



Multimodal Discourse of English on TikTok and Instagram: A Comparative Study of Iraqi Multilingual Users

الخطاب المتعدد الوسائط للغة الإنجليزية على تيك توك وإنستغرام: دراسة مقارنة للمستخدمين العراقيين متعددي اللغات

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Abstract

The use of social media for communication is more like the coordinated use of more than one semiotic resource than use of language. In Message Encounters in Digital Iraq, when English appears, it does so with image, sound, gesture and platform-specific visual effects. The research objective of this paper is to explore how Iraqi multilingual users draw on English (spoken and/or written) in multimodal posts on social media. In particular, this study aims to examine the integration of modes, affordances of the social media platform and communicative functions. A total of 200 posts (100 TikTok and 100 Instagram) were analyzed using a mixed-methods design that includes quantitative multimodal coding and qualitative discourse analysis. Findings indicate significant and overriding differences between platforms regarding the multimodal uses of English according to the technological designs and interactional norms of each platform. The research enhances current multimodal discourse studies and sheds light on digital literacy and language use through the lens of the use of English in multimodal, multilingual practices in Iraq. The analysis focuses on the specific multimodal functions of English while users operate in multilingual contexts.

Key Words: Multimodal – Discourse – TikTok – Instagram - Multilingual Users

المستخلص

يُعدّ استخدام وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في التواصل أقرب إلى توظيفٍ منسّقٍ لأكثر من مورد سيميائي واحد، وليس مجرد استخدامٍ للغةٍ فحسب. ففي سياق التفاعلات الرقمية في العراق، عندما تظهر اللغة الإنجليزية، فإنها غالبًا ما تفتنر بالصورة والصوت والإيماءة والمؤثرات البصرية الخاصة بالمنصة. يهدف هذا البحث إلى استكشاف الكيفية التي يوظّف بها المستخدمون العراقيون متعددو اللغات اللغة الإنجليزية (شفهياً و/أو كتابياً) في منشورات متعددة الوسائط على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. وعلى نحوٍ أكثر تحديداً، تسعى الدراسة إلى فحص تكامل الأنماط السيميائية، وإمكانات المنصة (affordances)، والوظائف التواصلية.

اعتمدت الدراسة تصميماً منهجياً مختلطاً يجمع بين الترميز الكمي متعدد الوسائط والتحليل الخطابى النوعي، وذلك لتحليل عينة مكوّنة من 200 منشور (100 من تيك توك و100 من إنستغرام). وقد أظهرت النتائج وجود فروق جوهرية وواضحة بين المنصّتين في الاستخدامات متعددة الوسائط للغة الإنجليزية، بما يعكس تأثير التصميمات التقنية والأعراف التفاعلية الخاصة بكل منصة.

تُسهّم هذه الدراسة في تعزيز الأدبيات الراهنة في دراسات الخطاب متعدد الوسائط، كما تُلقِي الضوء على محو الأمية الرقمية وأنماط استخدام اللغة من خلال منظور توظيف الإنجليزية ضمن ممارسات متعددة الوسائط ومتعددة اللغات في العراق. ويركّز التحليل على الوظائف متعددة الوسائط المحددة للغة الإنجليزية في أثناء تفاعل المستخدمين ضمن سياقات لغوية متعددة



كلمات مفتاحية: الخطاب المتعدد الوسائط - تيك توك - إنستغرام - مستخدمي اللغة المتعددين .

1. Introduction.

Language on TikTok and Instagram alone is often insufficient to convey intended meaning; rather, multiple modes coalesce to produce meaning.

English has been given considerable importance within institutional and educational spheres in Iraq; however, not so much in everyday digital communication, especially not regarding the multimodal discourse level. The way we read messages on social media is made complex by the way they mix captions, overlays, gestures, filters, music and framings. In settings where different languages are used, English may serve not only a communicative function but also a symbolic one indexing modernity, global affiliation or youth identity.

