The Semiotics of a Slap: Metafunctional and Visual Grammar Analyses of Meaning-Making in Selected Macron Memes

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This study examines eleven "Macron Slap" memes circulating on X (formerly Twitter) between May 26 and May 31, 2025, to analyze how humor, irony, humiliation, gendered power inversion, and ideological commentary are produced through complex processes of multimodal semiosis. Grounded in Halliday's ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, and supported by Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar and Barthes's concept of anchorage, the analysis demonstrates how the memes transform a single embodied gesture into a globally recognizable semiotic phenomenon circulating across international digital networks. Meaning is shown to accumulate through four analytical groups: Causal, Action, Reaction, and Intertextual Representations. This framework reveals how each redesign resemiotizes the original gesture and extends its interpretive range. Ideationally, the slap functions as a shifting signifier moving from a fictional domestic scene to a symbolically charged commentary on gender, authority, and political vulnerability. Interpersonally, gaze, posture, gesture, and evaluative captions position viewers within a shared stance of humorous appraisal. Textually, salience, framing, sequential pairing, and verbal anchorage stabilize the preferred readings and bind the meme sequence into a coherent multimodal narrative. A key semiotic feature of the cycle is its intertextual expansion, in which appearances by Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and globally circulating cultural templates recontextualize the slap within broader semiotic frameworks of public embarrassment and contested masculinity. Overall, the study illustrates how participatory media employ multimodal redesign to resemiotize political figures and generate ideological meanings that resonate across diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: intertextuality, metafunctional analysis, multimodal semiotics, political memes, Visual Grammar

1. Introduction

In today's digital landscape, online communication has become increasingly visual, multimodal, and participatory. Since Dawkins's (1976) conceptualization of the *meme* as a self-replicating cultural unit, internet memes have evolved from trivial jokes into potent semiotic artefacts that condense humor, critique, and ideology into easily shareable formats. As Shifman (2013) and Milner (2016) observe, memes function as "cultural building blocks" of digital meaning-making, shaping collective identity through imitation and variation. Wiggins (2019) further argues that they operate semiotically, circulating ideology through humor, intertextuality, and irony. This perspective is strengthened by Marino's (2015) account of "spreadability", which highlights how memes propagate semiotic content rapidly across networks and acquire new layers of meaning through iterative circulation. Together, these insights position the meme as a central medium for negotiating power, identity, and resistance in contemporary online culture.

Political memes, in particular, illustrate the intersection of humor, affect, and ideology. Adegoju (2022) and Cannizzaro (2016) highlight how semiotic resources, such as symbols, gestures, and images, construct layers of political meaning through visual and verbal interplay. Similarly, Calimbo (2016) and Oyemade and Adeagbo (2020) demonstrate that multimodal memes recontextualize political meaning into humorous critique, while Chagas et al. (2019) show how laughter becomes a form of civic commentary in Brazilian digital culture. Additional studies affirm the political potency of memes: De Leon and Ballesteros-Lintao (2021) illustrate how memes operate as vehicles of political propaganda in the Philippines, while Sunhith (2019) shows how Facebook-

based political memes construct ideological positioning through semiotic cues. Similarly, Suryaningsih (2025) demonstrates that political memes work as ideological texts, coordinating visual and textual resources to construct social actors and guide evaluative interpretation. Taken together, these works demonstrate that political memes function not only as humorous artifacts but as semiotic strategies that mobilize ideology, reframe authority, and shape public interpretation. Collectively, these studies underscore that memes have emerged as a new form of visual rhetoric in twenty-first-century politics, performing what Forceville (2009) terms "multimodal metaphor," namely a blending of imagery and language that renders ideological critique simultaneously humorous and symbolic.

Importantly, the interpretation of memes is guided by pragmatic expectations associated with genre. From the perspective of *relevance theory* (e.g., Forceville, 2025), meaning does not arise solely from text-internal visual and linguistic structures but is shaped by communicative intentions and audience-oriented assumptions activated by genre conventions (Scott, 2022; Barratt, 2025). Although the specific identity of meme creators often remains opaque, the choice of the meme genre itself provides strong interpretive cues, signaling humorous or ironic intent and expectations of non-literal interpretation. Genre therefore functions as a central pragmatic factor steering interpretation, framing memes as playful, satirical, or critical communicative acts rather than literal representations.

In this study, the term "meme" is used in an analytical sense to refer to *multimodal digital artefacts that circulate through patterned recontextualization of recurring semiotic resources*. In the Macron Slap dataset of memes, this involves the repeated redesign of a recognizable embodied gesture and its associated visual framing across different images and captions. The memes analyzed here do not constitute a single fixed template but a meme cycle in which related visual, gestural, and discursive elements are reworked to generate humor, satire, and ideological commentary.

Despite advances in meme scholarship, particularly in understanding memes as ideological artefacts and as genre-governed communicative practices, a persistent challenge remains in clarifying how visual and linguistic resources jointly interact to generate meaning. At this intersection, Halliday's (1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL) and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) *Visual Grammar* provide a critical framework. Halliday's metafunctional model analyzes meaning through three interrelated functions: *ideational, interpersonal*, and *textual*, which represent experience, construct social relations, and organize information. Extending these principles to the visual mode, Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) propose that images realize meaning through *representational, interactive*, and *compositional* structures. Their model enables a systematic decoding of gaze, angle, distance, and salience, which are the visual cues that shape power relations, attitude, and viewer positioning. Complementing this, Barthes (1977) emphasizes the role of *anchorage* in guiding viewers toward preferred readings by narrowing interpretive possibilities.

