ENTREVISTA

MULTIMODALITY AND IDENTITY: INTERVIEW WITH THEO VAN LEEUWEN

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Theo Van Leeuwen is one of the leading researchers in Critical Discourse Analysis and Social Semiotics. Co-authored with the unforgotten Gunther Kress (1940-2019), in 1996 he launched the first edition of "Reading Images", a work renowned for providing essential methods and concepts for image analysis in a multimodal approach. To keep this work current to the constant changes that have occurred in communication over the last few years, the authors released two more editions of the work (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, 2020), which further strengthened the work's impact on a global level. In the last three decades, Van Leeuwen's works managed to bring important discussions about complex issues for communication, for linguistics, for the social sciences, for education and for music, such as the various relationships that can be established between multimodality and identity, a thought-provoking theme of his most recent book (VAN LEEUWEN, 2021). In

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this interview, focusing on his most recent work, there will be approached some essential aspects for contemporary debates related to Social Semiotics such as the area's contribution to education, to the visual expressiveness of writing through typography, to the relationship between sounds and emotions and for the importance of Social Semiotics, in order to understand changes that occurred during the new coronavirus pandemic.

Like you, many semioticians have highlighted that there was a prioritization of monomodal approaches in texts. How can we bring a multimodal perspective to classrooms in order to prepare students to deal with different texts in multiple contexts?

This is not easy. The prioritization of monomodal, logocentric texts produced clear, teachable rules – spelling rules, grammatical rules, genre conventions and so on. Today the teaching of literacy must not only include a range of modes of communication but also foster values that are now highly appreciated in the workplace, such as flexibility, creativity, innovation, teamwork and so on. Teachers now need to teach, not what must be done, but what can be done, and they need to develop flexible criteria for evaluating what students do with the multimodal means of communication they now have available.

It is especially important to think about digital resources in this respect. Digital learning resources are often designed by global edu-tech companies as though learning can take place solely between child and machine, so that teachers are no longer needed. I remember doing a multimodal analysis of an educational CD-Rom in the late 1990s. As was often the case in that period, the home page was pictorial. It showed a classroom with monitors, computers and other equipment, and, in a corner, seated behind a small table with a vase of flowers, a teacher. All items of equipment could be clicked on, leading to a range of educational journeys. The teacher was the only element in the picture that could not be clicked on. Being a teacher myself, it was a shocking moment. But teaching, a trade that has existed for 1000s of years, is as important as ever. Teachers will have to do what Microsoft cannot do and expose students to a range of materials, to embodied experiences and to face to face practices they might otherwise not come into contact with.

Digital learning resources raise many issues. Online reading can bring distractions and lead to speedy and summary information processing. As Kathy Mills has pointed out in a recent book, teachers can help children avoid these risks by setting tasks such as planning reading pathways and focusing attention. Finding information on the internet also has its risks, as algorithms can create 'echo chambers' where users only find what they already know and believe, rather than encountering new

knowledge and points of view different from their own. Again, teachers can help children learn to evaluate information on the basis of credibility, purposes, authorship and so on. And as far as multimodality is concerned, teachers can develop leaning cycles and criteria for assessing learners' work, for instance assessing whether they can make effective connections between the words and images in their multimodal science assignments, or whether they can understand and implement concepts from narrative theory such as 'characterization', 'plot development' and 'point of view' through making short animation films with digital tools. There is much work to be done here.

In "*Multimodality and Identity*" (2021), as in other work of the past two decades, you defend typography as a vital meaning-making resource, especially in relation to styles and identities. This treatment is uncommon in linguistics, but current in design studies. How can your social semiotic approach to typography change the linguistic study of writing?

Teaching visual communication in Cardiff, some twenty years ago, I began to realize that my approach to teaching and writing about visual communication had been limited to images, and that there was much more to the visual – decorative patterns, typography, visualizations, and so on. Gunther Kress and I had called our book "*Reading Images*". We wanted to change that title in the 3rd edition of the book, but the publishers wouldn't let us. The title had become a bit of a brand name. So yes, the visual in social life is more than images. It is for instance also the patterns of fabrics. These are meaningful. People choose them to say something about themselves, even though they may not be able to express exactly what that is. Such patterns we now find not only in fabrics or wallpapers, but also in writing, for instance in the background and the page furniture of PowerPoint slides and other kinds of text.

As for typography, typographers themselves used to see the book as the pinnacle of typography and thought that typography should not draw attention to itself, that it should in the first place be about legibility, and only then, perhaps, also have aesthetic value, in a modest, self-effacing way. This I recognized from linguistics where phonemes are also thought to have no meaning in themselves and to serve only to make it possible to distinguish words from each other. But that has changed. Typographers now agree that typography does make meaning, alongside the meaning of the words, that it creates style, and that style is fundamental in conveying identity, for instance in branding, where logos are multimodal signs that include language and icon-like images as well as letter forms that are specially designed to express the values of the brand.

