

## MIDJOURNEY, THE 'DEATH' OF ART, AND ITS IMPACT ON LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN A POSTDIGITAL PERSPECTIVE

MIDJOURNEY, A “MORTE” DA ARTE E SEU IMPACTO NA EDUCAÇÃO LINGUÍSTICA EM UMA PERSPECTIVA PÓS-DIGITAL

MIDJOURNEY, LA “MUERTE” DEL ARTE Y SU IMPACTO EN LA EDUCACIÓN LINGÜÍSTICA EN UNA PERSPECTIVA POSDIGITAL

Luciana Parnaíba de Castro  

Federal University of Campina Grande, Cajazeiras, PB, Brazil

Lucas Gustavo do Nascimento Rigonato  

University of São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brazil

Ticiane Rafaela de Andrade Moreno  

University of São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brazil;  
Federal Institute of São Paulo, Sorocaba, SP, Brazil

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the controversies surrounding the use of generative artificial intelligence in artistic production, focusing on the image *Théâtre d'opéra spatial*, created via Midjourney, and its broader implications for language education in a postdigital context. It investigates the tensions raised by claims of the “death of art” and explores how AI challenges conventional understandings of authorship, creativity, and artistic legitimacy. The study aims to analyze the discursive, ideological, and epistemological dimensions embedded in AI-generated content and their influence on educational practices. Adopting a critical hermeneutic orientation grounded in poststructuralist, Bakhtinian, and postdigital theoretical frameworks, the article reflects on language, discourse, digital literacies, and digital colonialism. The analysis reveals that debates on AI in art and education involve not only technological innovation but also disputes over power relations, epistemic hierarchies, and meaning-making processes. The discussion demonstrates that AI technologies operate within broader structures of digital capitalism and coloniality, reinforcing social inequalities related to language, race, gender, and access to knowledge. In the field of language education, the article advocates for a critical pedagogical stance that promotes discursive awareness, ethical engagement, and the interrogation of implicit language policies present in AI adoption. It concludes that language education plays a key role in fostering students’ critical agency, enabling them to reflect on and respond to the sociocultural and ideological forces shaping digital technologies.

**Keywords:** Artificial intelligence. Language education. Postdigital age. Digital colonialism. Meaning making.

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**RESUMO:** Este artigo examina as controvérsias em torno do uso de inteligência artificial generativa na produção artística, com foco na imagem Théâtre d'opéra spatial, criada por meio do Midjourney, e em suas implicações para a educação linguística em um contexto pós-digital. A pesquisa investiga as tensões provocadas por discursos sobre a “morte da arte” e analisa como a IA desafia compreensões convencionais de autoria, criatividade e legitimidade artística. O objetivo é analisar as dimensões discursivas, ideológicas e epistemológicas presentes em conteúdos gerados por IA e sua influência sobre práticas educacionais. Com base em uma orientação hermenêutica crítica, ancorada em referenciais pós-estruturalistas, bakhtinianos e pós-digitais, o artigo reflete sobre linguagem, discurso, letramentos digitais e colonialismo digital. A análise demonstra que os debates sobre IA na arte e na educação envolvem não apenas inovação tecnológica, mas também disputas por relações de poder, hierarquias epistêmicas e processos de construção de sentidos. A discussão evidencia que as tecnologias de IA operam em estruturas mais amplas de capitalismo digital e colonialidade, reforçando desigualdades sociais relacionadas à linguagem, raça, gênero e acesso ao conhecimento. No campo da educação linguística, o artigo defende uma postura pedagógica crítica voltada à consciência discursiva, ao engajamento ético e à problematização das políticas linguísticas implícitas na adoção da IA. Conclui-se que a educação linguística tem papel fundamental na formação da agência crítica dos estudantes, permitindo que reflitam sobre as forças socioculturais e ideológicas que moldam as tecnologias digitais.

**Palavras-chave:** Inteligência artificial. Educação linguística. Era pós-digital. Colonialismo digital. Construção de sentidos.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo examina las controversias en torno al uso de la inteligencia artificial generativa en la producción artística, centrándose en la imagen Théâtre d'opéra spatial, creada mediante Midjourney, y en sus implicaciones para la educación lingüística en un contexto posdigital. La investigación aborda las tensiones suscitadas por los discursos sobre la “muerte del arte” y analiza cómo la IA desafía concepciones convencionales de autoría, creatividad y legitimidad artística. El objetivo es analizar las dimensiones discursivas, ideológicas y epistemológicas presentes en contenidos generados por IA y su influencia en las prácticas educativas. A partir de una orientación hermenéutica crítica, sustentada en marcos posestructuralistas, bakhtinianos y posdigitales, el artículo reflexiona sobre lenguaje, discurso, literacidades digitales y colonialismo digital. El análisis demuestra que los debates sobre IA en el arte y en la educación no implican solo innovación tecnológica, sino también disputas por relaciones de poder, jerarquías epistémicas y procesos de construcción de sentidos. La discusión evidencia que las tecnologías de IA operan dentro de estructuras más amplias de capitalismo digital y colonialidad, reforzando desigualdades sociales relacionadas con el lenguaje, la raza, el género y el acceso al conocimiento. En el campo de la educación lingüística, el artículo defiende una postura pedagógica crítica orientada a la conciencia discursiva, el compromiso ético y la problematización de las políticas lingüísticas implícitas en la adopción de la IA. Se concluye que la educación lingüística desempeña un papel fundamental en la formación de la agencia crítica de los estudiantes, permitiéndoles reflexionar sobre las fuerzas socioculturales e ideológicas que configuran las tecnologías digitales.