Building on these foundations, multimodal theorists have further integrated linguistic and visual metafunctions. O'Halloran and Lim (2014) developed multimodal meaning-oriented analysis to connect these metafunctions systematically, while Wong (2019) emphasized that text and image together enact social meaning in both print and digital media. Similarly, Al-Issawi, Al Ahmad, and Awajan (2024) show that English–Arabic humor memes blend captions with visual cues to craft culturally specific evaluations, highlighting how cross-linguistic multimodality shapes humor and stance. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) and Jewitt (2009) argue, multimodal communication redefines literacy itself: to interpret a meme is to read a network of semiotic choices distributed across multiple modes. This conceptualization has become central to contemporary multimodal studies, particularly those addressing humor, ideology, and online political meaning-making.

Recent studies have explicitly employed the metafunctional framework to analyze memes and digital humor. Ayu (2021) applied Hallidayan principles alongside Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual-Grammar framework to dark memes on 9GAG, identifying how ideational and interpersonal meanings produce comic transgression. Swari and Ayomi (2024) extend this by showing how metafunctions coordinate image–text interplay in Instagram memes, particularly in constructing

stance and affect. Damanis (2023) similarly demonstrates how ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions shape public interpretations of coronavirus memes. Mahfouz (2021) examined gender representation in "Men vs. Women" memes, showing how Visual Grammar reveals implicit hierarchies and stereotypes embedded in humor. Fatima, Zameer, and Qasim (2025) confirm the explanatory power of the metafunctional model by illustrating how humor and irony in Pakistani memes arise from the integration of linguistic and visual signs. Likewise, Youssef, Seddeek, and Sarwat (2024) show how gaze, bodily orientation, and camera angle construct interpersonal meaning in Covid-19 memes, highlighting how visual resources shape viewer alignment and affect. Together, these studies demonstrate the growing methodological consensus that metafunctional analysis provides a systematic descriptive framework for examining how multimodal humor and ideological positioning are constructed across visual and linguistic resources.

Although earlier studies have shown that memes function as ideological and discursive artifacts (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016; Wiggins, 2019; De Leon & Ballesteros-Lintao, 2021) and that Systemic Functional Linguistics and Visual Grammar frameworks effectively describe multimodal meaning (Ayu, 2021; Damanis, 2023; Fatima et al., 2025), limited attention has been paid to how embodied gestures, such as a slap, operate as recurring semiotic resources in meme cycles.

While multimodal analyses have largely focused on verbal–visual interaction, the semiotics of bodily action remains underexplored when the gesture itself becomes a repeated symbolic motif across memes. This gap becomes especially salient in political meme cycles where the slap gesture functions as a recurrent semiotic resource that visualizes humiliation, exposes power asymmetry, and dramatizes the reversal of authority. Likewise, few studies combine the three metafunctions with Barthes's notion of anchorage to account for how captions guide ideological interpretation or explore the global remixing of a shared gesture across diverse cultural contexts. The absence of such integrated approaches further highlights the need for analyses that connect multimodal structure with transnational meme circulation, a dimension emphasized in Marino's (2015) account of spreadability and Wiggins's (2019) discussion of discursive power in networked culture. This intersection of gesture, multimodality, and transnational circulation remains under-investigated, despite its centrality to how political humor travels globally. This study addresses these gaps through a tri-metafunctional, Visual Grammar analysis of eleven Macron slap memes, which distinctively interweave global figures such as Will Smith, Donald Trump, and Elon Musk. Their inclusion highlights the meme's transnational hybridity and demonstrates how a single embodied gesture becomes a recognizable symbol of humor, humiliation, and power inversion across contexts.

Emerging from a viral remix video depicting French President Emmanuel Macron being slapped by his wife, Brigitte Macron, the memes rapidly circulated across platforms such as X.com (formerly Twitter). As contextual grounding for the meme cycle examined in this study, Figure 1 shows a screenshot from the original, unmanipulated video footage of the incident involving Emmanuel and Brigitte Macron during their arrival in Hanoi, Vietnam, on May 25, 2025. The screenshot is taken from video material published by Reuters on May 26, 2025. It establishes the visual source from which the meme cycle emerged and is included for contextual reference only; the semiotic analysis in this study is confined to the later memetic transformations of this footage.

Figure 1. Moment when Brigitte Macron appears to slap President Emmanuel Macron during their arrival in Hanoi, Vietnam, May 25, 2025. Screenshot from Reuters, published May 26, 2025.
Source: https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/elysee-plays-down-apparent-shove-macron-wife-vietnam-2025-05-26/

Through exaggerated visuals and ironic captions, they reframed the gesture as a symbol of gendered power inversion and political humiliation. By transforming an ephemeral online joke into a semiotic motif, the memes elevate the slap into a metaphorical resource capable of indexing authority, vulnerability, and ideological stance. The memes transformed a fleeting incident into a recurring *visual metaphor* for authority and masculinity.[1] This transformation requires a multimodal semiotic account that explains how linguistic, visual, and gestural modes jointly produce ideological meaning.

Accordingly, the present study analyzes eleven purposively selected Macron Slap memes collected from X.com between May 26 and May 31, 2025. The sample was chosen for its semiotic richness, exhibiting dense interactions among image, caption, and intertextual reference. Drawing on Halliday's metafunctional framework (1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) theory of Visual Grammar, the study investigates how humor, irony, satire, and humiliation are constructed in the Macron Slap memes through the combined use of visual and linguistic signs. It examines how these memes communicate complex meanings about gender, power, and politics across ideational, interpersonal, and textual levels of representation. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1) analyze how the memes construct humor, satire, humiliation, and gendered power inversion through visual–verbal resources, using Halliday's metafunctions, Visual Grammar, and anchorage to account for actions, participants, and evaluative stance; and
2) examine how the memes use intertextuality and global public figures to craft humorous and satirical scenes across visual and verbal modes.