So now I had to find ways of talking about that, which didn't yet exist, not in semiotics and not in books by typographers. So I began to study the qualities of letter forms, such as that they are round or angular, flattened or elongated and so on, and the meaning potentials which such qualities unlock, and which are ultimately based on our embodied experience of these qualities, and hence recognizable and understandable to all of us, even if we may not normally be able to put into words how we arrive at such understandings.

Some linguists recognized this quite early. David Graddol, for instance, wrote about it in the 1990s. Now more linguists pay attention, especially sociolinguists, who have become very interested in identity, for instance Adam Jaworski, and linguists who have moved into multimodality, such as Christian Johannessen and Tuomo Hiippala. It is also an area in which designers and multimodalists are beginning to find each other, as you can see in a special issue of the journal Visual Communication, and a recent book called "*The Materiality of Writing*", which Christian Johannessen and I edited (JOHANNESSEN; VAN LEEUWEN, 2017).

In your new book you touch on actual problems when you analyse distinctive features of movement in a short video issued by the Australian Government about the risks of catching the corona virus. The pandemic is transforming many things, for instance in health, education, politics and economy. How can Social Semiotics contribute to understanding these changes and coming to grips with it?

As far as that video is concerned, it could have been any other video. I just wanted to illustrate that movement can be used to make meaning, in animation films and elsewhere, for instance in dancing and acting, and also in everyday life, and I wanted to develop tools for analysing how these meanings are made, so that it would be possible, for instance, to plausibly analyse how this video uses movement to 'say' something about the corona virus.

But how can social semiotics help us to understand the changes which the pandemic is bringing? I think we need to start here by thinking about the way increasingly many social practices are moving online, which is a trend the pandemic has greatly accelerated. More than ever we work online, we learn online, we shop online, we consult our doctor online, we hold meetings online, we socialize online and so on. And that means that all kinds of embodied practices, practices that involve all our senses, must now be transformed into texts, into words and images. That's where semiotics comes in. Semioticians such as Ravelli and myself, have, for instance, studied how the design of learning spaces

promotes new ways of learning, and how the design of office spaces aims to increase managerial control, team work and productivity. What will happen to such practices when they move online? Will office work become a kind of cottage industry, with contract workers working at home? Or will work be controlled from a distance, with all the new resources of technology? In Denmark we have a research project on online shopping, to study what happens to buyer-seller interaction when shopping moves online, and how physical actions such as, for instance, checking the ripeness of bananas by touching them or fitting clothes in a fashion shop are replaced by online words and pictures. There is classic work on shopping, by linguists such as Mitchell, Hasan and Ventola, but now a new chapter has to be written. And our academic work itself is also moving online, so we have also begun to study how sites such as Academia and ResearchGate transform aspects of academic work such as peer review.

In "*Multimodality and Identity*" (2021) you explain that the idea of experiential meaning potential was inspired by studies in the area of metaphor. Although your epistemic alignment does not go towards conceptual structure, how do you think the study of metaphor and multimodality can come together? In other words, would it be possible to think of conceptual plans, socio-culturally situated through semiotic resources?

One of the key motivations for developing the concept of 'experiential meaning potential' lies in what I have already touched on, the way meaning-making in many domains of public life is no longer based on stable, formal, conventional genres, but understood and practiced as, each time, to some degree, a creative act, each time, to some degree, new. This is the result of what Fairclough has called the 'marketization of discourse', and more particularly the influence of advertising and its ways of multimodal meaning-making on many domains of public discourse. This is why I stress the creative power of metaphor, metaphor not as a structure, but as a process, a meaning-making process, and why I stress that metaphoric meaning potential only becomes meaning in specific contexts.

Conceptual structures exist of course, but they are the 'discourse semantics', they are what meaning-makers draw on to work out what they want to 'say' rather than how they will 'say' it. In our book "*The Materiality of Writing*", Johannessen and I (JOHANNESSEN; VAN LEEUWEN, 2017) discuss '(ir)regularity' as a resource for making meaning. We then start from what are common experiences of irregularity, what kind of things cause, for instance, handwriting to be irregular – not (yet) having the skill to produce regular writing, not wanting or bothering to produce regular writing, using tools and materials that make it difficult to produce regular writing, being intoxicated, or having an

infirmity that makes it difficult to produce regular writing, and so on. It is on the basis of such common embodied experiences, rather than on the basis of conventions, as well as on the context in which we encounter an instance of irregularity, that we can, for instance, recognize irregular handwriting in an advertisement for painkillers as expressing agony, on the cover of a punk rock CD as rebellion, on the cover of a children's book as playful and whimsical, and so on.

In the chapter dedicated to your social semiotic theory of synaesthesia in "*Multimodality and Identity*" (2021), you reflect on the way shape, colour, texture, movement and timbre interact in multimodal texts, artefacts and performances. How can we analyse this in a way that transcends systemic-functional meanings, leading to analytical perspectives on the joint construction of meanings and discourse?