**Palabras clave:** Inteligencia artificial. Educación lingüística. Posdigitalidad. Colonialismo digital. Construcción de sentidos.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Not all documents and works of art were made to be collected, classified, stored, shown, or studied. These procedures can be advantageous and illuminating in some contexts and invasive and harmful in others. The prioritization of the documents and artworks, along with the transformation of the modes of handling them into neutral procedures, erase not only the concrete violence exercised here or there when particular archives were constituted, but also the entire context of imperial violence.*

(Azoulay, Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism, 2019, p. 58).

On October 16th, 2022, Kevin Roose, technology columnist for the New York Times, wrote a report for *Folha de São Paulo*, about a controversial event in the world of art and technological production. At the Colorado State Fair's annual art competition, the work that won the emerging digital artists category award was produced by an Artificial Intelligence (AI) program, Midjourney, based on statements selected by its developer, Jason Allen.

The competition awarded the customary categories – painting, sculpture, digital art and photography, and patchwork. Regarding the digital art contest, Jason Allen's piece of art, named "*Théâtre d'opéra Spatial*", guaranteed the emergent digital artist the award, being the first artistic work held in such an honor. As it seems, it was not very clear to the judges and the contestants that "*Théâtre d'opéra Spatial*" was an AI piece of art, even though Allen defends himself by stating that this was explicit in his subscription: "Jason M. Allen via Midjourney". Since then, there have been other occurrences of such controversial competitors, such as the German artist Boris Eldagsen, who won a photography competition in 2023 also using AI (Glynn, 2023).

As debates raged, Roose (2022) flares up the discontent that this award generated in the community of artists, as it touches on sensitive points such as ethics, plagiarism, the artist's work and his livelihood, authorship (as Allen is a game developer) and even the perception that this would lead art to its decline and death. The columnist also problematizes that this perception of art happened in other historical moments, for

example, with the emergence of photography, and that today algorithms are fed and feed our perceptions of reality.

In relation to the contemporary nature of this discussion, we find it relevant to investigate the process of meaning making (Monte Mór, 2008) such as which perceptions and questions may emerge from this context, how this meaning-making process concerns our understandings of reality, and how the constant and fluid change of such understandings are engendered in/from the digital world. In order to accomplish this, we will interpret the controversy as a discursive event and examine its repercussions in society and language education.

A broader conceptual framework is required when one proposes to investigate the challenges put forward by AI and its very recent influence on every social realm. Thus, these reflections on art, new technologies, history, authorship, and ethics are grounded on some epistemologies: literacies in the digital age (Kress, 2003; Gee; Hayes, 2011; Cope; Kalantzis, 2024), the postdigital age (Jandrić, 2023), language, meaning, and meaning making (Derrida, 1978; Ricoeur, 1978; Volochínov, 2018; Faraco, 2009; Monte Mór, 2017), and visual literacies (Mizan, 2015).

Considering this conceptual framework, this article is structured as a critical theoretical essay guided by a hermeneutic orientation. Rather than offering a technical assessment of Midjourney as a tool, it takes the controversy surrounding *Théâtre d'opéra spatial* as a discursive event from which broader questions about authorship, artistic legitimacy, meaning making, digital colonialism, and language education can be interpreted. This interpretive movement assumes that meanings are situated, conflictive, and historically produced, since the meanings attached to art, technology, and education are not fixed, but emerge from disputes among signs, discourses, and social forces (Derrida, 1978; Ricoeur, 1978; Volóchinov, 2018). Thus, the analytical material is composed of the AI-generated image, the public controversy around its award, and the educational, technological, and ideological discourses that emerge from this episode.

The analysis moves from the specific case of *Théâtre d'opéra spatial* to broader discussions on language, power, technology and education. The image is first

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approached through its visual, aesthetic, and cultural elements; the controversy is then interpreted as a discursive and ideological phenomenon; and its implications are finally discussed in relation to language education in a postdigital context. In this movement, theory works as an interpretive lens that connects the case to questions about how meanings concerning art, authorship, technology, and education are produced, circulated, contested, and naturalized (Monte Mór, 2008; Jandrić, 2023; Mizan; Ferraz, 2024).

In the first section, “Modern Art, Crisis: a critical hermeneutic exercise”, we analyze *Théâtre d'opéra spatial*, the contest-winning Midjourney artwork created by Jason Allen, critically addressing why it could be evaluated in such high regard. We draw on Derrida’s and Ricoeur’s reflections on language, interpretation, and meaning to understand some of the ways AI affects our perceptions of authorship, ethics, and transformation. From a historical perspective, we also examine how the emergence of new artifacts often reactivates narratives of crisis and replacement, a debate that reaches education when AI is presented as a solution capable of reorganizing teaching practices, reducing teacher agency, and reinforcing neoliberal forms of educational control.