By situating the inquiry at the intersection of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Social Semiotics, presented in Section 2, the research contributes to understanding how multimodal resources transform political events into semiotic meaning-making. The slap drives each stage of escalation, from cause

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[1] Multimodal metaphor is here understood in as an embodied, context-dependent process of meaning-making that operates through verbal, visual and gestural recontextualization (Stampoulidis, Bolognesi, & Zlatev, 2019), rather than purely conceptual mapping (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

to action, reaction, and intertextual remixing, and therefore provides the analytical thread that unifies the study's findings, provided in Section 4. In doing so, the study reaffirms the continuing relevance of Halliday's Kress and van Leeuwen's models for the analysis of meaning-making in participatory media, underscoring how embodied gestures become global semiotic resources for political humor and critique.

2. Theoretical Background

As outlined in the introduction, the study draws on three complementary semiotic frameworks, which provide the conceptual foundation for interpreting how images and captions cooperate to construct layers of representation, evaluation, and coherence within multimodal texts.

As is well-known, Halliday (1978, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) proposed that every communicative act realizes three metafunctions: the *ideational*, which represents experience and processes in the world; the *interpersonal*, which enacts relations between participants; and the *textual*, which organizes the message into a coherent whole.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2020) extended Halliday's metafunctions to the visual mode, showing that images realize the same ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions through resources such as gaze, angle, vector, and spatial composition. Their reinterpretation provides a systematic foundation for analyzing meaning-making in multimodal texts. In their theory of Visual Grammar, Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) identified three corresponding systems of meaning: *representational*, *interactive*, and *compositional*. Representational structures depict people, objects, and actions; interactive structures define the relationship between the image and its viewers through gaze, size of frame, and perspective; and compositional structures integrate these meanings by arranging visual elements according to salience, framing, and information value. Collectively, these systems provide a coherent framework for analyzing how visual choices communicate stance, emotion, and ideology.

In addition, the classical work of Barthes (1977) is used in this study specifically for the concept of *anchorage*, which helps explain how captions guide viewers toward preferred interpretations by narrowing or framing the meaning of an image. In political memes, anchorage is crucial because captions orient the viewer toward humor, critique, or irony, shaping how the slap is understood as a gesture of power inversion and humiliation.

Integrating these semiotic frameworks is particularly relevant for the study of internet memes, which are inherently multimodal, combining linguistic, visual, and often gestural resources to convey humor, irony, and social commentary. Their meanings arise from the interplay between caption, composition, and cultural reference. A metafunctional approach enables the analyst to trace how visual structures, textual anchorage, and evaluative stance interact to produce layered interpretations of humor and power in political memes. The analysis also resonates with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020, pp. 44–69) discussion of action, gesture, and embodied processes as semiotic resources within Visual Grammar, which is highly relevant to the present study since the slap gesture functions as an embodied sign of power and ideology. By treating action as a communicative resource, the analysis highlights how memes exploit gesture and framing to construct humor and humiliation. In addition, Barthes's (1977) notion of anchorage is employed to clarify how captions guide viewers toward particular readings of the image.

Taken together, these frameworks demonstrate that meaning in memes is not arbitrary but systematically produced through semiotic choices of form, composition, and text–image interaction. The combined perspectives of Halliday, Kress and van Leeuwen, and Barthes offer a coherent theoretical basis for examining how humor, irony, and power relations are constructed in multimodal meaning-making in the context of internet memes. In sum, this integration connects linguistic, visual,

and gestural layers of meaning, revealing how political memes transform an embodied action, *the slap*, into a global signifier of humor, humiliation, and power inversion.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

The dataset consists of eleven Macron Slap memes collected purposively from X.com (formerly Twitter) between May 26 and May 31, 2025, the period immediately following the viral circulation of the Macron slap video (see Figure 1). The memes were retrieved through targeted searches using the hashtags #MacronSlap, #BrigitteMacron, and #slapmeme. Each item was archived with its accompanying caption, posting date, and available metadata to preserve contextual authenticity.

Selection was guided by semiotic richness and representational diversity. Only memes that explicitly combined visual and linguistic elements and that referenced Emmanuel Macron, Brigitte Macron, or the slap gesture were included. This ensured that every meme embodied the multimodal interaction central to the study's objectives and theoretical orientation.

3.2. Categorization

To structure the analysis, the memes were organized into four thematic groups reflecting their dominant representational focus: (1) causal representations, (2) action representations, (3) reaction representations, and (4) intertextual representations. This progression enables a coherent tracing of how meanings evolve from domestic humor to broader political and cultural commentary.

The four-part categorization is analytically motivated rather than merely organizational. It reveals a progressive semiotic trajectory through which a single embodied gesture is transformed from a localized domestic action into a globally circulating ideological resource. By distinguishing causal setup, action, reaction, and intertextual recontextualization, the analysis demonstrates how humor, gendered power inversion, and political meaning are incrementally constructed, stabilized, and amplified across the meme cycle. In the following section, the memes are presented and discussed in accordance with this order.

3.3. Dimensions of analysis

Building on the theoretical frameworks specified in Section 2, the analysis applies metafunctional, Visual Grammar, and anchorage concepts through a set of analytically defined dimensions. Each meme was examined across the following dimensions:
   a) Ideational/representational meaning: Identification of participants, vectors, gestures, and linguistic processes to show how experiential meanings, including humor, satire, humiliation, and power inversion, are constructed.
   b) Interpersonal/interactive meaning: Interpretation of gaze, angle, framing, and evaluative tone to uncover relational stance, affect, and viewer positioning.
   c) Textual/compositional meaning and caption anchorage: Exploration of layout, salience, balance, and anchorage to establish coherence and guide interpretation.

