources and meanings represented in the visual mode. Assuming that contact with the visual mode in visual and multimodal texts is clearly insufficient for students to be able to develop their awareness of the process (Unsworth, 2006; Painter, 2018), the learning of such grammars is now being integrated in curricula worldwide—for instance, in Brazil (Hissa and Sousa, 2020)—and demanded from teachers (Callow, 2013; Unsworth, 2006), as otherwise also claimed by Bosch: "In order to enjoy wordless picturebooks, children have to acquire cognitive and narrative abilities that enable them to comprehend the sophisticated visual language in these works" (p. 198). Such learning is assumed not only to guide readers' attention (Stone, 2013) and support "deep reading" (Wolf, 2016) but also empower them to more fully understand the complex meaningfulness of the visual mode in their lives, developing their visual literacy (Painter et al., 2012; Serafini, 2014). Because they make use of the visual mode, picturebooks, wordless picturebooks, and graphic novels stand out as powerful resources to situate the initial learning of such grammars (Latham, 2022).

The multiliteracies agenda has also assumed a set of core socio-constructivist learning processes as "the different kind of things that learners can do to know" (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012, p. 17). They comprise *experiencing the known and the new; conceptualizing by naming and with theory; analysing functionally and critically; and applying appropriately and creatively*, altogether involving "learning by doing as well as by thinking" (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012, p. 25). *Experience* is assumed to lay the foundation of learning (Dewey, 1916). Basically, when *experiencing the known* learners' needs, identities, expectations, aspirations, interests, and

motivations are a departure point for meaning making, whereas when *experiencing the new*, "learners observe and interact with new factual information and experience new things" (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012, pp. 243–244). *Conceptualizing* refers to abstract knowledge that is consciously constructed by learners with the support of more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1986). When *conceptualizing by naming*, "learners clarify, classify, group and distinguish" (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012, p. 245), thus defining terms and constructing concepts. When conceptualizing with theory, they become active theory makers, enabling them "to clearly describe patterns in the world" (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012, p. 245). *Analysing* refers to learners' use of theoretical knowledge to systematically and deliberately examine what they have newly experienced. When *analysing* functionally, learners use their semiotic knowledge to gain deeper insight of how meanings are represented in the text, and when *analysing critically* (Gee, 1996; Freire and Macedo, 1987), they question such meanings, trying to unveil the social significance of the text (e.g., by identifying the author's intentions, the reader's positioning, the sources of the information provided, and the forms used in those ideological, biased and/or partial representations). Finally, *applying* supposes an active return to experience, allowing the learner the possibility to apply what has been learned in new meaning-making practices (Dewey, 1938). *Applying appropriately* is a process by which knowledge "is designed to get things done" (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012, p. 248), whereas by *applying creatively* "we attempt to make big leaps. We take knowledge from one context and apply it in a vastly different one" (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012, p. 249). In the pedagogy of multiliteracies, this set of processes is envisioned as essential in producing "deeper, broader, more trustworthy, more insightful and more useful knowledge" (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012, p. 249), such as the knowledge for visual meaning making.

Methodology

With this theoretical framework in mind, the following major question came up when we came across *Migrants*: *To what extent can this visual text become a resource for the learning of multiliteracies?* In order to answer this question, we first subdivided the leading question into the following two sub-questions: *Which meanings are represented the wordless picturebook*? *How are they visually represented?* The construction of the answers to these sub-questions was carried out in two main phases, as described below.

In the *first phase*, we began by negotiating the most prominent meanings of this visual narrative. To do so, we read the book independently, after which we confronted our readings, discussing the meanings constructed by each of us. This allowed us to agree about the major meanings of the narrative.

In the *second phase*, which was much more extensive and laborious, we performed a visual discourse analysis of the narrative to identify the semiotic resources with which the author constructed these meanings (which, ultimately, are the learning target in the pedagogy of multiliteracies). To do so, we adapted an analytical approach proposed by Painter et al. (2012) and Painter (2018) for

the analysis of visual narratives. Painter et al.'s approach draws on the *Grammar of Visual Design* by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), which is closely aligned with the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) tradition of discourse analysis (Halliday, 2002). As such, it is very "different from the application of fine arts theory" (Painter, 2018, p. 420), involving a detailed, systematic description of the semiotic resources available in the visual mode to realize different sets of meanings. Although still quite influential, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) work has been the target of some important criticisms. Bazalgette and Buckingham (2013), for instance, argue that their approach is used to actually reinforce a long-standing distinction between print and 'non-print' texts, apparently ignoring the "haphazard and improvised nature of much human communication, as well as its emotional dimensions" (Bazalgette and Buckingham, 2013, p. 98). However, we have adopted it, as many other authors worldwide have done (e.g., Gu and Catalano, 2022; Sciurba et al., 2021), because it provides an adequate analytical tool to answer to our research questions.