The organizing practices of TikTok and Instagram vary at the multimodal level although they are similar. TikTok is a short video social platform. Instagram makes it possible to post a static image or reel with captions. The contrasting nature of both platforms facilitates comparative analysis. A close examination of how English is embedded in the platforms' affordances of their multimodal structures shows how English is used in Iraqi digital culture.

The multimodal English use on TikTok and Instagram has four research questions; (see Section 3.2). Jewitt et al. (2025) demonstrate how modes are always socially shaped resources, which when combined, are always culturally and technologically situated, further theorizing multimodal meaning-making in the individual. In digital contexts, the arrangement of verbal, visual, auditory, and kinetic elements bring together the design of the platform and its user's practices. This perspective applies particularly well to social media contexts in which meaning emerges through layers of semiotic choices rather than isolated linguistic forms. These perspectives are treated as complementary rather than competing and represent an integrated analytical framework for multimodal English on social media in particular. The multimodal practices are diverse, rich and closely related to the features of the platform. The findings of this research are in agreement with the literature that suggests comparative cross-platform studies of multimodal uses of English.

This study maintains analytical sensitivity to issues of ideology and positioning where relevant within the multimodal data.

2. Theoretical Background.

Theoretical underpinnings of this study include Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and affordance theory. An analysis of these perspectives could coherently reveal how the English language functions at the level of multimodality on social media posts and how platform design affect modal integration on TikTok and Instagram.

According to Multimodal Discourse Analysis, multiple semiotic modes interact with each other to construct meaning rather than language only. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), today's communication makes use of ensembles of image, writing, layout, gesture, sound, and spatial design. In a similar vein, Norris (2004) notes that social interaction occurs through layered modal configurations where some modes are foregrounded and others backgrounded. Consequently, in digital spaces, this orchestration is not limited to just speech and subtitles. Rather, users combine emojis, music, camera movement, filter, and more in a post.



To be methodologically effective, multimodal analysis requires systematic attention to co-occurring and integrating modes and not just identifying them. As Jewitt (2013) states, we need analytical frameworks able to account for the coordination of visual, verbal and auditory resources. The development of models for the analysis of multimodal texts by focusing, not on the semiotic modes in isolation, but on their structural and functional relations, is proposed by Bateman et al. (2017). The coding of modal resources and types of integration (simultaneous, sequential, complementary) is directly informed by these approaches. An important source of the linguistic foundation of this study is Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014).

The systemic functional linguistics propose three metafunctions:

- It represents experience and content.
- the interactive (enacting social relations and stance), and
- The textual has to do with organizing discourse into coherent messages.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) also explain that images have the capacity to create representational, interactive and compositional meanings in multimodal contexts. The present study uses the SFL metafunctional model to analyze the English element (spoken or written) in multimodal posts. English captions, English overlays, and English speech were therefore analyzed according to whether their functions were ideational, interpersonal, or textual in a multimodal sense.

The very architecture of the platform itself shapes semiotic practices beyond semiotic resources themselves. The notion of affordances, introduced by James J. Gibson (1979), refers to the possibilities for action that an environment offers. In digital discourse research, affordances refer to the features of a platform, such as overlays, transitions, hashtags, the duet function, and the caption field, through which modal combinations are made possible or constrained. Zappavigna (2018) illustrates how people behave on social media platforms, specifically Twitter, and other sites. According to Androutsopoulos (2015), multilingual practices do not have a uniform implementation in participatory places.

The affordances of TikTok and Instagram play an important role in embedding English in multimodal design. The way TikTok videos are structured, they encourage a dense layering of speech and action. Instagram's semi-static or reel format often encourages sequential or complementary layering of modes. As a result, one must analyze multimodal integration patterns and functional uses of English against the technological affordances of the platform. The study presented here analyzes the observable modal coordination, the functional roles of English in multilingual contexts, and the affordances of the respective platforms. Accordingly, the structure incorporates:

- a. Multimodal Discourse Analysis for the Examining of Modal Coordination.
- b. Systemic Functional Linguistics helps to understand the function of English.
- c. Using affordance theory to explain cross-platform differences in modal integration.