Within each of the four categories of memes, the three dimensions were applied, as described in the following section.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Group 1: Causal representations

The memes shown in Figures 2-3 establish the causal frame of the Macron Slap cycle by depicting a small domestic moment that later escalates into satire and symbolic humiliation. Macron's private amusement and Brigitte's noticing gaze form the initiating tension, presenting the slap as the humorous outcome of an ordinary visual cue. These early memes introduce the narrative "trigger" that subsequent groups expand through dramatization, reaction, and intertextual layering. In this way, Group 1 provides the foundational multimodal setup through which a simple gesture begins acquiring broader ideological and gendered connotations. This early setup reflects Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) argument that seemingly small visual details shape how viewers interpret a scene. These include gaze, posture, and the way figures are positioned in relation to one another, which quietly construct relationships and tensions.

Figure 2. Domestic humor hinting at the slap's cause. **Source:** Twitter post by @Saffron_Sniper1, May 28, 2025

4.1.1. Ideational/representational meaning

From an ideational perspective, the memes in Group 1 present a coherent sequence that links a moment of private amusement with the emergence of domestic tension. In Figure 2, the figure portrayed as Macron is shown seated in an airplane, smiling at his phone. This shared airplane setting establishes narrative continuity between the moment of private amusement and the subsequent slap, reinforcing a causal interpretation of the meme sequence. His relaxed posture and focused gaze indicate that he is absorbed in what he is viewing. Behind him, the figure depicted as Brigitte Macron leans slightly forward and directs her gaze toward the phone screen, attempting to identify the source of his amusement. This alignment of gazes creates a quiet sense of watching and rising curiosity, as one figure becomes aware of the private activity of the other and begins to attend to it.

Figure 3. Visual disclosure of the content prompting the slap. **Source:** Twitter post by @Saffron_Sniper1, May 28, 2025

The meme shown in Figure 3 continues this sequence by disclosing the content on the phone: a playful YouTube Shorts clip from "Hatim's Shorts" featuring a posing model. The visible channel label functions as a platform cue associated with short-form humorous video content, presupposing audience familiarity with this mode of circulation rather than identifying a specific source. The humor of the scene is further intensified by an additional layer of irony: the figure displayed on the phone does not conform to stereotypical desirability norms associated with such content, making Macron's apparent excitement appear incongruous and reinforcing the satirical framing of the situation. This visual detail clarifies the implied cause of the tension introduced in Figure 2 and provides the humorous transgression that sets the narrative in motion. Thus, the representational metafunction frames the slap as a visually motivated outcome of a small offence rather than a random act, with meaning unfolding through the sequential pairing of the two images.

4.1.2. Interpersonal/interactive meaning

Interpersonally, the contrast between the two figures shapes the viewer's positioning in the scene. In Figure 2, the figure portrayed as Macron sits in a relaxed posture with his gaze fixed on his phone, creating a private moment that excludes both the viewer and the participant behind him. This distance makes him appear unaware and unguarded, which in turn heightens the viewer's expectation that a reaction is about to follow. In contrast, the figure depicted as Brigitte Macron stands slightly above him and leans forward, directing her gaze toward the same screen. Her elevated position and attentive posture introduce a subtle hierarchy that allows the viewer to anticipate her evaluative response before he does. This asymmetry generates a mild form of dramatic irony that underpins the humor.

In Figure 3, the close framing of the phone screen draws the viewer directly into the interaction by momentarily approximating Macron's perspective. Seeing what he sees creates a sense of complicity, as the viewer now understands both the source of his amusement and the reason it may be interpreted as a transgression. This shared viewpoint reinforces the interpersonal alignment between viewer and narrative, positioning the audience to foresee the conflict.

In line with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020, p. 10) notion of motivated (non-arbitrary) signs, the forward-leaning posture of Brigitte and the converging gazes are not neutral stylistic choices; they actively cue the viewer to anticipate conflict, reinforcing the causal interpretation that grounds this group.

4.1.3. Textual/compositional meaning and caption anchorage

Textually, the two memes establish a clear narrative movement from uncertainty to explanation. In Figure 2, the viewer's attention is first drawn to the figure portrayed as Macron through the salience of his smile and the downward direction of his gaze. The figure depicted as Brigitte Macron appears slightly behind him, and her forward-leaning posture is positioned so that it becomes the next focal point. This arrangement creates a visual sequence in which the viewer's eye moves from Macron's private amusement to her attempt to identify its cause. The composition therefore sets up a sense of anticipation: the scene introduces the tension but withholds its source.

The meme in Figure 3 addresses this anticipation by shifting the compositional focus to the brightly illuminated phone screen. The close framing of the device presents the content with heightened salience, functioning as the visual "answer" to the question implicitly posed in the Figure 2 meme. The two images thereby operate as a paired structure: the first initiates the causal chain through gaze and placement, while the second provides the key detail that completes the interpretive sequence. This sequential organization exemplifies how compositional structures guide viewer interpretation in multimodal texts.

The caption "Why Brigitte slapped Macron?" anchors the interpretation of both images by framing them as two steps in a single causal explanation. Its presence directs the viewer to read the sequence not as ordinary domestic moments but as the build-up to a humorous justification. Without this verbal cue, Brigitte Macron's posture in Figure 1 might appear as simple curiosity, and the close-up in Figure 3 as an unrelated glimpse of online browsing. The caption therefore functions as a framing device, stabilizing the preferred reading and binding the two images into a coherent causal unit. In this way, the caption performs Barthes's anchorage function, reducing ambiguity and directing the viewer toward the humorous causal narrative that initiates the entire meme cycle.

4.2. Group 2: Action representations

The memes shown in Figures 4-5 shift from the implied cause of the slap to its full dramatization, foregrounding the gesture as a scene of exaggerated impact and public humiliation. Through more vivid facial expressions, enhanced visual traces, and tighter framing, the slap is amplified from a domestic moment into a symbolic event with broader significance. These intensified cues, supported by anchoring captions, construct meanings tied to humor, gendered power inversion, and symbolic emasculation, aligning with the study's focus on how visual–verbal resources produce humor, satire, and humiliation. Within the overall narrative cycle, Group 2 serves as the pivotal moment where the slap becomes the central action, shaping the subsequent reactions (Group 3) and the intertextual reinterpretations that follow (Group 4).

