

Multiliteracies and semiotics

Entrevista concedida a Marisa Mendonça Carneiro

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CADERNOS de LINGUAGEM & SOCIEDADE

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Professor Len Unsworth is the Research Director of Educational Semiotics in English and Literacy Pedagogy in the Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education (ILSTE) at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) in Sydney. Len has been involved in educational research for over 30 years, including nine recent Australian Research Council funded projects. His key research interests include: literacy and learning in school curriculum areas; literature for children and adolescents; literacy development in the English curriculum K-12; and the pedagogic role of explicit knowledge about language and the meaning-making resources of images and image-language interaction in both paper and digital media texts, including animation and film. Prior to commencing at ACU in 2014, Len was Professor in Education at Griffith University, following earlier roles as Head of the School of Education at the University of New England and Head of the School of Development and Learning in the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney.



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Your research throughout the years has taken Science education and infographics as one of your main research interests. What is/was the motivation behind it?

I first became interested in science infographics decades ago when I was examining information books on science for primary school age children and noticed that many of these books contained images presenting inaccurate information and/or images that were irrelevant, peripheral or condescendingly comedic (Unsworth, 1993). I felt this amounted to some parts of the publishing industry not treating young learners with respect and that some scholarly reporting of the situation was necessary. This led me to pursue disciplinary literacy development in school science and examining the ways in which images and language worked together in the multimodal discourse of science (Unsworth, 1997) because, at that time it seemed that there was limited pedagogic attention to the multimodal nature of science texts in developing young students reading to learn. Then with the advent of electronic texts such as CD ROMs, it became apparent to me that the ways in which language and dynamic images interacted to communicate scientific knowledge was something teachers needed to understand in order to develop students' capacity to learn from these new media (Unsworth, 1999, 2004). I have maintained this research trajectory on the digital multimodal discourse of school science and continue to coordinate research into areas such as animations in science education (Unsworth, 2020). Working with international colleagues prompted interest in cross cultural comparisons of science infographics (Y. Ge et al., 2017; Ge et al., 2014; Y.-P. Ge et al., 2017; Ge et al., 2018a; Ge et al., 2018b). As I continued to work in this area I became aware that, although some work on multimodal literacy in science was occurring in the primary and junior secondary school, there was a paucity of research in this area in the senior high school biology, chemistry and physics subjects so this became a more recent focus of my work (Martin & Unsworth, 2024; Ngo et al., 2022; Unsworth & Herrington, 2023; Unsworth et al., 2022).

In 2001 you published a book titled “Teaching multiliteracies across the curriculum: changing contexts of text and image in classroom practice”, in which you approached multiliteracy pedagogy in several areas, including early school years and English teaching. What, if any, has changed in the way you approach multiliteracy in areas such as English teaching?

Most of my work on multimodality and English teaching has been in contexts where English is the official language of education in school systems. After 2001 I began to look more at multimodal digital literacy and its interaction with traditional paper media literacy in English teaching. This included children's literature and film as well as new forms of e-literature for children (Barton & Unsworth, 2014; Unsworth, 2006a, 2008, 2013; Unsworth et al., 2005). Digital multimodal composition also became and continues as an important dimension of my ongoing research. This included research into the classroom use of new animation software for children (Chandler et al., 2010; Chandler et al., 2012; Mills & Unsworth, 2018; O'Brien et al., 2010; Rutherford et al., 2011; Unsworth & Mills, 2020). More recently I have worked on children's coding of animated movies using Scratch (Unsworth,

2024). I've also been concerned about the lack of any significant attention to multimodal literacy in large-scale, high-stakes standardized tests of literacy (Unsworth, 2014; Unsworth & Chan, 2008, 2009; Unsworth et al., 2019; Unsworth et al., 2004). Since 2001 I have done a little work in the area of teaching multimodal literacy in English as an additional language (Ngo et al., 2012; Unsworth, 2006b; Unsworth & Bush, 2010; Unsworth & Mills, 2020)

How do you think other school subjects, such as Geography and History for instance, may benefit from your approach on educational semiotics, such as the analysis of infographics you proposed on your latest book “Reading Images for Knowledge Building - Analyzing Infographics in School Science”, co-authored by J.R. Martin?

The disciplinary discourses of school subjects are quite distinctive, especially in the senior high school years (Martin, 2020; Martin & Matruglio, 2020; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2017; Unsworth et al., 2022), however knowledge of the linguistic and multimodal resources that are drawn on in distinctive ways in different subjects can inform subject specific literacies. This applies to the role of infographics in different subject areas. In Reading Images for Knowledge Building (Martin & Unsworth, 2024) for example, we discuss the visual representation of activity, composition (part/whole relations) and classification. Understanding the complexity of different visual representations of classification and to some extent composition is very important in history texts. We also discuss iconization in images in science where the conceptual meaning of entities represented in images is backgrounded and the significance of the entity in symbolizing the values of certain social groups is foregrounded. This is clearly significant in history in images such as the man standing in front of the convoy of tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989, whose symbolic meaning has become foregrounded over its conceptual or literal meaning. Our discussion of the visual representation of activity is illustrated with infographics about climate change and the greenhouse effect (Chapter 9), which indicates the relevance of this underlying semiotic knowledge to geography. The section on aesthetics in images (pp. 174-75) includes images of wind patterns at different latitudes around the earth and our discussion of the use of cartoons is highly relevant to their use in history teaching. So many of the foundational approaches to infographic analyses in Reading Images for Knowledge Building can be related to subject areas other than science. Having said that, different subjects also have their distinctive infographic forms such as time visualizations in history (Coffin & Derewianka, 2009; Derewianka & Coffin, 2008).