These viewpoints together yield a focused and empirically operationalized framework corresponding to the research questions and coding procedures of this study.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods comparative design combining quantitative coding, statistical testing, and qualitative multimodal analysis.



3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative content analysis of multimodal posts with qualitative multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) of selected exemplars. The design allowed for both the measurement of frequencies and patterns across a large corpus and a fine-grained interpretation of meaning-making processes at the level of individual posts. Arabic and other languages were noted contextually, but only English was subjected to systematic quantitative analysis.

3.2 Research Questions

These research questions are addressed through a combination of quantitative multimodal coding and qualitative discourse analysis. They are:

1. How do Iraqi multilingual speakers use English with pictures, sounds, gestures and more on TikTok and Instagram?
2. How do the platform affordances shape the integration of these modes?
3. What functions (ideational, interpersonal, textual) does English perform in these multimodal ensembles?
4. How do qualitative exemplars illustrate and extend the quantitative findings?

3.3 Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive sample of 200 publicly accessible posts was collected: 100 TikTok videos and 100 Instagram posts/reels published between January and June 2025 by Iraqi users aged 18–35. The Selection criteria included: (a) visible English elements (spoken or written), (b) non-commercial or semi-commercial content (excluding fully corporate ads), and (c) diversity of genres (education, entertainment, lifestyle).

No private content was used.

3.4 Coding Scheme

Each post (N = 200; 100 TikTok and 100 Instagram) was treated as a single unit of analysis and coded across four analytical dimensions to ensure systematic and replicable annotation.

1. Modal Resources Present

All semiotic resources appearing in the post were identified and recorded, including spoken English, spoken Arabic, written overlay text, captions, visuals, gestures, music, and platform-specific effects. This layer of coding was descriptive and allowed multiple resources to be marked within a single post.

2. Integration Type of English

Each post was assigned one dominant integration type, reflecting the primary relationship between English and other semiotic modes:

- Simultaneous integration: English appears concurrently with visual and/or auditory modes.
- Sequential integration: English appears in a temporally distinct segment.
- Complementary integration: English provides supplementary or framing meaning.

Although multiple modes co-occurred, only the most functionally salient integration pattern was coded to maintain statistical clarity. Integration type and functional role analyses were conducted only on posts in which English served a clearly identifiable dominant role (n = 50



per platform). Therefore, totals equal $n = 50$ per platform for Tables 2 and 3. Of the 100 posts per platform, 50 were identified as cases in which English functioned as the primary semiotic resource, while in the remaining posts English appeared peripherally.

3. Functional Role of English

Each post was also assigned one dominant metafunctional role of English following Systemic Functional Linguistics:

- Ideational: representing actions, themes, or experiential content.
- Interpersonal: expressing stance, evaluation, or audience alignment.
- Textual: organizing discourse structure (e.g., captions, hashtags).

The dominant role was determined based on which metafunction most directly supported the post's communicative purpose.

4. Platform Affordance Markers

Platform-specific affordance features were recorded descriptively (e.g., TikTok duet/stitch functions, Instagram caption field, hashtag clusters). These markers were not mutually exclusive and could co-occur within a post.

The coding sheet was adapted from established multimodal annotation frameworks (Grzenkiewicz & Wildfeuer, 2025) and affordance-based categorizations (Wang & Taabaldiev, 2025), ensuring alignment with current methodological standards in multimodal research.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, two trained coders independently double-coded 40 posts (20% of the corpus). Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa, yielding $\kappa = .86$ for modal categories and $\kappa = .81$ for functional roles, indicating strong agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Discrepancies were resolved through analytical discussion until full consensus was reached. Construct validity was strengthened through the use of theoretically grounded coding categories derived from established multimodal frameworks (Bateman et al., 2017; Grzenkiewicz & Wildfeuer, 2025). Internal validity was supported through triangulation between quantitative statistical patterns and qualitative multimodal exemplars. This integration ensured consistency between macro-level frequency distributions and micro-level discourse interpretation.

