



Reflecting on the semiotic work of multimodal research

Diane Mavers

*Bridging the Gap between Here and There: Combining
Multimodal Analysis from an International Perspective*

10–13 September 2014

Bremen, Germany

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Diversification

- Different disciplines: *e.g. media studies, education, early years literacy, psychology*
 - Different academic interests: *e.g. social justice, identity, social interaction*
 - Different theoretical frameworks: *e.g. Anthropology, Linguistic Anthropology, Socio-Cultural Approaches, New Literacy Studies*
 - Different methodological approaches: *e.g. conversation analysis*
 - Different analytical approaches: *e.g. systemic functional linguistics*
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Common ground (...?)

- Multimodality as a variety of ways in which people communicate or express themselves (Kress, 1997; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001)
 - A fact of everyday communication
 - Study of modes other than writing and speech, such as gesture and gaze, is not new
 - Raises questions about linguistic modes
 - Raises questions about other modes
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Some key issues for multimodality

The complexities of multimodal communication:

- The distinctive resources of modes
 - Features that are shared
 - Multimodal ensembles
 - Relationships between modes (e.g. Martinec and Salway, 2005; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006; Unsworth and Cleirigh, 2014)
 - Shifts across modes: e.g ‘transmediation’ (Suhor, 1984); ‘transduction’ (Kress, 1997); ‘resemiotization’ (Iedema, 2003); ‘transmodal remaking’ (Mavers, 2011); ‘the transmodal moment’ (Newfield, 2014)
 - The social frame
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Some critiques of a multimodal approach

- Jack of all trades and master of none
 - Language is backgrounded
 - Multimodal analysis is overly complex
 - Some modes are analysed and not others
 - Analysis is impressionistic
 - Imported theoretical concepts and methodological procedures
 - Focus on the minute – ability to generalize and discuss wider issues
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Variation

What is multimodality?

- A theory?
- A methodology?
- A perspective?
- A field of inquiry?
- A combination of some of these?

Terminology (e.g. 'non-verbal', 'medium', 'text', 'visuals')

What is mode?

- A materially realized entity such as a piece of writing or a drawing?
 - An activity such as the act of drawing or writing? Is reading a mode?
 - ‘Modalities’ as materializations of semiotic resources (O’Halloran, 2014: 123-4)?
 - A channel or means of representation?
 - Able to fulfill the three Hallidayan (1978) ‘metafunctions’ (‘ideational’, ‘interpersonal’, ‘textual’)
 - Are colour and layout modes?
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What is mode?

A socially and culturally shaped resource for making meaning (Kress 2010: 79)

- Not autonomous or a universal given
 - Crafted through the materialities available to us and the actions and interactions of people over time and in particular social contexts
 - Broad modes shared across cultures are not identical
 - Different modes are available to different cultures
 - Historically, modes are developed and lost
 - What a mode is depends on who is making the meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001: 113-114)
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‘Semiotic work’ (Kress, 2010)

- All representation or communication shares the common ground of sign
 - But what is a sign?
 - ‘Semiotic work’ (Kress, 2010): the effort invested in sign making
 - Dealing with form and meaning
 - The semiotic work of the researcher is specialized
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Form and meaning

- How can you know what is meant— or can you know?
 - Where are clues to meaning?
 - Does meaning exist *per se*?
 - Within and beyond the graphic extract
 - Social frame and discourse
 - Countering the charge that interpretation is merely impressionistic, idiosyncratic or unsystematic
 - Making knowledge explicit
 - Fine-grained, detailed, careful analysis; it may not be possible or necessary to include all analysis
 - Plausible hypotheses
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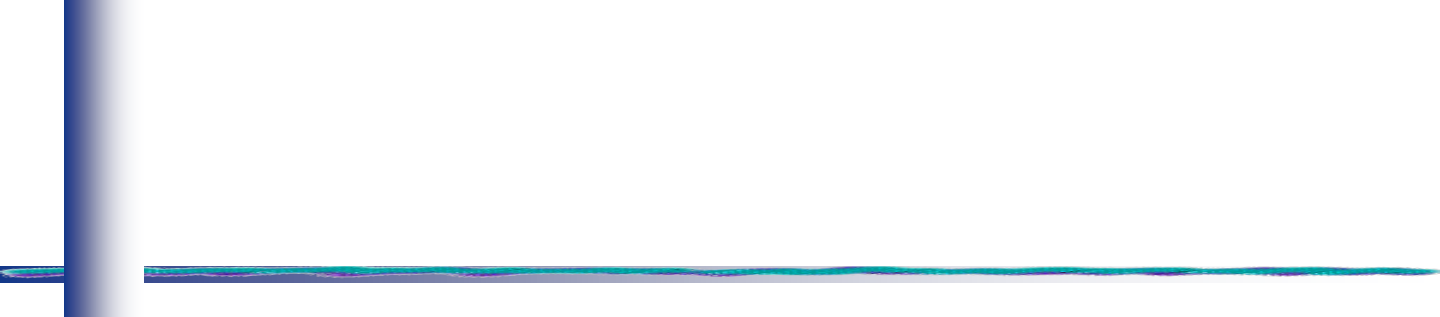
Reflecting on the semiotic work of multimodal analysis