In 2006 you proposed a framework that provided us with a theoretical description of the interaction between language and image in ideational meaning-making by analyzing school science materials. What should we take into consideration if we want to conduct an intermodal analysis of news that are published online?

The semiotic framework underpinning my work has been built on the systemic functional linguistic and social semiotic theories promulgated by scholars such as Michael Halliday, Jim Martin, Gunther

Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (as I indicate further below). A colleague at the University of New South Wales, Dr Helen Caple, whose work is also built on these theories has specialized in the analysis of contemporary news stories. Helen's publications provide excellent detailed frameworks for the analysis of news stories (Bednarek & Caple, 2012; Caple, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Caple, 2013). There are a number of other systemic functional semiotic analyses of news stories that may be useful (Abbas & White, 2021; Economou, 2008, 2012; Macken-Horarik, 2003; Tavassoli et al., 2019; White, 2014). Further work on online news following the same theoretical perspective has been done by John Knox, a colleague at Macquarie University (Caple & Knox, 2012, 2015, 2017; Knox, 2007; Knox, 2009a, 2009b, 2010).

How do you see the increasing possibilities that the online medium affords in terms of the several multimodal combinations and the way people understand them (and could learn from), especially image/text interaction in Instagram?

I have not been involved with social media research per se, but the online environment certainly affords extended forms of multimodal integration of sound, music and haptics so that communication, interpretation and learning are responsive to innovative forms of multimodal meaning making. One example of bodily engagement in meaning-making along with the experience of language, moving image, sound and music is digital literature for children, where, for example, manipulating the actual i-pad (or other tablet device) is how the 'reader' experiences the story by being a participant and taking action in the storyworld (Zhao & Unsworth, 2017). Recent developments in augmented reality and virtual reality have created other ways in which readers/viewers can enter into the actual story space in online narrative fiction (Mills et al., 2023 see Chapter 10) [This book is open access and can be downloaded free of charge from https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-mono/10.4324/9781003137368/literacy-digital-futures-kathy-mills-len-unsworth-laura-scholes?_gl=1*rloxe*_gcl_au*MTA0OTI3Mjg4NS4xNzI0OTI0ODE4*_ga*MTI5NjM4MTc4LjE3MjQ5MjQ4MTk.*_ga_OHYE8YG0M6*MTcyOTcyNDk1Ny40LjAuMTcyOTcyNDk1Ny42MC4wLjA.].

The recent advances on online tools for the creation of multimodal texts enables the creation of texts that integrate moving images, sound and music. I have just completed a large project in which teachers of students in Years 6 and 7 of their schooling incorporated coding of animated narratives as part of the English curriculum (Unsworth, 2024). In this project the students used the online block coding platform Scratch (<https://scratch.mit.edu/>) to create animated stories in which they were able to import music and create sound effects as well as record the dialogue using their own voices for the characters.

These are just some of the ways in which the digital literacies of the 21st century are developing multimodally, and while words remain integral to our communication, they are no longer sufficient and the literacies of today and the future are now inherently multimodal.

Emojis, stickers, gifs and images may be used to express meanings, and oftentimes are used alone in online interactions. How, in your point of view, should school teachers approach their teaching/learning? How should a teacher proceed in order to explore the meanings that come from such features of online discourse?

As a teacher and researcher of literacies and learning, since I was introduced to the systemic functional linguistic and social semiotic theories of Michael Halliday (Halliday, 1978; Halliday et al., 1988; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), Jim Martin (Martin, 1992) and the work of those who followed this trajectory into multimodality (Kress, 1997, 2003, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; van Leeuwen, 2005; Van Leeuwen, 2022), I have found that this work provides the most appropriate robust semiotic perspective on which to ground the development of pedagogies of multimodal literacy. I have not personally undertaken research into the meaning-making options of emojis and gifs etc, but I highly recommend that teachers draw on the systemic functional semiotic research of Associate Professor Michelle Zappavigna in this area (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024a, 2024b).

Memes have become ubiquitous in online social networks. Do you believe science-related memes may be used for teaching and/or learning purposes?

I don't believe it is possible to provide a yes/no answer here. It depends on the nature of the memes. Some may provide readers with opportunities to interrogate the meanings communicated by the meme and through such an inquiry build their own scientific understanding. For example I saw a meme that was visual comparison of the Fahrenheit, Celcius and Kelvin temperature scales in which each showed the values of 0 and 100. For Fahrenheit the annotation for 0 was 'really cold outside' and for 100 'really hot outside'; for Celcius the annotation for 0 was 'pretty cold outside' and for 100 'dead'; for Kelvin the annotation for 0 was 'dead' and for 100 was 'dead'. On the other hand, I saw a meme that said that something like 'Chemists: I research atoms, molecules and their interactions' and 'Physicists: I research matter and its properties and interactions and how the universe works'; and then the third quote was 'Geologists: I like that boulder. That is a nice boulder'. Memes of that kind are simply detrimental. So, I think the judicious discussion of some memes may be useful if they provoke scientific questioning, and especially if they are visually astutely amusing.

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