3.6 Data Analysis

The descriptive statistics and chi-square tests were used to analyze quantitative data evaluating the modal integration and English functions on both platforms. Key patterns were summarized through visualizations. Statistical tests were conducted to determine the differences in distributions, not causal modelling.

A multimodal transcription of selected posts (see section 5) formed the qualitative data. The transcripts recorded timing and layering of speech, overlay text, gesture, sound and image composition. With direct reference to the quantitative findings, each exemplar was then analyzed for semiotic orchestration and the role of English in it.

3.7 Ethical Considerations



Data was collected from publicly available posts. Screenshots with identifying features are blurred and usernames are anonymized. The research followed College of Arts, Mustansiriyah University ethical guidelines for research that uses social media content.

4. Quantitative Findings

Table 1 compares the modal types used in TikTok and Instagram. The noticeably higher frequencies of spoken English, gesture, and audio/music on TikTok reinforces its inherently dynamic and audiovisual character. Instagram demonstrates much lower levels of these performative modes fitting its semi-static visual culture.

Table 1. Frequencies of Modal Categories by Platform (Empirical Data)

Mode	TikTok (n)	TikTok (%)	Instagram (n)	Instagram (%)	Total (n)	χ^2 / p
Spoken English	86	86.0	26	26.0	112	34.13 / <.001
Text Overlay	92	92.0	66	66.0	158	8.68 / .003
Gesture	92	92.0	50	50.0	142	19.43 / <.001
Audio/Music	90	90.0	50	50.0	140	17.19 / <.001
Sticker/Effect	86	86.0	74	74.0	160	1.56 / .211

Notes:

Note. χ^2 tests compare distributions across platforms (N = 200). Degrees of freedom (df = 1). Effect sizes (Cramer’s V) are reported for statistically significant comparisons. Counts reflect dominant integration types identified per post; totals do not necessarily equal the full platform sample due to analytical categorization criteria.

The types of integration differ significantly as presented in Table 2. TikTok shows a significantly higher tendency toward simultaneous integration, whereas Instagram more frequently exhibits sequential and complementary integration patterns. This is consistent with what we know about the affordances of the two platforms: TikTok supports rapid multimodal layering, while Instagram supports staged content organization. Chi-square values summarize differences between platforms; row-level statistics are not reported.

Table 2. Distribution of multimodal integration types by platform (Empirical Data)

Integration Type	TikTok (n)	Instagram	Total	χ^2	p / V
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		(n)			
Simultaneous	20	13	33	23.06	<.001 / .48
Sequential	15	18	33		
Complementary	15	19	34		

Notes:

Note. $\chi^2(2, N = 100) = 23.06, p < .001, V = .48$. Totals reflect the analytical subsample (n = 50 per platform) consisting of posts where English functioned as a dominant semiotic resource.

Table 3 below analyzes the functional positions of English across platforms. The interpersonal English used in TikTok content shows that it is an environment for very high engagement. Given the more ideational and textual functions of Instagram, the use of English here suggests a more informational or aesthetic purpose, often as labels, slogans, and caption-based meanings.

Table 3. Functional roles of English across platforms based on SFL metafunctions (Empirical Data)

Function	TikTok (n)	Instagram (n)	Total	χ^2	p / V
Interpersonal	27	9	36	14.06	.001 / .38
Textual	10	18	28		
Ideational	13	23	36		