A key element of the SFL approach, assumed by Kress and van Leeuwen's frame, is the understanding that any grammar (verbal, visual or otherwise) is organized to represent three domains of meanings in texts, namely ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Accordingly, any text in any mode "embodies simultaneously three strands of meaning" (Painter, 2018, p. 423), i.e., comprises meanings from the three metafunctions. Another key dimension of SFL that was extensively developed in Kress and van Leeweun's *grammar* is the idea that each metafunction is organized in systems of meaning potential, defined as "sets of possibilities for meaning with specifiable realizations" (Painter, 2018, p. 423) by definite semiotic resources (verbal, visual or otherwise). In any text, "any text is to be realized as embodying identifiable choices from a 'meaning potential'" (Painter, 2018, p. 423) within each metafunction. This very general outline of SFL will be evidenced in the Figs. 5, 6 and 7.

These essential features of SFL/the *Grammar of visual design* were taken up by Painter et al. in their analytical approach for *Reading Visual Narratives*, which we used in our analysis. In their grammar, Painter et al. (2012) assume, in the *ideational metafunction*, the availability of (among others) different systems of meaning potential that are responsible for the realization of meanings concerning the actions of the characters and their space and time (see detailed description in Fig. 5). Three of such systems were especially productive in our analytical process (in bold in Fig. 5): Characters' manifestation, characters' appearance, and kind of action. The systems of *manifestation* and *appearance* are related to recognising and tracking characters (Painter et al., 2012, p. 58). *Manifestation* refers to how characters are depicted and how their symbolic attributes are constructed (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Painter, 2018); *Appearance* involves the representation of characters' identity, since characters are inferred to have the same identity when their salient features *reappear* in subsequent images. The characters can appear unchanged or varied in attribution or status (that is, varying from being embedded in the circumstantial setting to being a central participant) and reappear in the very next image or at some later point in the story (which
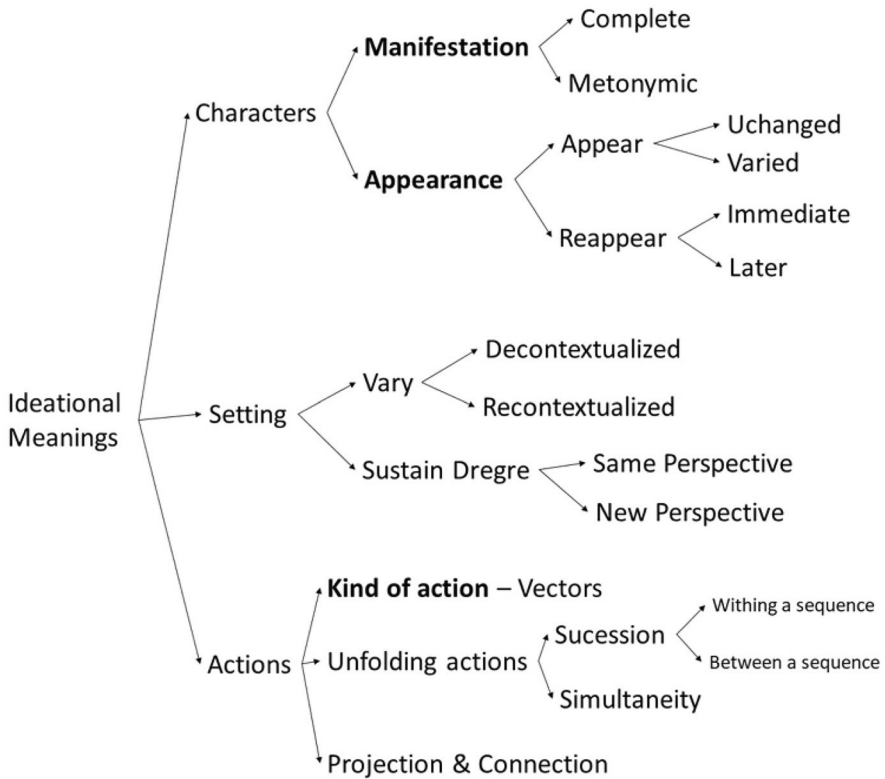
Fig. 5 Ideational metafunction—systems of meaning potential

is meaningful for the story progress). *Kind of action* concerns the characters' actions, textually realized by vectors (imaginary diagonal lines).