In the second section, “Artificial Intelligence, Art and Digital Colonialism”, we examine how AI shapes not only our worldviews, but also our ways of becoming social beings. Drawing on Volóchinov’s and Faraco’s Bakhtinian approaches to language, society, and life, we discuss how AI-generated content participates in the production and circulation of meanings. We then relate this discussion to digital colonialism, arguing that AI can deepen existing hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, language, and knowledge (Mizan; Ferraz, 2024).

Finally, in the third section, *The Postdigital Age And Generative AI Implications For Language Education*, we relate the debate on AI to postdigital perspectives and discuss its implications for language education. From our position as critical language educators, we argue that AI-generated texts and images should be critically mediated in classrooms, teacher education, and school contexts, especially because these technologies are also connected to economic, environmental, and labor exploitation within broader structures of digital colonialism.

## 2 MODERN ART, CRISIS: A CRITICAL HERMENEUTIC EXERCISE

Figure 1 – Midjourney AI piece of art



Source: ALLEN, Jason M. *Théâtre d'opéra spatial*, 2022.

*Théâtre d'opéra Spatial*, (image above) constructs a sense of classicism through its visual composition and the way human figures are represented. At the same time, it also evokes impressionist features, especially in the blurred contours and in the way some lines merge into one another. The image appears to depict women wearing classical clothes, whose posture and placement suggest contemplation, either of the stage-like interior space or of the landscape beyond it. There is a strong contrast between light and darkness: while the interior is dimly lit, a large circular window opens onto an external landscape from which natural light enters the scene. This light functions almost as an ethereal and dystopic spotlight, intensifying the theatrical atmosphere of the image.

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The architecture, furniture, spatial amplitude, and clothing seem to evoke an old European setting. The green and gold tones around the window may also be read as visual elements historically associated with nobility, luxury, or aristocratic imagery, although such associations are themselves culturally and historically situated. At the same time, the landscape and the interior decoration appear both detailed and blurred, as if the scene were a remnant of a past that can no longer be fully recovered. The title of the artwork helps guide this interpretation: the figures seem to be either preparing for or performing an opera. The space may be read as a backstage area or as the stage itself, facing the circular window that opens toward outer space. This ambiguity contributes to the mysterious, nostalgic, and melancholic atmosphere of the image.

Allen stated that he used at least 624 text prompts and revisions as inputs for Midjourney to create the initial image. He later edited the image using Adobe Photoshop and upscaled it with Gigapixel AI before submitting it to the competition (United States Copyright Office, 2023). From the perspective of meaning making, the number of prompts, trials, and revisions involved in the process suggests that the image was not generated by chance but emerged from a deliberate compositional process mediated by the AI generator. Although the judges later acknowledged that they did not know the artwork had been AI-generated, this controversy became central to debates on authorship, artistic legitimacy, and the role of human agency in AI-assisted creation.

We can outline some of the reasons why this artwork was highly valued for its aesthetic qualities, as well as the meanings and effects it may evoke. Renaissance and Symbolism, as artistic movements, are often associated with humanism, realism, religious imagery, and the visual regimes of modernity. Renaissance art, in particular, has frequently been treated as a privileged model of artistic achievement, often positioned above more contemporary and provocative aesthetic forms.

On the other hand, this aesthetic valuation can also be interpreted as part of the historical maintenance of Europe as a central reference in the field of art. The European imperial imaginary, especially from the 14th and 15th centuries onward, helped establish

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certain artistic forms, traditions, and institutions as universal models, while marginalizing multiple forms of art and representation produced by different cultures, places, social groups, perspectives, worldviews, and subjectivities. As Azoulay argues, “The imperial modernist gesture of fixing human activities to sites that, at certain historical moments, operate as sources or harbingers of new trends implies, and often entails, the demise of art practices in other places” (Azoulay, 2019, p. 109). Yet, for the same author,

Writing specialized histories of collecting or of art, even with critical tools, one continues to be bounded by the phenomenal field created by imperial destruction, cultural appropriation, and the imposition of a new regime of modern art, which centers on seemingly neutral activities such as collecting, preserving, interpreting, and displaying objects, which reaffirm the transcendental condition of art (Azoulay, 2019, p. 95).

In Allen’s work, although the image was produced with AI, its title in French and its visual references to an opera house seem to reinforce an aesthetic repertoire historically associated with European elitist and imperial cultures. The composition may be read through elements commonly related to Renaissance visual conventions, such as perspective, contrasts between light and darkness, balance in lines and colors, and classical inspiration. At the same time, it also evokes Symbolist and impressionistic traits, especially in its dreamlike atmosphere, fluid lines, sense of movement, and aura of decadence. This suggests that, although the modes of artistic production are changing, what is socially validated as art may still remain attached to old, European, and traditional paradigms. Such attachment to European and modern regimes of art is not merely an artistic issue; it also indicates how technologies may reproduce dominant repertoires of meaning, revealing the relation between language, ideology, and the social validation of knowledge.

Taking this paradox into account, we outline some historical reflections. Throughout human history and with respect to the resulting technological developments, we have gone through several moments of rupture in paradigms, beliefs and ways of being in the world. When writing emerged, for example, Plato considered that this technology would harm people's memory, as they could always resort to written text to remember facts (Gee; Hayes, 2011). With the advent of industry and more recently the

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digital technologies, various machines, programs, and devices have made certain professions obsolete, while others are on the verge of disappearing. The fact is that even those who create these technological and digital innovations can never predict the consequences and possibilities resulting from their creation.