Figure 4. Visual dramatization of the slap as humiliation. **Source:** Twitter post by @DeepBlueCrypto, May 26, 2025

Figure 5. Satirical depiction of the slap as symbolic punishment. **Source**: Twitter post by @Saffron_Sniper1, May 28, 2025

4.2.1. Ideational/representational meaning

From an ideational perspective, these memes portray the slap as a public act of embarrassment using visual and linguistic cues. In the meme shown in Figure 4, the left frame shows Emmanuel Macron at the doorway of an aircraft, leaning back with his head turned while Brigitte Macron's raised arm is directed toward him. The presence of other figures in the background indicates that the event is happening in front of witnesses rather than in a private space. The right frame, presented as a still image, reinforces this by displaying a clear red handprint on Macron's cheek, functioning as the visual

"after-effect" that ties the moving image to its consequence. The caption "Weak globalist Emmanuel Macron is a constant humiliation for France… He just got slapped by his husband Brigitte…" does more than report an invented event; it assigns gender-reversed marital roles.

The phrase "his husband Brigitte" is a deliberate lexical deviation that masculinizes Brigitte and feminizes Macron, transforming the slap into an act of gendered power inversion, which aligns directly with the study's objective of examining how multimodal resources encode humor and humiliation through the reversal of expected gender hierarchies. This explicit reversal directly contributes to the humorous framing by undermining conventional gender expectations and symbolically reducing Macron's authority. The clause "the teacher that abused him even when he was a minor" introduces an additional layer of humiliation by activating age- and authority-based power dynamics, drawing on publicly known intertextual references to Macron's past to intensify the meme's construction of him as vulnerable, subordinate, and symbolically diminished. Visually, the exaggerated handprint on Macron's face acts as a salient vector that concretizes the textual narrative of disgrace. The combination of digitally manipulated imagery with pseudo-factual narration creates a form of mock-authenticity, a common strategy in political memes blurring the line between exaggeration and credibility (Shifman, 2013).

In the meme displayed in Figure 5, the ideational focus shifts to a more exaggerated depiction of the impact. Macron's face appears tightly twisted, his eyes half-closed, and a splash-like effect surrounds the point of contact, amplifying the force of the slap. This exaggerated distortion illustrates Ayu's (2021) observation that hyperbole is a key representational strategy in digital humor. The black-and-white palette adds a parodic seriousness that heightens the contrast between dramatic style and absurd content. The caption *Macron just became the face of Men's Domestic Violence Awareness* 🙏 *(Ultimate Satire)* places the image in an ironic frame, and the praying-hands emoji adds a small touch of polite humor. Consistent with Ayu's (2021) observation that digital humor often relies on hyperbole, these visual distortions and verbal cues push the slap beyond a literal blow and turn it into a stylized moment of public ridicule. Together, the visual exaggeration and caption-induced irony construct Macron as the symbolic victim of a humorous yet pointed gendered reversal.

4.2.2. Interpersonal/interactive meaning

Interpersonally, the two memes in Group 2 reposition the viewer from an observer of domestic tension to a witness of public humiliation. In Figure 4, the left frame employs a mid-range social distance that places the viewer close enough to register Macron's vulnerability while still maintaining observational detachment, similar to the stance of a bystander witnessing an unfolding scene. Macron's backward-leaning posture and averted head position him as the Goal of an action process, visually realized through vectors in Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020, p. 60) framework; he neither confronts the viewer nor asserts any presence. Brigitte Macron's raised arm forms a strong vector pointing toward the action, and her forward-leaning posture conveys assertiveness. This contrast creates a visible interpersonal hierarchy in which power shifts away from Macron.

The presence of background figures intensifies this interpersonal dynamic by implying an audience. Their silent spectatorship amplifies the sense of public exposure, reinforcing Macron's diminished position. In the right frame, the close-up of Macron's cheek with the red imprint draws the viewer into intimate proximity, compelling a more direct evaluative stance. This closeness isolates Macron as an object of inspection rather than an autonomous agent, strengthening the interpersonal reading of vulnerability.

The meme in Figure 5, the extreme close-up collapses interpersonal distance even further. Macron's distorted features bring the viewer uncomfortably near the moment of impact, enhancing the sense of forced intimacy and making the slap appear more forceful and symbolically consequential. His half-closed, downward gaze conveys disorientation and lack of control,

reinforcing his passive interpersonal role. The caption shapes viewer alignment by directing interpretation toward satire, not empathy. The ironic tone and emoji invite the viewer into a shared stance of humorous disbelief rather than sympathetic concern. Taken together, the interactive features of gaze, distance, framing, and caption tone transform the slap into a stylized performance of power inversion. They position the viewer as an evaluator of hierarchy and encourage the adoption of an ironic stance that participates in the communal humor constructing Macron as the subordinate figure.

4.2.3. Textual/compositional meaning and Caption anchorage

Textually, these two memes organize the slap into a structured compositional sequence that moves from the moment of action to its exaggerated aftermath. In Figure 4, the split-frame layout constructs a cause-and-effect relationship: the left side captures the slap at the point of immediate bodily reaction, while the right side foregrounds its visible consequence through the red handprint. This side-by-side arrangement guides the viewer's reading path, creating a linear visual progression that makes the slap appear both sudden and publicly consequential. The placement of background figures in the left frame also anchors the event within a semi-public social space, thereby reinforcing the meme's broader social dimension. The right frame's close-up functions as a salient compositional device. By isolating Macron's face and the marked cheek, the layout elevates the physical trace of the slap to the central point of meaning, increasing its salience (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). This compositional emphasis connects the visible mark to the wider narrative of humiliation that unfolds across the meme sequence.

