Book review: *Introducing Multimodality*

(Jewitt, C., Bezemer, J. & O'Halloran, K. (2016) Routledge)

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Considering the pervasive use of audio-video and graphic resources in the classroom, it is not surprising that there is a growing interest in how teaching and learning are *multimodal* – that is, how they make integrated use of varied communicative resources (language, visual materials, gesture and others). The recent publication of *Introducing Multimodality* is timely considering the visual turn in the social sciences and the magnitude of multimodal resources and representations at work in the visual economy (Poole, 1997; Rose, 2016; O'Halloran et al., 2017). Furthermore, the book offers a useful introduction to the various ways multimodality has been approached and is of relevance to any teacher wanting a greater understanding of multimodal pedagogy.

The authors of *Introducing Multimodality* say their book is

> written for anyone who is interested in language, communication and meaning, including undergraduate and postgraduate students. (p. ix).

and assure that no prior specialist knowledge of linguistics or semiotics are required. The following seven chapters, useful glossary and optional self-study guide set about attempting to achieve this ambitious goal of providing clarity in the methodologically diverse field of multimodality.

Tracing the origins of the term 'multimodality', the authors explain that the difficulty begins with the varying definitions and changes in the meaning of the term. A multimodal artefact uses a combination of *modes*. 'Mode' is a term used within Systemic-Functional Linguistics and Social Semiotics to refer to resources for meaning making. Examples of modes include speech, images, diagrams, drawings, writing, clothing, digital screens, or any material artefacts communicating meaning (Lackovic, 2018). Each of these modes is organized according to the principles of semiotic resources that are recognized within a social context. Multimodality is also a *combination* of modes: for example, a film consists of moving images, sounds, speech, text or captions and, therefore, includes a mixture of semiotic resources, social meanings and interpretations, occurring in combinations and changing over time. These varying material, historical and temporal dimensions of multimodality contribute to its complexity and the authors make the important point that

> it is very difficult and potentially problematic to talk about multimodality without making explicit one's theoretical and methodological stance (p. 1).

In other words, your underpinning views of language, meaning and communication and the ways these are shaped within your academic discipline will influence your approach to multimodality as well as the ways you incorporate it into your teaching, whether this be tacit or overt. For example, a science professor may draw on multimodal resources like diagrams or laboratory equipment, whereas history or social science teachers may use photographs and/ or documentary films. A more explicit focus on the multimodality of teaching can be found in Jewitt et al., (2001), while *Introducing Multimodality* demonstrates general dimensions of the field and methodological underpinnings. These include: firstly, *Systemic-Functional Linguistics* (SFL), originally developed by Halliday (1994) in the 1960s, conceptualizing language as a social semiotic resource for meaning creation; language is broken down into the modes of spoken, visual, audio and written and the aim is to understand the ways these modes are organized to carry out social functions. Secondly, *Social Semiotics*, pioneered by Hodge and Kress (1998) in the 1980s, incorporates ideas from Critical Linguistics, SFL, semiotics and social theory, whilst van Leeuwen (2005) also contributes insights from Music and Film Studies. Social Semiotics added the role of people or social actors, using multimodal language, and considered the social and power relations in which communication is embedded. Thirdly, *Conversation Analysis* was

an approach in sociology developed by Blumer (1969), Goffman (1981) and Garfinkel (1967) in the US in the early and mid-twentieth century. They proposed detailed observation and description of 'lived experiences' and social interactions to consider how people make sense of the world and display their understandings of situational social actions and meanings. Sacks et al. (1974) explored the question of how intelligible social action is possible, suggesting that this depends on the "normative structuring and logics of particular courses of social action" (Heritage, 1997, p. 104). Common-sense social interactions, although socially constructed, become so familiar and routine that they appear naturalized and almost non-negotiable. For example, a teacher standing at the front of the classroom, shaking hands when you greet someone in some cultures, or wearing particular types of clothing associated with modesty for example.

Introducing Multimodality highlights the significant variances of these approaches, whilst making the fundamental link that each is concerned with cultural and social resources for making meaning. The authors suggest that each approach offers a substantial piece in the jigsaw for understanding the complex elements of meaning making across multiple semiotic modes. Since the complexity of multimodality intensifies further when semiotic modes *combine* within instances of meaning making – for example when a video integrates moving images with captions, audio, music and people – they finally get to the crux of multimodality when they introduce the concept of *semiotic transformation* or *transduction*. For example, interpreting the words of a poem and transforming these into a visual form by creating a painting is by no means a straightforward process since it involves interpretation, mediation or translation. The way one person interprets the poem may differ to another and subsequently their paintings, based on the same poem, may be very different. In the classroom, multimodal interpretations in the form of diagrams or visual props also involve these complex processes of semiotic transformation or transduction of complex subject matter and cognitive processes. The authors manage the ambitious balancing act of offering a concise summary of these complex processes in part through the thematic comparisons of Systemic Functional Linguistics, Social Semiotics and Conversation Analysis. These are important theoretical strands informing the field of multimodal studies and the authors make a good case for explaining what each of the approaches brings to the field. In the case of SFL, this is the Hallidayan understanding of the (meta)functions of different modes of language: spoken, written, audio and visual. Kress & van Leeuwen (2001) show that there are cross-overs between these modes (for example, writing is also a visual mode, displayed through orthographic representation); they provide a framework for analysing a whole range of audio, visual and textual artefacts through their systematic methodology of visual grammar that is situated in social context and meanings. They also discuss the motivation of signs or the ways an image is 'interested' in conveying a particular meaning, that stems from ideology and power:

> As in all sign making there is the question of the availability of resources. The sign makers' interest leads to their choice of resources, seen as apt in the social context of sign production. (*Introducing Multimodality*, p. 68).