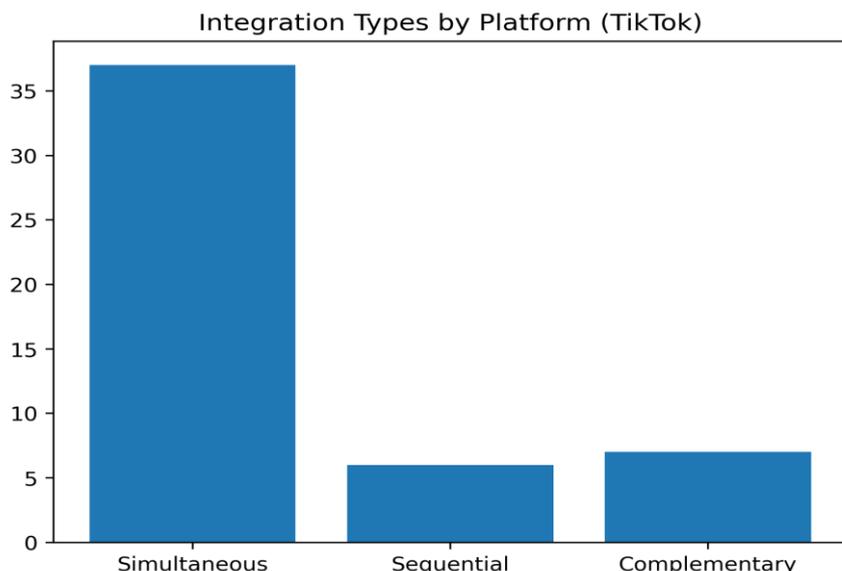
Table 4 below looks at affordance usage. Although both TikTok and Instagram offer overlays, AR filters and stickers, TikTok offers transitions more often than Instagram. Similar to TikTok’s video-creating ecosystem, it encourages users to change up scenes with rhythm.

Table 4. Platform-specific affordance usage in TikTok and Instagram posts (Empirical Data)

Affordance	TikTok (n)	Instagram (n)	Total	χ^2	p
Overlay Tool	43	37	80	1.56	.211
AR Filter	36	29	65	1.58	.208
Sticker	37	33	70	0.43	.513
Library					
Transitions	27	13	40	7.04	.008
Split-screen/Duet	8	3	11	1.63	.201

Figure 1 below illustrates the differences in types of integration presented in Table 2. The contrast in simultaneous and sequential patterns provides insight into how each platform might shape multimodal design.

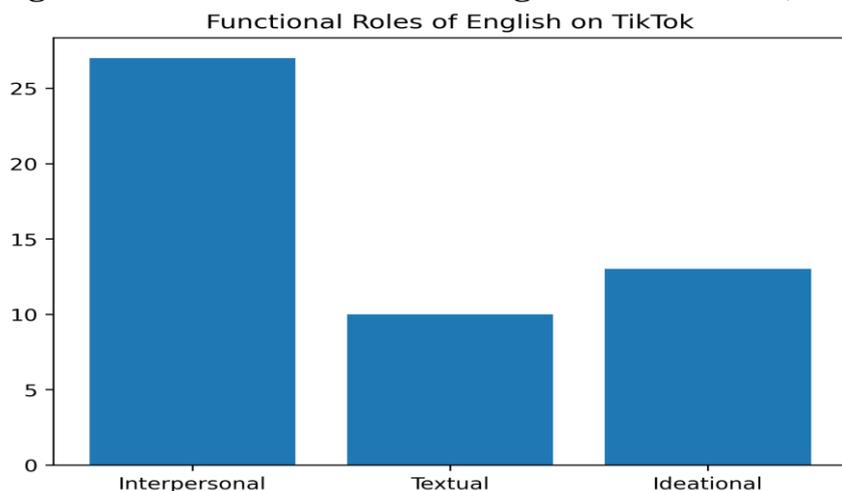
Figure 1. Integration Types by Platform (Empirical Data)



The TikTok platform prefers to use all these dimensions simultaneously, unlike Instagram which prefers to use these rather sequentially.

Figure 2 shows the English functional roles mentioned below that were in TikTok. The interpersonal function, as visualized here, further supports previous claims about the attention economy, audience engagement, and interactivity on the platform.

Figure 2. Functional Roles of English on TikTok (Empirical Data)



According to Figure 2, the predominant type of English on TikTok is interpersonal English.