In Painter et al.'s analytical approach, several systems of meaning potential are available to represent characters' attitudes and readers' positioning in the *interpersonal metafunction* (see detailed description in Fig. 6). Three of such systems stood out as especially relevant in our analysis: *pathos*, *power*, and *ambience* (in bold in Fig. 6). *Pathos* and *power* concern the representation of characters. *Pathos* is textually realized by the drawing style (minimalist, generic or realistic), which has implications in the construction of the relationship between the reader/viewer and the characters, whereas *power* concerns the representation of greater, neutral or less power relations among participants, being visually realized by a lower, an eye-level or higher vertical angle, respectively. The third system, *ambience*, refers to the use of colour to convey a mood to the viewer: ± vibrant, ± warm, and ± familiar.

Painter et al. also describe the systems of meaning potential available for the construction of the *textual metafunction* (See detailed description in Fig. 7). Two of such systems stood out in our analysis of *Migrants*: *framing* and *focus* (in bold
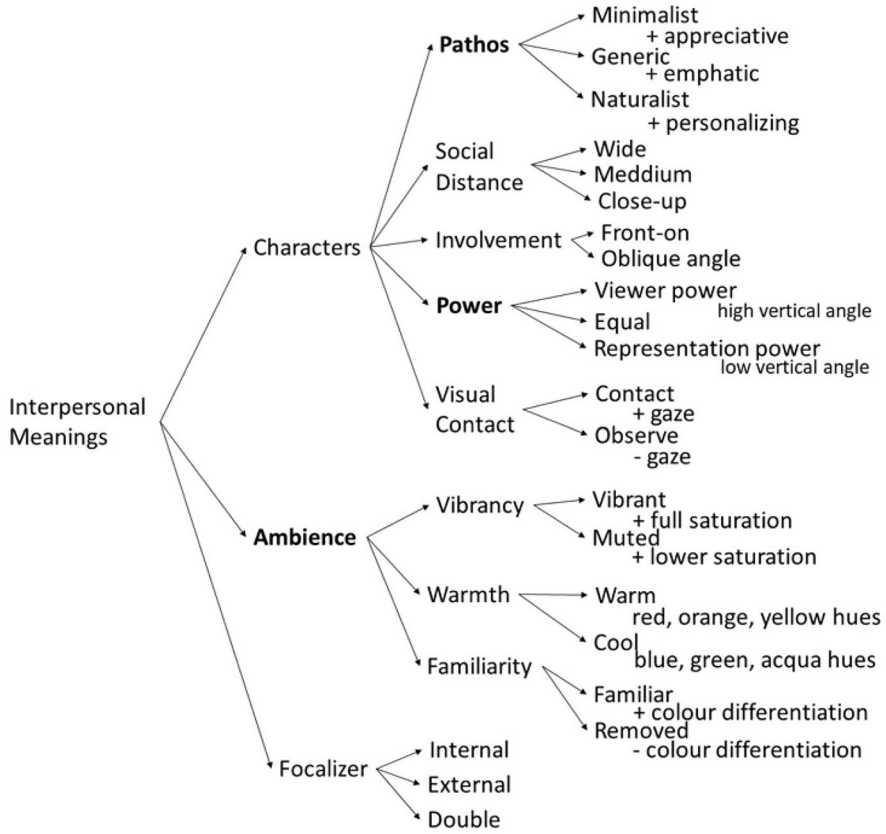
Fig. 6 Interpersonal metafunction—systems of meaning potential

in Fig. 7). The first concerns the meanings constructed by the presence or the absence of page margins, with implications in the proximity that the reader establishes with the story world. The second refers to the positioning of the depicted elements in each page, having implications in the understanding of their roles in the narrative.

The prominent systems of meaning potential and semiotic resources that we have referred to will be illustrated in the next section.