The reflections that this article raises, such as whether art and the artist are dead, as well as others regarding changes in the paradigms of education, knowledge production, technology, languages, work etc., remind us of other reflexive thinkings: the definition of what is art and an artist is multiple and not consensual, it depends on the social group, context and culture, and the acceptability of these meanings are related to the authority and power of these enunciators. When someone says that a piece of art produced by an application cannot be considered art and a computer programmer cannot be an artist, some meanings may be read - art labor cannot be machine work and made by programming language; therefore, we might interpret that it is not art that is dead, but what was conceived as art.

Faced with these reflections, it is paramount to raise Derrida's (1978) thoughts about center versus periphery in language: "Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality" (Derrida, 1978, p. 109). In a traditional form of conception of language and society, it was understood that signs and meanings were organized around a center that directs them, and a periphery that encompasses the signs and meanings that form the outsider or the negative/inferior side of the center-periphery relation.

This is critiqued by Derrida, for whom the "classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (it is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere", or, in better words, "The center is not the center" (Derrida, 1978, p. 109). Thus, for Derrida (1978), the center, in fact, does not occupy the center, as it has no physical locus. It is, much more, a function,

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which changes, in which signs relate and replace each other in the interpretive games, the play of differences.

If there is, therefore, a question as to whether art is dead, it is up to us to ask whether what we understand as modern art (as center) has been altered into these new signs that are put into play through this application that creates digital art (periphery). Regarding the crisis that was generated by this AI creation, the conflicts of interpretation, and the play of differences, Ricoeur (1978) building on Husserl asserts that crisis is the moment full of criticism and creativity that can enrich the play of differences in Derridean views. This is why Allan's work of art comes to terms with Art, and travels from the periphery (not art) to the center (new art).

According to Ricoeur (1978), the clash of conflicting interpretations can dismantle illusions regarding materials, production methods, techniques, and concepts. Ultimately, these clashing viewpoints expose the power dynamics that dictate who decides what art is and who qualifies as an artist.

The use of Midjourney does not automatically guarantee the production of an effective artwork, since images such as Allen's depend on a complex process of prompting, selection, revision, editing, and interpretation. This process expands our understanding of multimodal and imagistic meaning making, especially because lexical choices in prompts may influence style, technique, lighting, color, representation, and ambiance. Thinking through this process also allows us to see how new forms of art, language, and technology can enter Derrida's play of differences, continuously displacing what counts as artistic creation.

### **3 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, ART AND DIGITAL COLONIALISM**

As we have argued previously, the discussion surrounding art competitions and AI raises questions such as “what is art?”, while also highlighting the ways in which meanings are constructed in the world. By interacting with the discourses that define what counts as art, human beings also participate in shaping them, since “in the course of their own development, human beings also actively shape the very forces that shape them” (Daniels, 2001, p. 1). In other words, the forces that shape us are also shaped by our responses to them. A work of art, therefore, can open possibilities for reconstructing and/or deconstructing interpretive attitudes, that is, the ways through which we create meanings about the world around us (Monte Mór, 2000). In this regard, Ono (2019, p. 96) highlights that our interpretive attitude is often too rigid and normative, which “prevents us from breaking the barriers of our interpretations and constructions of meaning”.

This connection between art and meaning making is central to the argument because AI-generated content does not only produce images or texts; it also organizes signs through social values already available in culture. For this reason, AI requires attention to language and ideology, since what appears to be technological output is also a socially situated production of meaning.

From a discursive perspective, the discussion does not concern only the meaning of art, but also the ideological construction involved in the interaction among the artist, the viewer, and the artwork. If every artwork is both concrete and ideological, it reflects and refracts different realities (Volóchinov, 2018). This perspective allows us to ask which realities an AI-generated artwork reflects, which realities it refracts or marginalizes, and how these processes are shaped by databases composed of different artistic traditions, social values, and cultural assumptions. At the same time, it is necessary to consider the intentions, discursive constructions, and worldviews of those who produce, circulate, and interpret AI-generated images.

It is undebatable that our interaction with AI is shaping our way of thinking and interpreting. Our conscience and thinking are made of signs. These signs circulate from individual to individual, individual to collective conscience, through interactions that bond

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us in collective thinking, culture, and ideology (Volóchinov, 2018). Thus, how much of our individual or social conscience is now shaped by AI content? How much do we know, experience and accept this digital colonialism put forward by AI, and many other digital products? Soap operas, TV shows, social media, cartoons, artists and politicians' interactions based on AI content are spreading all around.

Moreover, chatbots, apps and social networks are changing our daily tasks, emotions, and relationships as we see people solving problems, having fun, learning and practicing, and even engaging in relationships and life storytelling with these types of AI programs. These are just some examples of how AI and the digital technologies have transformed sociability. If one brings Volóchinov's (2018) theories into the debate, it is a safe bet to assume that AI content, images, and interactions are now part of our psychological-social lives, because every social ideological sign seeps through our inner consciousness, at the same time as some aspects of our inner life are being sewn to AI generators.