Conversation Analysis enriches the field of multimodality through its interdisciplinary approach, drawing on anthropology, education, sociology and linguistics. Conversation Analysis is concerned with fine-grained analysis of talk and interaction. Conversation analysis pioneers, Goodwin (1979) and Heath (1986), extended the empirical scope through the introduction of video analysis to look at the role of gaze, gesture and other resources in conversations. This provided reference to systematic methods of transcription and analysis for multimodality, and in recent years conversation analysis has begun to explore concurrent visual activities or overlapping courses of action (Mondada, 2011). Whilst Conversation Analysis grounds analysis within video recordings, critiques of the methodology point out that the relationship between the core text and what counts as context is problematic. Definitions of context are also problematized in critiques of social semiotics. Kress & van Leeuwen (2010) provide a decontextualized analysis of artefacts in *Reading Images*, despite the approach emphasizing the importance of situated meaning; their approach is also problematic in the way it relies on a linguistic language of description to provide sociological analysis. The authors of *Introducing Multimodality*

draw on Dowling (2004, p. 84) to explain that "a social semiotic language of description cannot construct a text as a sociological instance." In other words, social semiotic approaches mix linguistic and sociological methodologies in ways that are not easily aligned.

Chapter 6, titled 'Five more approaches to multimodality,' provides a brief overview of geosemiotics, multimodal (inter)action analysis, multimodal ethnography, multimodal corpus analysis and multimodal reception analysis. Although this chapter attempts to offer nothing more than a taster to these diverse sub-strands of multimodality, it is curious to consider some of the important approaches and issues in multimodality studies that the authors leave out. For example, Peirce's theory of semiosis (Peirce et al., 1967), based on the triadic relationship of *representamen* (sign), *referent* (the object to which the sign refers) and *interpretant* (the interpretive process), points to unlimited chains of meaning, adds crucial insights into multimodality studies and is gaining attention in communications, philosophy and higher education (Jensen, 2010; Lackovic, 2018). Machin's (2007) Critical Multimodality, which is the extension of Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Linguistics is not rereferred to despite its explicit interest in questions of power and multimodality as well thinking about modes in terms of non-hierarchical affordances or range of uses. Issues relating to multimodality in global and intercultural contexts are also not discussed, which is perhaps the greatest limitation of this book, especially as multimodal artefacts in the digital age circulate and form across increasingly diverse geographical contexts (Bouvier, 2015).

In terms of thinking about this book from the perspective of a teacher or academic in the Gulf, this lack of intercultural multimodal awareness is problematic if we consider the ways multimodal resources in the Gulf context, including writing, clothing, body language, the types and ranges of images, operate in significantly different ways to Western contexts, and something that all teachers in this environment should be sensitive to. For example, the social networking sites Twitter and Instagram are popular multimodal artefacts in both Western and Gulf contexts yet the semiotic resources they draw upon to create meaning will be understood in different ways by different people in/between the different contexts as they draw on, construct, reinterpret and subvert social meanings. Furthermore, boundaries between visual and multimodal cultures are impossible to draw, as images cross-over and create further chains of meanings. (Rose, 2016). Nevertheless Chapter 7, *Designing a multimodal study*, poses interesting questions for teachers planning a multimodal analysis of teaching and learning or those wishing to make better use of multimodal resources for enhancing classroom practice. It asks you to think about the multimodal orientation of your teaching; for example, when you show your learners a video, an image on a PowerPoint, or coordinate your own body language and hand gestures, this can be understood in terms of *transformation/transduction* (the remaking of meaning across modes) or *interaction* (gesture, gaze, body language).

The authors also suggest you consider and decide on the ways multimodal artefacts, such as videos or websites etc., are bounded in terms of context. In terms of my own teaching in the Gulf context, this book articulates the importance of multimodal awareness as, although a tremendous asset for communicating meaning, these meanings may be (mis)interpreted differently across cultures. Nevertheless, multimodality plays a central cognitive and social role in communication across academic disciplines and is a crucial learning resource bringing communicative scope to any subject, and particularly beneficial when working with bilingual and second language learners. Overall, although the authors make an admirable attempt to render the complexity of multimodality more accessible, ironically the inclusion of more multimodal visual resources, such as colour images, diagrams and photographs would have been illuminating, enabling further communication of the importance and exciting possibilities of this growing academic field. Also, as in many books in this field, less reliance on acronyms to shorten terminology would improve the clarity of the writing. Usefully, concluding chapters of the text offer a glossary of the key terms as well as a self-study guide, providing materials for anyone wanting to teach about or enhance multimodal practices.

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