Findings and Meanings

In this section we present the answers to each sub-question that guided the visual discourse analysis: *Which meanings are represented the wordless picturebook? How are they visually represented?*
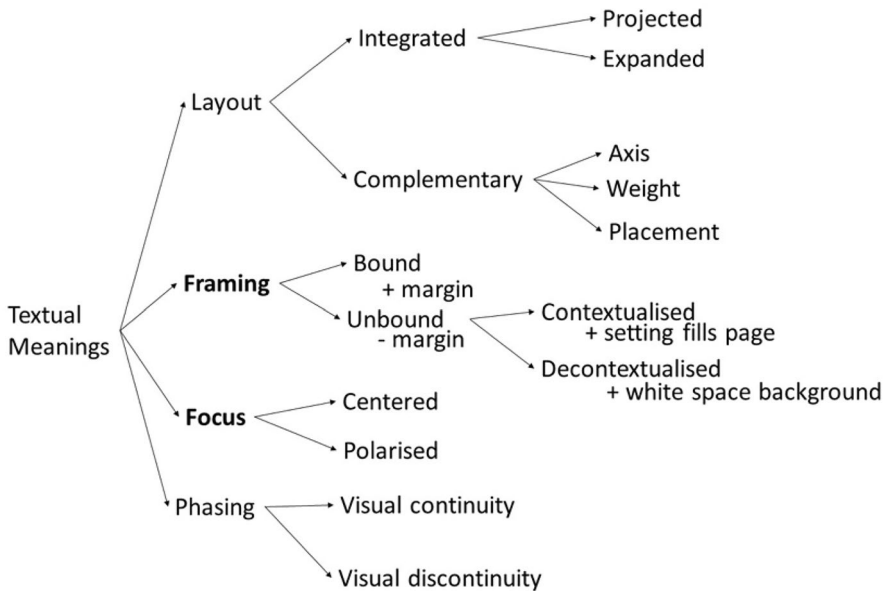
Fig. 7 Textual dimension—systems of meaning potential

We have identified four major meanings: *diversity, journeys, death*, and *empathy for suffering and hope*. We have organized the section according to each meaning, in each case describing the most outstanding resources the author used in their visual representation.

Diversity

A central meaning represented in this narrative is "diversity". In the analysis, systems of two metafunctions stood out in the construction of this meaning: *Characters' manifestation* (ideational metafunction—cf. Fig. 5) and *framing and focus* (textual metafunction—cf. Fig. 7).

The *manifestation* of characters is central to represent "diversity". The characters are all different from one another, showing unique identities. A careful look reveals that such diversity is denoted by their clothes and belongings, showing different colours and patterns (see Fig. 1). Extremely relevant in constructing the meaning of diversity is the characters' manifestation as anthropomorphized animals (that is, adult male and female and children are all depicted as different animals with human traits). These elements in the characters' manifestation act as symbolic attributes at several levels. To start with, the "bags" and "packs of clothes" represent the belongings of a lifetime and the diverse backgrounds that migrants carry with them in their journeys (as otherwise often included in visual representations of human migrant groups). Additionally, by being represented as animals, this diversity becomes universal, since it can be recognized by any reader independently of her background or

the context situating the meaning making process. As such, the characters' manifestation as anthropomorphized animals powerfully circumvents (or avoids) the misrepresentation of specific communities and the reinforcement of stereotypes, as commonly observed in books representing immigrants (Gu and Catalano, 2022).

Framing and *focus* are also important visual resources in the visual depiction of diversity. The unbound framing of the pages puts the focus of attention throughout the narrative on the diverse characters. The positioning of characters as a group in the centre of the double-page spread throughout the book indicates that the focus is on the collective, rather than on any specific characters, thus highlighting the unity and parity that actually characterizes the diverse group. The close positioning of characters is also important since it depicts the affection and complicity that characterizes this collective journey (Sciurba et al., 2021). Additionally, the focus on the group of diverse characters gives prominence to the migrants and not to their place of destination, as frequently noted in picture books with immigration themes (Gu and Catalano, 2022).

Journeys

Another key meaning in this visual narrative is the "journey". From the cover to the end of the book, the migrants are on move, and even their stops for rest are important parts of unfinished travel. The most detached visual resources in the construction of this meaning come from three systems of meaning potential, namely: *actions* (ideational metafunction—cf. Fig. 5), *characters' manifestation* (ideational metafunction—cf. Fig. 5) and *framing* (textual metafunction—cf. Fig. 7).