The meme shown in Figure 5 further intensifies this compositional logic through the use of an extreme close-up combined with a simplified black-and-white palette. These choices sharpen the dramatic focus on the moment of impact, allowing the image to function as the climactic point of the visual sequence. The splash-like exaggeration visually amplifies the force of the gesture, pushing the representation decisively into the realm of stylized satire.

The caption performs what Barthes (1977) terms anchorage by directing interpretation toward irony rather than literal violence. It narrows the range of possible readings, ensuring that the exaggerated visuals are understood as satirical commentary rather than straightforward social critique. Through framing, sequencing, salience, and verbal anchorage, these memes organize the slap into a coherent semiotic event that communicates gendered power inversion, symbolic domination, and public ridicule.

4.3. Group 3: Reaction representations

The three memes shown in Figures 6-8 shift the narrative focus from the slap itself to Macron's exaggerated reactions, presenting surrender, self-protection, and domestic threat through symbolic props and staged expressions. These memes draw on familiar cultural cues, including white flags, protective helmets, and rolling pins, to dramatize his vulnerability and extend the slap into a continuing comedic motif. By foregrounding how gestures, objects, and facial expressions sustain the humor, this group demonstrates how the meme cycle develops a cumulative satirical thread that reinforces themes of public embarrassment, gender inversion, and ideological commentary across its multimodal resources.

Figure 6. Visual parody of surrender after humiliation. Source Twitter post by @AssociatedFress, May 26, 2025.

Figure 7. Humorous depiction of self-protection. **Source:** Twitter post by @Saffron_Sniper1, May 28, 2025

Figure 8. Ironic portrayal of domestic power dynamics. Twitter post by @Saffron_Sniper1, May 28, 2025.

4.3.1. Ideational/representational meaning

From an ideational perspective, these memes present exaggerated reactions that reframe the slap as an event with lasting consequences. In the meme shown in Figure 6, Macron emerges from an aircraft holding a white flag, a widely recognized symbol of surrender. The tight, almost anxious way he grips the flag exaggerates the sense of defeat, and the red finger-shaped marks on his cheek visually link this reaction back to the slap. The image humorously elevates a private conflict into a political gesture of "immediate surrender", reflecting Halliday's ideational metafunction, where symbolic actions and participant roles encode interpretations of experience (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The meme given in Figure 7 rather focuses on self-protection. Macron stands next to Brigitte while wearing a large football helmet. The helmet, typically associated with impact and injury prevention, functions as a visual metaphor for precaution and fear of another blow. Such use of exaggerated objects echoes findings that digital humor often relies on visual hyperbole to dramatize social tension (Ayu, 2021; Damanis, 2023).

In the meme shown in Figure 8 , the representation becomes clearly domestic. Brigitte holds a rolling pin, a prop conventionally associated in comic depictions with a wife's authority exercised over her husband, while Macron smiles with visible signs of injury, including an edited black eye and a missing tooth. This creates a semiotic contradiction: the bruise and the implied domestic threat suggest vulnerability, yet Macron's forced smile and tightened lips signal an attempt to appear composed or strong. His distant, unfocused gaze reinforces this tension, as if he is looking past the camera to avoid acknowledging the humiliation. The Spanish caption *Macron llegando a Vietnam* ("Macron arriving in Vietnam") humorously relocates the scene to a diplomatic setting, blending intimate power dynamics with public political roles. Consistent with political meme studies highlighting how props and symbols construct ideological positions (Calimbo, 2016; Cannizzaro, 2016; Adegoju, 2022), these three memes represent Macron as a figure who responds to humiliation through surrender, protection, and cheerful acceptance of domestic dominance.

4.3.2. Interpersonal/interactive meaning

Interpersonally, the memes guide viewers toward a stance of amused superiority and light ridicule by placing Macron in positions of exaggerated vulnerability. In the meme shown in Figure 6 meme, his serious facial expression contrasts with the raised white flag, creating a humorous mismatch between his stern demeanor and the symbol of defeat. His rigid facial muscles, tightened lips, and distant gaze further exaggerate the contrast, amplifying the contradiction between appearing strong and openly surrendering. The mid-range distance and side-on orientation present him as an "offer" image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 118), inviting viewers to evaluate him rather than interact with him directly. This is consistent with Halliday's interpersonal metafunction, which concerns how attitudes and relationships are enacted (Halliday, 1994).

In Figure 7, the close, smiling pose between Macron and Brigitte is combined with the comic football helmet. The intimacy of their pose suggests affection, yet the helmet signals fear of further slaps. This contradiction positions Macron as both devoted and anxious. The scene resonates with Mahfouz's (2021) analysis of "men vs. women" memes, where humor often stems from exaggerated gender roles and playful reversals of power.

The meme in Figure 8 further intensifies this interpersonal positioning. Macron's raised hand and broad smile, together with the visible bruise, construct him as a cheerful victim who accepts the narrative imposed on him. His slightly strained smile and unfocused gaze subtly index emotional discomfort beneath the playful framing. Brigitte's confident stance with the rolling pin reinforces her dominance while remaining within a humorous register. The emojis in the original post (🔥🤣) and the excited tone of the caption invite viewers to share in the joke, creating a form of collective amused alignment typical of political meme interaction, where humor and ridicule function as mechanisms of shared evaluative positioning (Milner, 2016). Across the group, interpersonal meaning positions the viewer to adopt a humorous, non-sympathetic stance that treats the slap as a recurring joke rather than a serious act.

4.3.3. Textual/compositional meaning and Caption anchorage

Textually, the three memes organize Macron's reactions through compositional choices that foreground symbolic objects and stabilize interpretation through captions. In Figure 6, the white flag is centrally placed and held high, becoming the most salient element in the frame. Macron is visually anchored in the aircraft doorway, producing a vertical structure that guides the viewer's gaze upward to the flag. The red slap marks on his face, though placed off-center, provide a secondary point of salience that visually reinforces the cause of his surrender. The headline-style caption *Macron Slapped By Wife; Immediately Surrenders* functions as Barthes's anchorage: it narrows the range of possible readings by telling the viewer to interpret the image as humorous surrender rather than as a literal political event (Barthes 1977). This kind of text–image coordination reflects the semiotic view that memes operate as multimodal signs whose components mutually constrain meaning (O'Halloran & Lim, 2014; Cannizzaro, 2016).