5. Qualitative Analysis

Four posts (two from TikTok and two from Instagram) were selected for qualitative multimodal analysis to complement the quantitative patterns in Chapter 4. To demonstrate the modal configurations and functions identified most frequently in the coding (see Table 2 and Table 3), these exemplars were selected purposefully; they also help illustrate how affordances differ in the two platforms. Exemplar coding specified semiotic modes present, type and integration of semantics (simultaneous, sequential, complementary), and function of English (ideational, interpersonal, respectively) textual.

5.1 TikTok Exemplars

Exemplar 1 (TikTok):



“Street-Food Vlog with English Overlay”

A 15-second TikTok clip features an Iraqi street vendor presenting a new snack. Modes: spoken Arabic with occasional English interjections (“Try now!”), large bold English overlay text (“Delicious!”), close-up visuals, upbeat background music, gesture pointing to the food, and AR sticker effects. Integration is simultaneous: as the vendor gestures, overlay text and music occur synchronously. Functional role of English is interpersonal (catchy overlay draws viewers). This pattern supports the quantitative finding of higher simultaneous integration and interpersonal English functions on TikTok.

Exemplar 2 (TikTok): “English Vocabulary Duet”

A bilingual micro-celebrity demonstrates English vocabulary in a duet format. Modes: split-screen showing the teacher and a learner, spoken English examples, overlay captions with Arabic translation, hand gestures synchronizing with speech, and subtle background music. Integration type is complementary: spoken English by teacher, Arabic overlay by learner. The functional role of English is ideational (transmitting content). This example highlights TikTok’s affordance for interactive multimodal teaching and supports Aslan et al. (2025) on microcelebrity English teachers.

5.2 Instagram Exemplars

Exemplar 3 (Instagram): “Fashion Photo with English Hashtag Slogan”
A static image of a local fashion influencer in Baghdad. Modes: high-resolution photograph, English slogan overlay (“Urban Vibes”), Arabic caption below, and branded hashtag (#BaghdadStyle). Integration is sequential: viewer sees image, then reads caption. English’s role is indexical and textual (branding, hashtagging), matching the quantitative pattern of more textual/ideational English functions on Instagram.

Exemplar 4 (Instagram): “Cooking Reel with Mixed Overlays”

A 30-second Reel shows recipe steps with Arabic narration, English step titles (“Step 1: Fry onions”), and visual close-ups. Integration is mixed sequential/complementary. English function is ideational (labelling steps) rather than interpersonal. So, this reflects Instagram’s affordance for slower, staged content with bilingual overlays.

5.3 Cross-Case Insights

TikTok posts more tightly layer modes at the same time and have more interpersonal English functions. Instagram posts more sequentially layer modes and have more textual/ideational English functions. The qualitative analysis shows in detail how the quantitative patterns arise from individual posts. It also shows us how English also has a symbolic rather than merely communicative indexical role through overlay slogans and hashtags. Similar findings are presented by Grzenkovicz & Wildfeuer (2025) regarding the audiovisual complexity of TikTok or the analysis by Zappavigna (2018) of hashtags as devices of ambient affiliation.

Overall, it is clear that multimodal discourse analysis can reveal the detailed choreography of English with other modes in Iraqi TikTok and Instagram posts. The examples show how modal strategies and functional uses of English differ across platforms, extending the quantitative results and deepening the theory earlier presented.

6. Discussion and Implications

The findings indicate systematic differences in modes of English in multimodal posts on TikTok and Instagram. TikTok English is often integrated simultaneously with other modes,



including gesture, speech, and overlay visuals. The platform prioritizes immediacy, rhythm, and viewer engagement in all short video formats. Instagram usually allows images and videos to serve as actual content. In this light, English text can be written as captions, slogans or through staged overlays that appear on relatively stable images or videos in a more sequential or complementary manner.

Concerning RQ1, Iraqi multilingual users integrate English with different visual, auditory, and gestural modes across platforms. On TikTok, English tightly synchronizes with speech, gesture and music; on Instagram, it more often attaches to captions, slogans, and staged overlays.