Algorithms in social networks determine which "forces" and "influences" reach our screens and, therefore, those we interact with. These algorithms in/from artificial intelligence identify which publications will be delivered to which people, including the geographic and socio-indicative aspects. Such algorithms determine how news feeds will be ranked, depending on the relevance of that content for each person. If there is an artificial intelligence behind these digital interactions, how much control will these 'intelligences' have over the meanings we create for our existence? If we are cultural beings and if we spend so much time connected, are we creating limited/pre-determined meanings being led by algorithms?

Algorithmic meaning making can also be associated with the political polarization experienced in Brazil and in other contexts over the last few years. As people receive information through highly personalized digital environments, they may become more exposed to discourses that reinforce existing beliefs, intensify affective responses, and shape their interpretations of social and political events. In this sense, reactions against democratic processes, including electoral results, can illustrate how meanings are

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produced, circulated, and transformed through algorithmically mediated interactions, while also shaping the society in which they emerge.

These examples indicate that algorithmic meaning making is not separated from social hierarchies. When AI systems organize visibility, relevance, and representation, they also participate in the reproduction of cultural norms and exclusions that already structure social life. It would be naive, therefore, to treat AI as a neutral content generator, since every discursive construction is politically and economically situated. From a Bakhtinian perspective, AI is fed by culture and society (Faraco, 2009), which means that the words, expressions, images, and sounds generated by these systems remain connected to socially produced meanings. For this reason, it is not surprising, although deeply concerning, that AI generators may reproduce racialized patterns of erasure and misrepresentation, particularly in relation to Black people.

Another concerning use of AI involves the creation of non-consensual intimate images, including misogynistic deepfakes that target women and abusive content involving minors. In these cases, images are manipulated or generated without consent, violating the dignity, privacy, and safety of those represented. Similar concerns also emerge in relation to LGBTQIA+ identities, as some technology companies that have previously presented themselves as inclusive may contribute, through data practices, moderation policies, or algorithmic decisions, to the erasure, misrepresentation, or unequal treatment of LGBTQIA+ people in digital environments.

If signs constitute consciousness and social life, as discussed from a Bakhtinian perspective (Faraco, 2009; Volóchinov, 2018), AI systems cannot be understood as mere technical tools. Trained on hegemonic databases and organized by corporate infrastructures, they operate as large-scale systems for producing and circulating signs, selecting which images, words, identities, and worldviews become more visible, repeatable, and legitimate. This is where language, ideology, and digital colonialism intersect: AI does not only process data; it also participates in the production of social meanings under unequal conditions of power. This connection is central to Mizan and Ferraz's argument:

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Digital capitalism, platform capitalism and surveillance capitalism are neologisms that complement each other and give us a picture of the ways digital ownership, digital structure and its purposes are entangled. The digital clearly adopted the capitalist ideology, by authorizing only few actors to take ownership of the digital infrastructure and by creating the belief that reminds us of Thatcher's declaration that "there is no alternative" to the centralized control of the GAFAMs of software, hardware and the Internet (Mizan; Ferraz, 2024, p. 198).

This control, exercised by large technology corporations known as GAFAMs, namely Google (Alphabet), Apple, Facebook (Meta), Amazon, and Microsoft, is not only infrastructural or economic. It is also semiotic, because these companies shape the conditions under which meanings are generated, circulated, ranked, and made visible in digital environments. In the case of Midjourney, this semiotic control becomes visible in the recurrence and validation of Renaissance, European, and imperial aesthetic repertoires over other non-hegemonic visual traditions.

For Mizan and Ferraz (2024), this reveals that digital environments do not suspend the hierarchies that organize social life outside the digital sphere. Instead, they often extend and intensify them through platforms, databases, algorithms, and automated systems of representation. In this sense, digital colonialism can be understood as a process through which technological infrastructures reproduce older colonial logics by defining whose languages, bodies, images, and forms of knowledge become visible, profitable, and legitimate. This is why *platformization* is described by the authors as "just an extension of the colonialities lived in the non-digital world" (Mizan; Ferraz, 2024, p. 193). The issue, therefore, is not only that AI may produce biased outputs, but that these outputs emerge from systems already organized by unequal relations of power, in which visibility and legitimacy are unevenly distributed.

These examples show how deeply AI has entered social life and how urgently language educators need to engage with it critically and sensitively. The question, then, is not whether these technologies should be discussed in education, but how language education can help students identify the ideological meanings, hierarchies, and exclusions embedded in their outputs. This critical work must also be accompanied by public debates, laws, and regulations capable of addressing the transformations produced by AI in digital culture.

## 4 THE POSTDIGITAL AGE AND GENERATIVE AI IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION

The digital, social, and meaning-making transformations intensified by the growing presence of AI in everyday life must also be problematized in education. Educators have increasingly witnessed the emergence of “educational” programs on YouTube and governmental platforms, as well as applications and online courses that promise to teach children and adolescents in faster and more autonomous ways.

One of our main concerns, therefore, is not simply whether AI will replace teachers, but how it is being mobilized to reorganize teaching practices, reduce teacher agency, and intensify platform-based forms of educational control. The current São Paulo State government, for instance, considered using an AI program such as ChatGPT to create teaching materials (Freitas, 2024, online), while digital software and platforms already correct and evaluate tests, texts, and tasks, as if learning could be measured through the identification of formal patterns. Such educational policies reveal a concerning capitalist and neoliberal backlash in Brazilian public education.