- What can a multimodal perspective offer to investigating my research question?
 - How do the descriptive and explanatory terms of multimodality cohere with my theoretical framework?
 - How will I manage the quantity of materials that a multimodal approach generates?
 - What are the units of analysis?
 - Do I need to analyse everything?
 - How shall I analyse what is going on in individual modes and the relationships between them?
 - How can I be confident about meaning?
 - How does the social frame my analysis?
 - Do I need to include all of my analysis to make a point or build my argument, or should I be selective?
 - What were the benefits and limitations of a multimodal approach in this research?
 - What surprised me?
 - What have I achieved?
 - What might I improve next time?
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The semiotic work of multimodal transcription

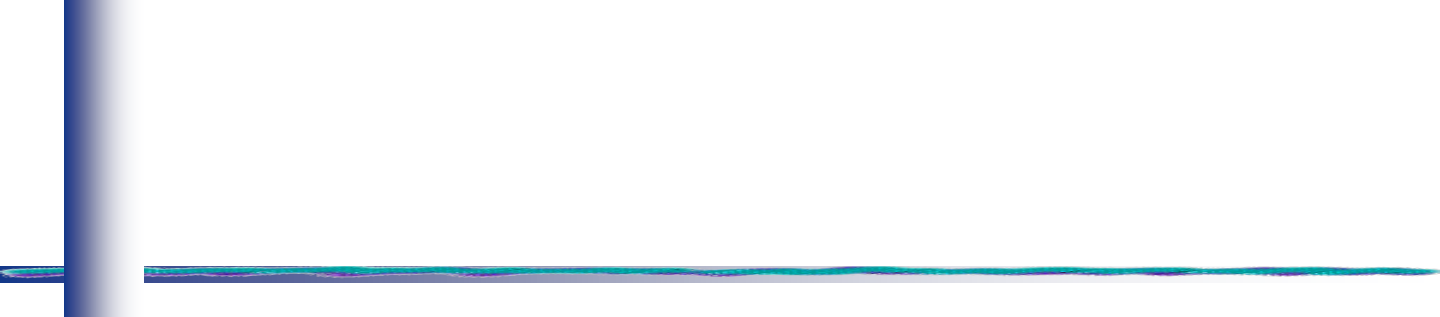
See Bezemer and Mavers (2011)

- Interpreting the signifiers of video footage or a graphic artefact
 - Information is shifted across modes
 - Where resources are unavailable in the mode or modes of transcription, decisions are reached about how materials are to be remade
 - Sustaining constancy of meaning may be planned, but this is not quite as straightforward as it might seem
 - There is always change: 'A semiotic is hard-pressed to provide an unproblematic, transparent and 'direct' translation for meanings made in another semiotic' (ledema, 2003: 47)
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“Now,” says Ebony. “What was next? We need the paper.” She disappears to find the storyboard. On her return, Ebony rights and repositions the monkey that Ambareen and Jeselle have knocked over. She then prises the two pirate figures from Jeselle, protesting, ‘Oh don’t put it there, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.’ [...] Jeselle points to this frame on the storyboard and then to the succeeding one, which Ebony attends to with concentration, and they engage in some discussion’ (Mavers, 2011: 119).





‘Even the most richly detailed vignette is a reduced account, clearer than life. Some features are selected in from the tremendous complexity of the original event [...] and other features are selected out of the narrative report. Thus the vignette does not represent the original *event itself*, for this is impossible. The vignette is an abstraction; an analytic caricature (of a friendly sort) in which some details are sketched in and others left out; some features are sharpened and heightened in their portrayal [...] and other features are softened or left to merge with the background’ (Erickson, 1986:150).



Reflecting on the semiotic work of multimodal transcription

- Why is multimodal transcription important in my work?
 - What is the purpose of the transcript?
 - Is it possible or necessary to transcribe everything?
 - Which modes of the original expression or interaction will I transcribe? Why?
 - What are the various ways in which I might go about transcription?
 - Which modes will I select for transcribing the video extract? Why?
 - What layout will I create? Why?
 - Will one transcript suffice or do I need more?
 - How detailed will the transcript be?
 - What is included and excluded, foregrounded and backgrounded? Why?
 - How does my transcript reshape the original expression?
 - Which information is located in the transcript and which in the analysis? Why?
 - How does my transcript shape how the 'reader' understands the extract?
 - What are the benefits and limitations of having transcribed in this way?
 - What surprised me?
 - What have I achieved?
 - What might I improve next time?
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Implications for the multimodal researcher

- Being informed about different multimodal approaches
 - Being open to other perspectives, accepting pluralism and being prepared to adjust my position
 - Evaluating which approaches are best suited to my research and my theoretical frame
 - Being able to justify why I chose this way rather than that
 - Being explicit about my perspective (e.g. terminology, concepts, transcription, analysis)
 - Being consistent in how terminology, methodology and theory are applied
 - Being critically reflective
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