The meme in Figure 7 uses a tight frame that highlights the football helmet. The helmet is the primary point of salience, with the couple's smiling faces arranged closely behind it. The caption *New Safety gear for Macron* anchors the visual focus by labeling the helmet as protective equipment against domestic aggression, preventing alternative readings that might see it as a simple sports reference. This reflects broader observations that captions in memes often guide viewers toward preferred humorous interpretations of the visual content (Shifman, 2013; Chagas et al., 2019).

In the meme shown in Figure 8, salience is created through the alignment of three elements: Brigitte's rolling pin, Macron's edited bruise, and the couple's composed poses. Macron's gaze directed off-frame and the tension around his mouth subtly shape how viewers read the emotional

undertone of the scene. The rolling pin in the foreground introduces a domestic comic threat, while the bruise ties the image back to the earlier slap. The Spanish caption *Macron llegando a Vietnam* recontextualizes the scene as a diplomatic arrival, anchoring the humor in the contrast between public duty and private domination. Following Barthes (1977), the caption again fixes the reading so that the image is understood as ironic commentary rather than simple couple photography. In line with multimodal analyses that emphasize layout, salience, and information value in digital texts (Jewitt, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Wong, 2019), the memes in Group 3 show how compositional design, and anchoring captions work together to organize Macron's reactions into a coherent narrative of exaggerated vulnerability and domestic power inversion.

4.4. Group 4: Intertextual representations

The memes in Figures 9-12 broaden the Macron Slap cycle by embedding it within well-known global references, most notably the Will Smith–Chris Rock Oscars incident and humorous dialogues involving Donald Trump and Elon Musk. Through these intertextual links, the memes recontextualize Brigitte's slap as part of a wider cultural repertoire of public embarrassment and contested masculinity. This group uses intertextuality as a semiotic resource to extend the humor and ideological framing beyond the immediate domestic scene, reinforcing how multimodal memes draw on shared cultural texts to amplify satire, political meaning, and gendered power inversion.

Figure 9. Intertextual parallel between Emanuel Macron's and Will Smith's slaps. **Source**: Twitter posted by *@_emergent_,* May 28, 2025.

Figure 10. Intertextual parody linking Macron's slap to Trump's remark. **Source**: Twitter post by @bennyjohnson, May 30, 2025.

Figure 11. Intertextual echo in Musk's remark on Macron's slap. **Source**: Twitter post by @RWAwatchlist_, May 31, 2025.

Figure 12. Intertextual contrast of Trump's authority and Macron's subjection. **Source**: Twitter post by @Daytobehappy, May 28, 2025.

4.4.1. Ideational/representational meaning

From an ideational perspective, the memes in Group 4 use intertextual parallels to reconceptualize the slap as a culturally meaningful act that resonates across global media events. The meme in Figure 9 juxtaposes Brigitte Macron's slap with Will Smith's highly publicized Oscars slap. The parallel placement constructs an ironic comparison, turning Macron's humiliation into a globally indexed spectacle of public confrontation. This echoes Cannizzaro's (2016) view that memes derive power from circulating shared cultural templates. The representation frames Brigitte as a figure capable of matching or surpassing a globally iconic gesture, further exaggerating the inversion of gendered expectations explored earlier in the paper.

In the memes shown in Figures 10 and 11, the scene shifts to the Oval Office, where Donald Trump and Elon Musk jokingly reference the Macron slap. These memes ideationally represent the slap as a political talking point. The event is presented as sufficiently notable to function as mock "foreign policy advice" and a source of playful banter. Trump's fabricated remark, *Make sure the door remains closed*, reframes the slap as a humorous lesson in marital risk, while Musk's edited bruise and comment *I wasn't anywhere near France* transform him into a symbolic "victim" of the same phenomenon. Through this intertextual chain, the slap becomes an ideological reference point that transcends France, aligning with scholarship that sees political memes as tools for reframing and recontextualizing public figures (De Leon & Ballesteros-Lintao, 2021; Adegoju, 2022).

Finally, the meme in Figure 12 reinforces this ideological contrast by showing Trump holding a document that reads *My wife doesn't / Bitch slap me*. Here, "bitch slap" is used as a colloquial expression that conventionally indexes humiliation and loss of authority in figurative discourse, rather than serving as a literal description of a physical act within the represented scene. The ideational meaning positions Trump as a figure of intact authority, while Macron remains symbolically "slapped into subjection". This aligns with studies showing how visual humor in memes often relies on exaggerated gender-role reversals and symbolic emasculation (Mahfouz, 2021). In this group, intertextual recontextualization most explicitly shapes the slap into a globally resonant commentary on weakened masculinity, public embarrassment, and shifting power dynamics.

4.4.2. Interpersonal/interactive meaning

Interpersonally, these memes align viewers with a stance of collective amusement by inviting them to compare, evaluate, and judge Macron through the lens of familiar cultural figures. In the Figure 9 meme, the side-by-side placement of Will Smith's dramatic Oscars slap and Brigitte Macron's slap positions viewers as judges in a humorous competition. This comparative framing encourages the viewer to adopt an evaluative stance, consistent with Halliday's interpersonal metafunction and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) work on how compositional structure shapes viewer alignment.