Intense *platformization* is one example of these policies, as technology may be used to deprive teachers of creation, critical reflection, authorship, and connection to local realities. In the case of São Paulo, this educational “package” includes platform-based control over educational subjects, the expansion of profit opportunities for technology corporations, a back-to-basics and non-critical approach to education, and the maintenance of abyssal lines between those who can access digital education and those who remain excluded from it.

The epistemological assumptions underlying this kind of education are often left unexplored or unchallenged. For this reason, language education has an important role in questioning the discourses surrounding AI, authorship, ethics, digital literacies, and the *platformization* of education. By addressing how meanings about technology are constructed and circulated, language education can foster students’ capacity to read, critique, and produce discourses about AI in ways that resist naturalized corporate

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narratives. This dimension of teaching is fundamental to the development of citizenship and agency in a highly technologized and unequal society.

Therefore, an implicit language policy is at stake. Decisions about adopting AI to produce teaching materials, evaluate students' writing, or even design curricula are not neutral technological choices; they are acts of language policy that shape who gets to speak, who writes, whose words are valued, and how meanings are negotiated in schools. By automating these processes through AI systems trained on dominant discourses, there is a risk of standardizing language use, marginalizing local varieties and forms of knowledge, and reducing the space for dialogue, authorship, and critical reflection. As language educators, recognizing these technologies as instruments of language policy is crucial to resisting the erasure of plural voices and maintaining education as a site of democratic meaning making.

In light of these concerns, the postdigital approach offers a coherent way of analyzing and understanding this challenging context. The concept of postdigital emerged in the 2000s in the fields of arts, humanities, and social sciences (Jandrić, 2023). Defining such a complex term is not a simple task, as Jandrić himself suggests:

One day, probably, our postdigital condition will be condensed in concise encyclopaedia entries and routinely explained by undergraduates. One task is to ensure this does not happen, and that the postdigital remains—for as long as it is productive—a concept that constantly resists any final definition (Jandrić; Ford, 2022, p. 707, apud Jandrić, 2023, p. 12).

However, the postdigital should not be understood merely as a term that comes after the digital, but as an approach that examines the entangled relations between humans and technologies. Jandrić (2023, p. 14) explains that “the postdigital is a signal to a ‘post’ or a transition to something else and one of many ways of describing this transition”. Although the concept emerged in a context of intense technological development, especially in areas such as arts and education, the rise of Generative AI (GenAI) makes this discussion even more urgent. In this scenario of uncertainty and fear, it becomes necessary to rethink the roles of humans and machines, as well as the conditions for human agency.

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From a postdigital perspective, Cope and Kalantzis (2024) argue in favor of “cyber-social learning”. Their argument moves away from interpretations of the human-machine relationship in which the boundaries between humans and technologies become increasingly blurred, as suggested in Haraway’s *Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1985). For Cope and Kalantzis (2024), humans and machines have distinct capabilities and roles. However, instead of rejecting these technologies, they argue that we should learn to incorporate them into our daily lives while maintaining human agency. In education, this agency can be developed when students are invited to discuss not only the affordances of these technologies, but also their limitations, risks, and harmful effects.

Recent discussions on machine learning and human learning has argued that “we live and work in knowledge environments where we have come to rely increasingly on externalized memory in the form of the web-connected devices close to our bodies that we constantly need to look up – doctors and lawyers are good examples” (Tzirides et al., 2024, p. 289). These authors suggest that relying on this externalized memory is not necessarily something negative, as has been thought in the past. When discussing memory, AI, and learning, Cope and Kalantzis argue (2024, p. 4):

There is more to human learning than individualized long-term memory. This is all that heavily proctored assessments can measure. (A definition of ‘long term’: at least until the day of the exam.) But any such measure is particularly anachronistic today when we have outsourced so much of our long-term memory to the networked collective knowledge devices that we have close at hand and upon which we have come to rely. There’s too much that needs to be remembered these days and memory has become socialized. Almost everything of documented human knowledge is just a click or two away. We rely increasingly on digital devices as our cognitive prostheses, not only to remember things but to process knowledge in-the-hand with algorithms of calculation and procedure (Cope; Kalantzis, 2024, p. 4).

According to the authors, the issue is not to succumb to these technologies or to lose human cognitive capabilities such as reasoning, remembering, and creating. Rather, they argue that education should abandon practices that no longer make sense in the contemporary world, especially memorization-based assessments. As educators, we should encourage students to work collaboratively, give presentations, and create

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projects that involve different modes of meaning making. Such practices can value students' cognitive capabilities while also allowing them to use technologies such as GenAI as “cognitive prostheses”, not as substitutes for human thought, but as tools that may support and expand learning processes.

Nonetheless, even when used in conscientious and reflexive ways, GenAI may still produce harmful effects. For this reason, language educators need to critically examine not only whether these technologies should be used, but also under what conditions, for what purposes, and with which political and pedagogical implications. As Jucá and Mattos (2021) reflect:

The current scenario forces us, however, to pause for a moment in face of the retrospective observation of our pedagogical practices in order to question ourselves, as teachers and teacher educators, about what we mean by educating and by doing politics; whether, as educators, we perceive ourselves as political agents; and what kind of politics we have made throughout our teaching careers. In other words, we need to ask and answer ourselves how we have been educating and for what purposes (Jucá; Mattos, 2021, p. 325).