Traveling is the dominant *action*. The characters' movement is represented by physical action and by perception. In both cases, actions are visually represented through vectors, which are imaginary lines drawn by the characters' bodies. The legs and the body posture of the walking characters (Figs. 1 and 4) as well as the boat and the waves (Fig. 2) form diagonal vectors that represent movement. The gaze vectors of the characters depict the perception actions, such as looking down, looking forward, and (less frequently) looking back. During their stops for rest, during which they perform usual familiar actions, such as cooking, sleeping, washing clothes, and taking care of one another, the eye vectors indicate that they also look at each other. These perception actions are relevant to construct the dominant action of *travelling*, alongside the physical movement, because they humanize the journey, in contrast to common oversimplified portrays (Sciurba et al., 2021). It is important to highlight that the migrants are the agents of all the actions performed throughout the book, taking active roles. This is distinct from Gu and Catalano's findings (2021) regarding the e 'White Savior' ideology, according to which the migrants are represented as weak victims and passive receivers of others' aid.

Also, the visual narrative is composed by 19 double-page spreads, each dominated by a large unbound *framing*, which is also relevant for the meaning-making of "traveling" since it reinforces the amplitude and the continuity of the movements indicated by the vectors. Perhaps to a lesser extent but also significant in the construction of the meaning is *characters' manifestation*, specifically their belongings

(e.g., bags, packs of clothes, blankets, pans) (see Fig. 1), suggesting the need for subsistence while moving on.

Death

Death is another key theme in the visual narrative. This diverse group of migrants is followed or haunted by Death during the journeys. There are three systems which are especially relevant to the visual representation of Death : *manifestation* and *appearance* (ideational metafunction—cf. Fig. 5) and *focusing* (textual metafunction—cf. Fig. 7).

Death is the only character *manifesting* as a (human) skull rather than as an animal. The use of the skull is highly symbolic itself, since it is conventionally associated with death in many different cultures. In addition, the character also wears a shroud, which is also a symbolic attribute related to death. On top of this, the initially vibrant colours of the shroud (cf. Figs. 1 and 2) contrasting with its final grey-scale colouring (Fig. 3) also reveal Death's presence and participation in the development of the story.

Another detached resource in the construction of this meaning is given by the *focusing* system. As can be seen in Figs. 1, 2 and 3, while the group of migrants is almost always represented together in a central position, Death is dominantly positioned on the left side, either close or far from the migrants, always occupying a marginal position. The choice of focusing option constructs Death as an antagonist in this narrative. In Fig. 3, Death is situated in the higher part of the page, suggesting a negative spiritual presence (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), as it hovers like a dark shadow over the migrants.

Throughout the narrative, Death *reappears* on different pages and with different status, as seen above, either clearly depicted as a secondary character in a wider scene (Figs. 1 and 2) or as a dreadful central participant (Fig. 4). These choices are meaningful for the story progress, since they put Death as the only element of unpredictable presence.

The representation of Death is a blatant distinguishing dimension in this picturebook; a sensitive theme that authors and illustrators are not usually comfortable portraying. Gu and Catalano (2022) found that none of the picturebooks in their data depicted the dramas endured by migrant children, calling for picturebooks' role in depicting critical themes in order to help children overcome them or learn how become empathic for others' suffering, as explored next.

Empathy (for Suffering and Hope)

A key meaning throughout this narrative, likely its deepest intended meaning, is the positioning of the reader, which we have agreed to be one of "empathy for the characters' suffering and hope". We identified options in the systems of *pathos*, *power*, *ambience* (interpersonal metafunction—cf. Fig. 6) and *framing* (textual metafunction—cf. Fig. 7) as detached resources in the realization of this meaning.

The characters are represented in a generic style (*pathos*), neither too realistic nor too stylized, showing a repertoire of facial expressions that includes behavioural emotions, such as resignation (cf. Fig. 1), fear, suffering (cf. Fig. 2) and hope (cf. Fig. 4). Their body gestures and postures reinforce the expression of such emotions. This style of representation allows the perception of the characters as friendly, encouraging readers to identify with them (Painter et al., 2012). The characters are represented at eye level with the reader, suggesting an equal relationship in terms of *power,* enhancing the identification of the characters as "one of us" and the readers' alignment with them. However, it is important to note that, despite this equal *power* relationship, the characters are never depicted looking directly at the readers or in a close-up view, which would intensify the development of a close relationship between the readers and the characters, with enhanced empathy. Therefore, it seems that—at some level—the readers become somewhat distant? observers of the "others", a pattern also identified by Gu and Catalano (2022) in their analysis of 18 picturebooks about immigrant children.