In the memes of Figures 10 and 11, interpersonal humor emerges from the scripted dialogue between Trump and Musk. Their relaxed poses, humorous expressions, and mock-serious comments construct a shared "circle of insiders" to which the viewer is invited. The memes create an ironic hierarchy: Trump and Musk appear unthreatened and authoritative, while Macron becomes a distant figure of ridicule. This dynamic is consistent with research on political meme culture showing that humor frequently operates through hierarchical positioning, inviting collective alignment with some actors while ridiculing others (Milner, 2016).

The Figure 12 meme intensifies this interpersonal stance by presenting Trump as a confident husband who appears unaffected by physical humiliation, thereby contrasting his authority with Macron's implied subjection. The viewer is encouraged to laugh with Trump and at Macron. The direct, frontal presentation of Trump holding the document functions as an "offer" image, insofar as the represented participant does not establish gaze with the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 118). The document itself is thereby presented as an object of visual information, offered for contemplation rather than interaction, prompting viewers to assess the contrast rather than engage empathetically. Across the group, interpersonal meaning positions the viewer as a participant in an extended social joke centered on Macron's diminished masculine authority, while also allowing for implicit critique of Trump's and Musk's performative authority.

4.4.3. Textual/compositional meaning and Caption anchorage

Textually, the memes rely on composition, juxtaposition, and anchoring captions to stabilize the intertextual comparisons. The meme in Figure 9 uses a parallel layout, with two images aligned horizontally, to make the comparison explicit. The caption *Who delivered a better b*tch slap?* functions as Barthes's (1977) anchorage by directing viewers to interpret the juxtaposition as a humorous competition rather than as unrelated events.

The memes shown in Figures 10 and 11 use the visual salience of the Oval Office, including the flags, the desk, and the presidential setting, to anchor the slap within an authoritative political context. The composition places Trump at the center, with Musk positioned as a secondary but clearly visible figure. The captions, which include Trump's marital "advice" and Musk's denial of involvement, guide the viewer toward satire and transform the slap into an international joke. The humor emerges from the close coordination of text and image, reflecting O'Halloran and Lim's (2014) and Jewitt's (2009) discussions of how multimodal layout shapes meaning.

In the meme shown in Figure 12, salience is created through the centered, frontal presentation of the open document held by Trump. The textual element, *My wife doesn't / Bitch slap me*, functions as the primary semiotic resource. Without the caption, the altered document could be misinterpreted; with it, Barthes's concept of anchorage ensures a satirical reading. The background flags, the presidential seal, and the Oval Office setting visually reinforce authority and amplify the ideological contrast with Macron. Together, these intertextual memes show how the slap moves beyond a private or national moment and becomes part of a wider cultural script recognizable to global audiences. By drawing on widely circulated figures and events, the group demonstrates how intertextuality amplifies

the humor and strengthens the ideological reading of Macron's diminished authority within the broader meme cycle.

5. Conclusions

This study analyzed a dataset of eleven Macron Slap memes to show how humor, irony, humiliation, gendered power inversion, and ideological commentary are constructed through the interaction of visual and linguistic signs across Halliday's ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, and Barthes's principle of anchorage, as reviewed in Section 2. The analysis approached the memes as an interconnected sequence, demonstrating how meaning progressively accumulates across the cycle and how each successive redesign elaborates and expands the semiotic force of the initial gesture.

Across the four groups, the Macron Slap memes demonstrate how a single embodied gesture can expand into a rich multimodal cycle of humor, irony, humiliation, and ideological commentary. Beginning with simple causal motivation and moving through dramatized action, exaggerated reaction, and intertextual recontextualization, the memes show how the slap becomes a flexible semiotic resource rather than a fixed event. This staged progression offers a coherent account of how iterative redesign broadens the narrative focus, aligning with the study's aim of explaining how visual and linguistic signs collaboratively shape meaning.

Ideationally, the slap evolves from a private moment into a symbolic motif used to comment on gender roles, political vulnerability, and global relations. *Interpersonally*, the memes consistently position Macron as a diminished figure whose expressions, gestures, and exaggerated reactions invite viewers into a shared stance of humorous superiority. This pattern echoes findings that political memes construct communal attitudes through affect and role reversal. *Textually*, captions operate as anchorage in Barthes's sense, guiding preferred readings, while compositional cues such as framing, salience, and repetition create coherence across diverse visual scenes. A notable feature of the cycle is its use of *intertextuality*, which extends the meaning of the slap beyond its fictional domestic setting and situates it within globally recognizable cultural scripts.

Taken together, the meme cycle illustrates how participatory media reimagine political figures through repeated visual and textual redesign, transforming the Macron Slap from a domestic joke into a recurring metaphor for power inversion, vulnerability, and public mockery. By integrating Systemic Functional Linguistics, visual grammar, and social-semiotic perspectives, this study highlights how memes operate as dynamic cultural artefacts that translate political events into coherent multimodal meanings through their iterative semiotic design.

Furthermore, the study offers several implications for multimodal and semiotic research. By showing how a single embodied gesture expands into a cycle of visual humor and ideological commentary, the analysis demonstrates how Halliday's metafunctions and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar operate across iterative processes of meme redesign. The findings also underscore the importance of Barthes's concept of anchorage in guiding viewers toward preferred readings, especially when satire depends on gender inversion, symbolic humiliation, and exaggerated reactions. These observations contribute to broader semiotic discussions on how political figures are reframed through recurring multimodal motifs.

The study, however, has its limitations. The sample is deliberately small and focused on eleven memes circulating within a short time frame, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The analysis also treats the memes as static artefacts, without considering audience interpretations or platform dynamics that may influence their circulation. Language variety is limited as well, since the dataset consists almost entirely of English captions, with only two isolated Spanish phrases appearing in Group 3. Future research could examine other gesture-based meme cycles to determine whether

similar semiotic strategies, such as exaggeration, symbolic inversion, or intertextual reference, emerge in different political contexts. Larger comparative analyses would help assess whether the patterns observed in the Macron Slap cycle are characteristic of broader trends in multimodal political humor.

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