The critical hermeneutic orientation adopted in this article is shaped by our position as critical language educators. When we started thinking and reading about AI-generated art in 2022, our concerns were mainly related to authorship, ethics, and changing paradigms in the use of digital technologies. In 2026, however, new and increasingly urgent issues have emerged, especially regarding AI image and video generators. From our perspective, these tools should not be naïvely incorporated into classroom practices; rather, they should be critically discussed with students in relation to their broader social, political, ethical, and environmental implications. One of these implications concerns the ecological impact of AI image generators, since AI tools consume water and image generators require more water than text-based systems (Yañez-Barnuevo, 2025).

Therefore, there are also ecological reasons to debate AI critically. During the trend that transformed people's photos into Studio Ghibli-style images, three million images were generated in one hour, with an estimated water consumption of 75 thousand liters in that time span (Soares, 2025, online). Furthermore, some AI companies have been

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expanding their infrastructure in countries of the Global South, where water resources and labor are often more vulnerable to exploitation. In addition to environmental concerns, these systems also depend on workers who train AI models under precarious conditions, with reported payments ranging from US\$1.32 to US\$2 per hour and exposure to tasks that may harm their mental health (Smink, 2023, online).

AI image generators are also controversial because they may appropriate real people's images without consent. In some cases, users feed these systems with images of people whose work depends on online visibility, such as digital influencers and online sex workers, in order to create AI-generated versions of them and profit from their likeness. These practices raise significant ethical concerns for education, especially when AI tools are introduced in classrooms without critical discussion. For this reason, we argue that teachers, students, and school administrators should address these issues through critical reflection on consent, authorship, representation, and the social consequences of AI-generated images.

The problem, of course, is not technology itself, but the capitalist and neoliberal structures through which it is developed, distributed, and monetized. Digital environments were once imagined as spaces of plural voices, open creativity, democratic participation, and expanded connections. However, they have increasingly become territories marked by colonial logics, violence, extraction, and the exploitation of people, data, labor and natural resources. In this context, the need for regulation and ethical debate becomes urgent. Technology has become an efficient mechanism of domination because it organizes affects, time, attention, memory, mobility, production, and social relations through digital infrastructures. The more these systems become part of everyday life, especially among younger generations, the more they are able to shape thoughts, desires, habits, and forms of social imagination.

Furthermore, capitalist and neoliberal logics drive the *platformization* of education, undermining pedagogical agency and reducing social opportunities for teachers, schools, and students. The same logics shape the uses of AI, including its capacity to generate

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worlds, retrieve information rapidly, and automate tasks, often in ways that deplete environmental resources and affect vulnerable communities. From a postdigital perspective, the response should neither be a total rejection of AI nor an uncritical acceptance of Big Tech ecosystems. Rather, these issues must be critically debated in language classrooms, while language educators, institutions, and policymakers reflect on the conditions under which AI tools are developed, adopted, and regulated. What is at stake is not only which technologies should be used, but what forms of critical, creative, relational, and human agency language education should preserve and strengthen in a context increasingly shaped by political and economic interests.

### 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We certainly cannot offer answers to all the questions raised in this article, but we understand the act of asking them as an initial critical gesture in the process of challenging discourses that naturalize fundamental aspects of modernity and coloniality, including the ways hegemonic discourses act upon bodies (Foucault, 1980). In this sense, we understand that the “exercise of revealing the colonial side, bringing to light what modernity kept outside the public space, is a first decolonial step in this direction” (Veronelli; Daitch, 2021, p. 97). Questioning the coloniality of knowledge, therefore, also means interrogating which epistemologies are privileged in education, including language education.

As language educators, we must challenge hegemonic views of what counts as knowledge and examine which languages, discourses, and subjects are legitimized, marginalized, or erased. Discussing art and AI in language education is not only a matter of technological literacy; it also requires engaging students in understanding how these tools embed and reproduce epistemic hierarchies, shaping which knowledges and worldviews are considered valid.

This dispute over epistemologies is also a dispute over language and meaning. In a Bakhtinian sense, life is dialogical and responsive: we interact, question, answer, agree,

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and disagree (Faraco, 2009). In digital culture, these dialogical relations are no longer restricted to face-to-face encounters. As technologies evolve, bodies, languages, texts, artworks, and other forms of production enter increasingly complex networks of circulation, creating heteroglossic contexts that expand the conditions through which meanings are produced and interpreted. Texts not only circulate and affect broad audiences; they also reverberate within our inner worlds, shaping how we perceive ourselves, others, and social life.

In AI-mediated environments, these dialogical relations are reorganized by systems shaped by economic and political structures. This dialogism also permeates AI-generated content, which responds, recombines, and produces meanings from individual and collective inputs, as well as from the interests that organize these interactions. In this sense, AI content makes more visible what Rancière (2009) identifies as the difficulty of living outside systems structured by profit, exploitation, and inequality. We are not external to these systems; we participate in them, even when we are also affected by their violence and asymmetries.