Framing also plays a detached function in the positioning of the reader, since the unbound images foster a close connection with the characters in the narrative, inviting the reader to become immersed in the story world. The *ambience* is characterized by the contrast between the extremely cold temperature of the black or dark setting and the vibrant colours of the characters' clothes (cf. Figs. 1, 2, and 3). While the cold setting indicates the difficult and alarming scenario, strongly suggesting suffering, the vibrant colours in the characters generate a feeling of familiarity, which enhances the positive emotional effect associated with them (empathy). On the last page of the narrative (cf. Fig. 4), the presence of vibrant and warm colours in the trees on the right side of the image adds some familiarity and vitality to the setting, which, together with the characters' facial expressions (and body movements) and children's positioning as leading the walk, indicate a more positive atmosphere of hope.

In *Migrants,* many other meanings can be constructed, such as the dreadful but non-specified setting where the travel unfolds as varying from a forest and the sea, again suggesting movement; the fact that Death apparently deceives the group disguised as a migrant; the symbolism of the ibis accompanying "death"; and migrant children apparently becoming the main characters in the final pages, leading the hopeful walk; among others. In each case, it would be possible to identify the meaning systems and semiotic resources used in their visual representation. We have intentionally kept our descriptions to a minimum so that our analysis provides clear answers to the two sub-questions, illustrating how the different systems of meanings and semiotic resources are involved in the visual representation of diversity, journeys, death, and empathy in the visual narrative.

Discussion

Having answered our sub-questions, we now turn to the major question that motivated our study: *To what extent can this visual text become a resource for the learning of multiliteracies?*

Our findings support the claim that *Migrants is an exemplary resource* for the learning of multiliteracies for two important reasons. The first concerns the key meanings that readers are allowed to construct with the narrative. By presenting migrants in a neutral yet universally recognised way (as animals) and by offering their dramas for students' reflection and empathy, *Migrants* allows migration, a key societal concern in the multiliteracies agenda, to enter the classroom. This is clearly aligned with Katie Sciurba et al.'s (2021) claim (though theirs is not framed by the multiliteracies approach) and with Gu and Catalano's (2022) detailed panorama of the visual and verbal representation of immigrant children (and the ideologies behind them) in 18 picture books with immigration themes. A second and major reason supporting our claim lies in the way in which the visual text clearly instantiates the working of the visual grammar. Our findings unveiled the use of different semiotic resources, such as anthropomorphism, vectors, colours, position and unbounded frame, in the visual realization of meanings such as diversity, journeys, death, and empathy (and some ideologies behind them). As such, *Migrants* has a great deal to contribute to the development of students' multimodal meaning-making, in particular for the learning of the visual mode, and therefore the development of visual literacy.

Upon these findings, we claim that *Migrants* offers itself as an outstanding text to initiate students in the *experience* of highly relevant visual meaning-making for the development of 21st century citizenship. Our analysis has shown how fitting *Migrants* might be for students to *conceptualise* the grammar of visual meaning and prepare to read the complexities of contemporary visual communication, whether in print or in digital media, as also advocated by Latham (2022), Serafini (2014), Kalantzis and Cope (2012), Kress (2010), among others. Our claim is also aligned with Painter et al.'s (2012) and Bosch's (2018) appeal for students to learn how visual meanings are made in wordless picturebooks, and partially converges with others that have advocated the pedagogical use of wordless picturebooks. For instance, while we agree with Lasley and Haas (2017) that:

> in today's society it is increasingly important for students to develop visual literacy, which is the ability to make meaning from images through negotiation and interpretation; (check quote?) concepts that ignites critical thinking. Digital technologies have opened endless possibilities to create and share visual media; however, the pervasiveness of visual images does not mean that individuals are able to analyse, evaluate, and critically view the visual content of an image. Therefore, these essential literacy skills must be developed for individuals to be successful in this ubiquitously visual society. Wordless picture books offer the unique possibility for connecting academic standards, critical thinking, and literacy while students actively participate in a visual literacy experience. (29),

Our approach diverges from their proposal by using the semiotic metalanguage for visual narrative analysis suggested by Painter et al. (2012), Painter (2018), Callow (2013) and Small and Callow (2021), assuming that the visual narrative could be instrumental in initiating the learning of such grammar. However, our emphasis on the analytical approach for reading visual narratives does not mean that any such

analytical approach must be taken uncritically nor applied as a recipe. Indeed, as Bosch (2018) defends, the "high degree of diversity shows that the various types of wordless picturebooks need to be dealt with in different ways" (p.198).

