Proximisation and distance in polarised discourse. The case of digital news

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Polarisation, usually defined as a divergence of opinions to opposing ideological extremes (DiMaggio et al. 1996), is a major concern in Western societies these days. As a metaphorical concept, polarisation can be seen as the increasing distance between groups, derived from the conventional metaphor IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES ARE SPATIAL DISTANCE, and so, there is a general perception that polarisation hinders consensus and leads to the fragmentation of society (Porto 2023). Media contributes to this view of general threat, but, on the other hand, it is often considered responsible for fostering polarisation and extremism in their framing of news (Bjornsgaard & Dukić 2023). In this context, the present paper examines some multimodal strategies of polarisation in digital news and their possible effects on readers' interpretation of the events presented.

For this purpose, a sample of multilingual European newsbites about the Brazilian congress attack (Jan 8th, 2023) was collected and analysed from a critical and socio-cognitive approach. Drawing on the methodological integration of Proximisation Theory and Deictic Space Theory (Chilton 2004; Cap 2013, 2017) and the notion of multimodal construal (Alonso-Belmonte & Porto 2020), findings show that multimodal polarisation is enhanced by presenting the Other not only as distinct and negatively valued but also as a threat, adding emotions to the overall framing of the events. The negative representation of the Other on the one side and the proximisation textual and visual devices on the other are some of the multimodal strategies that construct an overall frame of 'close threat' in spite of the physical, geographical distance of the events presented. Results can be of interest for media discourse analysts, cognitive linguists and researchers interested in polarized discourse.

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