AI could be used to support new ways of thinking and creating, as well as to make people's lives easier by freeing time for rest, social interaction, reading, creativity, contact with nature, and critical reflection. However, within capitalist and digital colonial structures, it has often been mobilized as another mechanism for reproducing inequalities. In this article, dialogism, decolonial critique, and the questioning of linguistic and epistemological centers have allowed us to problematize artistic and educational content created by AI. Since this is still a recent and constantly changing field, our reflections remain situated within the possibilities and limitations of the present moment. Even so, we argue that language education can contribute to identifying, interrogating, and interrupting unethical and unjust uses of AI (Menezes de Souza, 2019), while also discussing how these technologies might be oriented toward collective purposes.

For this reason, language teacher education must prepare professionals to engage with these issues without reproducing corporate discourses or deterministic narratives

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about technology. By foregrounding the ideological and discursive dimensions of AI-generated content, teacher education can equip future educators to analyze and question the values, worldviews, and power relations embedded in these technologies (Faraco, 2009; Volóchinov, 2018).

Such an approach fosters a critical interpretive stance that goes beyond functional or instrumental uses of AI in language education. It aims to develop teachers' abilities to facilitate classroom discussions that unpack the social meanings, cultural assumptions, and ideological forces that shape AI outputs. In this way, teacher education contributes to cultivating students' critical agency, enabling them to read and produce discourses that challenge naturalized hierarchies and promote more equitable and reflexive uses of technology.

As language educators, we are also called to interrogate our own practices and complicities in reproducing these systems. It is not enough to analyze technology critically; we must design learning experiences that help students question the very categories, values, and epistemologies that underpin these tools. Only by engaging in this collective, reflective labor can language education truly serve as a space of emancipation and possibility in the postdigital age.

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### About the Authors

#### Luciana Parnaíba de Castro

I hold a PhD from the Postgraduate Program in Linguistic and Literary Studies in English (PPGELLI/FFLCH-USP), with a fellowship as a visiting scholar at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA, funded by the Print/Capes Program. I have a Master's degree in Language and Teaching from the Federal University of Campina Grande and a Teaching degree in Languages and Literature (Portuguese and English) from the Federal University of Campina Grande. I am a professor at the Languages and Literature Department at the Center for Teacher Education at the Federal University of Campina Grande (UAL/CFP/UFCG). I am a member of the GEELLE study group (USP). My research interests include: language education, language teacher education, and (multi)literacies. Email: [luciana.parnaiba@professor.ufcg.edu.br](mailto:luciana.parnaiba@professor.ufcg.edu.br)

Author Contributions: Contributed to discussions and analyses on meaning-making, teacher education, and the post-digital era; Drafted the manuscript; Revised the manuscript.

#### Lucas Gustavo do Nascimento Rigonato

I am a language educator and a doctoral candidate in English Linguistic and Literary Studies at the University of São Paulo (USP). My doctoral research adopts an autoethnographic approach to examine the relationships among body, subjectivity, normativity, and language education. I hold a Teaching degree in English Language and Literature, a specialization in Applied Linguistics, and a Master's degree in Linguistics and Literature from the Federal University of Goiás (UFG). I was a Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) at The Catholic University of America (2015–2016), where I taught Portuguese and participated in intercultural language education initiatives. My professional work spans English language teaching, teacher education, curriculum development, and materials design. I am a member of GEELLE (Research Group on Language Education in Foreign Languages) and the National Literacies Project (PNL). My research interests include autoethnography, language education, critical epistemologies, discourse, memory, the body, and processes of subjectivation.

Email: [lucasrigonato@usp.br](mailto:lucasrigonato@usp.br)

Author Contributions: Designed the analysis; Contributed to discussions on language education, meaning-making, and authorship; Articulated Foucauldian references on discourse and power; Drafted and revised the manuscript.

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### Ticiane Rafaela de Andrade Moreno

I hold a Teaching degree in Portuguese and English Language and Literature from the State University of Northern Paraná (UENP/Jacarezinho) and a Bachelor's degree in Pedagogy from the Metropolitan University of Santos (UNIMES). Currently, I am a member of the GEELLE Research Group - Study Group on Language Education in Foreign Languages (2022 - ) at USP. I have a specialization in Foreign Language Teaching from UEL; my thesis research focused on foreign language teaching for children and the analysis of textbook-based teaching systems. I hold a Master's degree in Language Studies from UEL, where I conducted research on representations of the political action of English language teachers for children from the perspective of Critical Pedagogy. I am a doctoral candidate in the "Linguistic and Literary Studies in English" program at USP. My research focuses on an autoethnography of Critical-Affective Education practices in English with children. I have taught English and Portuguese to various educational levels in both public and private settings at the basic education level – from early childhood education to high school. Currently, I am a professor of Portuguese, English, and language teaching at IFSP - Sorocaba campus, where I work with integrated high school courses and teacher education programs. I have coordinated and organized events at the institution, as well as teaching and outreach projects in the areas of literacy, critical literacy, literary literacy, marginal literacies, and gender and sexuality.

Email: [ticiane.rafaela@ifsp.edu.br](mailto:ticiane.rafaela@ifsp.edu.br)

Author Contributions: Integrated philosophical and discursive reflections into the agenda; Provided contemporary references integrating educational policies and socioeconomic, social justice, and environmental impacts into the discussion; Executed the analysis; Drafted the manuscript.

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