We further contend that the repertoire of learning processes that has been suggested within the scope of the pedagogy of multiliteracies offers teachers essential guidelines to orchestrate the learning potential offered by *Migrants*. For instance, *experiencing the old and the new* might be enacted when teachers guide readers to make meanings in specifically designed meaning-making tasks situated in their own previous experiences and meaning-making skills. In contexts where students themselves are migrants, this would enrich the meaning-making of *Migrants*, besides obviously giving voice to these so often silent students. While this is a critical process in literary meaning-making, the repertoire of learning processes put forward by the pedagogy of multiliteracies suggests that much more can be done to enhance the agency that is crucially expected of the multiliterate meaning-makers. *Conceptualising* might mean guiding students in gradually learning to name some of the semiotic resources that are used in the realization of meanings (e.g., vectors indicate movement; vibrant colours indicate familiarity), and initiate the construction their own theory/knowledge about what it is involved in visual meaning-making. *Analysing* might both imply that learners used their increasing semiotic knowledge to have deeper insight into how the meanings they have constructed are represented in the text and ossicles to discover unsuspected new meanings. Additionally, students might be supported to question such meanings, trying to unveil the social significance of the text (e.g., by identifying the reasons for the migrants' travels or the places of their destination, which are clearly not among the author/artist's intentions but left for readers' scrutiny; imagining the feelings and reactions of the children who lost their mother in the sea boat crossing and thinking about what might be necessary to do to help them). As such, *Migrants* can contribute to broaden the views of teachers and students about key societal issues, again in line with Sciurba et al.'s (2021) argument about children's literature offering a great opportunity for teachers to support students learning to read literature with a critical stance, as otherwise also suggested by Gu and Catalano (2022). Moreover, the results of our analysis show how *Migrants* uses visual resources to foster an empathic position from the reader, which Papen and Peach (2021) highlight as a key element of critical literacy. *Applying* might, for instance, mean that students transduce the visual narrative into the verbal mode; use the semiotic knowledge they have gained to make meanings with other (wordless) picturebooks; or use what they have learned in creating new visual narratives.

Reyes-Torres and Portalés-Raga (2020) have also argued that learning to read wordless picturebooks is an extraordinary first step in learning the contemporary multiliteracies. They advocate the enactment of the learning processes suggested in the pedagogy of multiliteracies to scaffold the learning of meaning-making as a way to enhance the learning of English as a second/foreign language (EFL):

> Our aim in this article is to provide EFL teachers with effective instruction based on this type of pedagogy by integrating the knowledge processes framework (NLG 1996) with a selected range of visual thinking strategies to trans-

form learners into active, creative, critical users of multimodal texts. To this end, as we have already stated, picturebooks are a highly effective pedagogical resource. (102)

However, our approaches differ in the metalanguages used. By using a visual grammar for visual narrative analysis and learning in the classroom that has a parallel for the verbal mode, our approach is more closely aligned with the multimodal approach endorsed in multiliteracies pedagogy.

Conclusion

The study that we report in this article demonstrates how *Migrant*s by Issa Watanabe, could be an exemplary textual resource in the learning of multiliteracies. The visual narrative analysis that we performed allowed us to conclude that this wordless picturebook might be very relevant to guide students to experience the construction of key societal meanings in the complex 21st century, to initiate them in conceptualising the grammar sustaining such visual meaning-making, as well as offering itself as a tool for analysis and a potential trigger for renewed meaning-making practices. As such, we consider that our inquiry contributes to the understanding that wordless picturebooks are called to play a prominent role in the construction of the multiliteracies pedagogical agenda,.

However, the transformation in literacy education that is endorsed by the pedagogy of multiliteracies is very ambitious. The enactment of this pedagogical approach—and the full use of textual resources such as *Migrants*—is completely dependent upon teachers developing the complex semiotic and pedagogical knowledge that they need to be able construct the pedagogy as well as on theorists and researchers' descriptions of the workings of the visual mode for meaning making. From the perspective of literacy educators and researchers, our conclusions about the potential role of wordless picturebooks in the development of the pedagogy of multiliteracies also point into (what seem to us to be) promising possibilities that the new pedagogy has to offer to further constructing complex literary education itself.

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