If I understand your question correctly, then you suggest that the systemic-functional approach has produced frameworks for analysing separate modes, but not, or not yet in sufficient detail, for analysing how they combine, how the meaning of multimodal texts is more than the sum of the meanings of the separate modes. Which, by and large, is true.

Over the years I have developed a few tools for analysing how modes combine, focusing on composition as a way to bring modes together spatially, and on rhythm as a way to bring time-based modes together. But that cannot explain the interaction of what I call media, the integration of shape, colour, texture, timbre and movement and they way they affect each other in multimodal texts. Here I had not been able to get much further than saying that they integrate in the way the ingredients of a dish, in their different proportions, create an overall taste. In my latest book I have tried to go a step further by applying principles of orchestration to this problem. Just as in "*Reading Images"* we had, as a heuristic, applied principles from Hallidayan linguistics to non-linguistic modes, so here I tried to apply principles from music to non-musical modes. No doubt this will have a long way to go, and no doubt it will eventually have to be corrected somewhat, as Gunther Kress and I have done in relation to our use of linguistics in "*Reading Images*". But it has, I think, resulted in some productive new ideas.

In this connection I also started reading about synaesthesia, since synaesthesia has long been a fellow traveller of multimodality. As avantgarde artists began to create multimodal art in the early 20th century, psychologists and neurologists began to study synaesthesia. My readings have convinced me

that the two have, over time, grown towards each other, and that is a good thing, so long as biology and culture are seen as interdependent, mutually influencing each other.

You have recently worked with projects focusing on sounds and emotion. How can we research what is being heard and felt, taking into account the sharing of intersubjective contexts?

I have thought and written about sound and music for a long time, for instance in "*Speech, Music, Sound*" (VAN LEEUWEN, 1999), which I first published in 1999. There I first developed the idea that our understanding of sound, whether of speech, of music, or of other sounds, is based on the embodied experience of speaking and singing which we all share, as human beings, in other words, again, on the experiential meaning potential of sound. The example I often use is vocal tension. When we tense our voice, the muscles of our throat tighten up. As a result, the voice becomes higher, sharper and brighter, because in their tensed state the walls of the throat cavity dampen the sound less than they would in a relaxed state. We know from experience when this happens – when we are excited, for instance, or anxious, or feel anger welling up – many things can cause tension. This is its meaning potential and which one of its potential meanings will be activated in a given instance will depend on the situational context of that instance. Tension can of course also be used deliberately, for example by actors or singers, either to express a momentary emotion, or as the emotional temperature of a particular style or genre of song, and tension is differently valued in different cultures.

It is important not to lose the cultural aspects of emotion from sight. As semioticians we study, not what people feel, but the signifiers of emotion which cultures have created over history– and, as anthropologists know, different cultures recognize or foreground different emotions and different ways of expressing them. We can study how and why specific signifiers of emotion developed. In the 17th century, in the context of the then new genre of opera, composers like Monteverdi deliberately looked for ways to increase the emotive impact of music, for instance by foregrounding the role of strings, because stringed instruments can create vibrato, and we all know from experience that emotion can make our voice waver.

Finally, we are also interested to hear a little about any ideas you may have about the future of different approaches in the field of multimodality.

Well, first of all, I have already mentioned the importance of studying the digital technologies which now provide us with resources for multimodal representation and communication. It is not only

important to study what people do with these resources, that as well of course, but also and above all, to study the resources themselves - what they allow us to do, and what they do not allow us to do, or make it difficult to do. Halliday always said that language is shaped by the interests and needs of the society whose language it is. These new semiotic resources are shaped by the needs and interests of the powerful organizations that have created them and that continuously update and further develop them. As Emilia Djonov and I discovered in our study of one such resource, PowerPoint was created by the engineers at the Bell Laboratories in California to pitch ideas to management for funding. Such pitches need to be brief and take the form of a list of 'selling points'. Today PowerPoint is used for many other things and in many other domains, including education and even certain forms of religion. But it has not been adapted to suit the needs of these other domains. The other domains have to adapt to it and apply the model of the sales pitch to conference presentations, lectures, sermons and much more. They can of course use the medium differently, but as Emilia and I found out by studying how PowerPoint is used in university lectures and commercial presentations, most people stick to the format of heading plus list of bullet-points. Yes, the critical study of semiotic technologies should, in my view, be a priority for multimodal analysis.

There is one other thing I would like to say. There is today a pressure on the humanities and social sciences to use scientific research methods, including quantitative methods and big data. I am not against this, but I feel that semiotics should remain an art of interpretation, of texts, and of their situational and cultural contexts. Interpretation is to some extent a creative act, albeit one that must take care to ground interpretations on meticulous observation of what there is in texts and contexts, on plausible accounts of experiential meaning potentials, on thorough ethnographic and documentary research of situational contexts and their practices of text making and on equally thorough historical research on the cultural context. All this of course also makes semiotics very much an interdisciplinary endeavour.

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