Communication practices are shaped differently by the design of the platforms through the functional roles of English. The widespread use of interpersonal English on TikTok is a reflection of the platform's interactive nature: often, creators speak directly to viewers or invite them to join in. Often, English on Instagram serves textual or ideational purposes with branding, description, and aesthetics, and is not interactive. The results imply that speakers' use of English closely mirrors the timeliness and nature of the interaction each medium requires.

Based on all the findings above, these answer the above research questions by illuminating how platform affordances shape modal integration (RQ2), and how English performs distinct metafunctional roles across platforms (RQ3).

6.1 Pedagogical & Practical Implications:

- Choose modal combinations strategically for the content creator platform.

Language educators and digital literacy instructors should equip students not only with English vocabulary and grammar, but also with strategies for embedding English multimodally.

- For social media strategists/marketers: multilingual creators can leverage English as a semiotic lever. Using English overlay on visual posts can appeal to nonlocal or aspirational audiences. Blending in Arabic/local dialect can help maintain local resonance.

This study advances theory by offering a cross-platform and multilingual lens for multimodal English use and not just one platform in isolation. It improves existing models of coordinating modalities fitted to real constraints (e.g. TikTok vs. Instagram). Future research can expand to platforms beyond TikTok. The use of computational multimodal tools to scale coding can enhance sample diversity. Longitudinal studies can clarify whether creators shift their modal strategies over time. Studies of audience reception can determine perceptions of effective and appropriate modal strategies.

6.2 Overview of the Study

The goal of this study is to explore the multimodal discourse of English in TikTok and Instagram of Iraqi multilingual users. This study investigated how English works in different semiotic modes and how platform affordances affect the use of English across those modes. It used a quantitative analysis of 200 posts and a qualitative analysis of selected examples. Using Systemic Functional Linguistics and identity/indexicality frameworks, this study draws on affordance theory to map the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions of English as it functions through various modes of meaning making – visual, textual and aural.

7. Conclusions



The study has reached the following conclusions:

1. Cross-platform differences: Quantitative results revealed that TikTok posts show a higher degree of simultaneous integration of modes and more interpersonal uses of English (calls to action, address to viewer), whereas Instagram posts tend toward sequential or complementary integration and more ideational/textual functions of English (labelling, captions, slogans).
2. English is often found as not merely a means of communicating but also a symbolic index of a cosmopolitan identity, modernity and youth lifestyle as the qualitative exemplars demonstrated. English overlays and hashtags are used for branding and aspiration even when redundant for understanding.
3. Platform affordances strongly shape multimodal design choices. TikTok's video format is short and audiovisual, so creators are pressed for tight modal integration and immediacy of engagement. Instagram's semi-static environment stimulates staged layering and textual elaboration. These variations have an effect on sociolinguistic phenomenon such as English Language Learning (ELL), digital literacy and social media strategy.

7.2 Contributions to Research

This paper makes a contribution to the literature through:

- Offering a pioneering, multilingual cross-platform analysis of the multimodal use of English in Iraq.
- Enhancing multimodal discourse analysis through a combined SFL-affordance-identity framework.
- Demonstrating how macro-patterns emerge from micro-level practices through qualitative examples.

Moreover, it builds on work by Grzenkowicz & Wildfeuer (2025); Wang & Taabaldiev (2025); Aslan et al. (2025), and others, set in a multilingual, non-Western context.

7.3 Practical Implications

For content creators: tailor English use and modal integration to each platform's affordances to maximize engagement.

For educators: incorporate multimodal digital literacy into English language teaching, training students to coordinate text, speech, and visuals.

For policy makers and marketers: recognize the symbolic value of English in social media branding and youth identity.

7.4 Limitations and Future Research

Expanding to other platforms (e.g., YouTube Shorts, Snapchat) and comparing additional multilingual communities would further refine the findings.

7.5 Closing Statement

When platforms today are innovating and finding multilingual uses online, English is less a language and more a multimodal resource, for the construction of identity and engagement. By examining the use of English on TikTok and Instagram by Iraqi users, the study seeks to inform the fields of language, culture and technology more generally and thus further provides routes towards more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to multimodal discourse.

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