Editors’ introduction

Doing critical multimodality in research on gender, language and discourse

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to open a discussion about multimodal work in the area of gender, language and discourse, and propose the kinds of multimodal approaches that are most appropriate for this task. Multimodality, we claim, is a rather fragmented and unconsolidated field where many of the tools and concepts applied by different researchers are much less suitable than others. Our intention here is to raise critical questions about the affordances used by communicators in each context of usage and the ideological purposes they are meant to accomplish, so that meanings about gender and sexuality are uncovered.

KEYWORDS: MULTIMODALITY; GENDER; SEXUALITY; CRITICAL ANALYSIS

There are several good reasons why we felt that a special issue of Gender and Language on language, gender and multimodality was particularly timely – especially one which is critical in its perspective. One of the main

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reasons is to foster more multimodal work in the area of gender, language and discourse, where so far there has been very little. We do this in part by presenting a set of papers which point to the huge possibilities for critical multimodal study across different cultural domains and social practices. Another important reason is to think about what kinds of multimodal approach are most appropriate for this task. Multimodality, we suggest, is in fact a rather fragmented and unconsolidated field where many of the tools and concepts being proposed are much less suitable than others. Before we discuss our intentions for the collection of papers presented here, we look briefly at the state of multimodality, and say where to place this scholarship, proposing a basic approach for more such work. And above all we do this out of a concern for a growing tendency for scholars to focus not so much on actual good critical analysis, but on just concentrating on producing new theoretical angles on what critical discourse analysis (CDA) might be, and on constantly providing new conceptual frameworks and terminologies without fully justifying why ‘old’ concepts have lost explanatory power.

The multimodality ‘turn’ in discourse studies derives essentially from the first work of critical linguistics (Fowler 1996; Fowler et al. 1979; Kress and Hodge 1979), which itself developed into CDA (to mention just a few: van Dijk 1985; Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard 1996; Fairclough 1989, 1992; Wodak 1989; Wodak and Meyer 2001). These analytical approaches took as their main theoretical basis the work of Michael Halliday (1978, 1985) and his systemic functional linguistics (SFL). This was a theory of language which emphasised not the idea of a formal, strict grammar but one of a system of semantic choices and networks. There are two parts to this model: the system and the social context: meanings of the system constrain the context and vice versa. It is contextual meanings that have been crucial for some theorists in CDA (Kress 1989). For critical discourse analysts (and we include ourselves in this paradigm), linguistic text analysis must be associated with a social theory of the functioning of language in political and ideological processes, since social groups determine the discursive practices we are socialised into. Against this backdrop, it is part of our role as analysts to ‘investigate, reveal and clarify how power and discriminatory values are inscribed in and mediated through the linguistic system’ (Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard 1996:xii). So we need to study linguistic and grammatical choices made in text and in talk because such preferences are not arbitrary but are linguistic materialisations of the ideologically-laden interests of the writer or speaker. However, the range of available choices itself carries traces of power relations in society – for example, the terminology used to talk about certain ethnic groups, or to
represent gender roles and the grammar by which alignment to these representations is created.

‘Multimodality’ was to follow the works of CDA, but its main innovation was to include not just language but all the semiotic modes that make up a social context. Two books, Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1990) *Reading Images* and O’Toole’s (1994) *The Language of Displayed Art*, initiated this new turn. Both contain different degrees of the main aim of SFL, which was to model the systems and subsystems of choices that form language.

Multimodality has now developed into an academic field in its own right (van Leeuwen, 2014). However, despite the growing interest, there has been much less self-reflection about which project of critique is entailed in multimodal analysis. A number of books have started to emerge (Abousnouga and Machin 2013; Djonov and Zhao 2014; Machin and Mayr 2012; Mayr and Machin 2012) and there have been special editions of journals (Machin 2013; Machin and van Leeuwen 2016) dedicated to the subject. These publications have indicated how multimodal analysis can be best aligned with the core aims of critical discourse studies: to reveal buried ideologies in texts and to show how the powerful seek to re-contextualise social practice in their own interests and maintain control over ideology. We come back to some of the basic approaches shortly. But first we want to say exactly why it is crucial that we are now more careful and specific about what kinds of tools and assumptions we must choose in order to carry out critical multimodal work.

Multimodality has developed as, and into, a plethora of threads, all of which have very different interests and theoretical assumptions. Most of these, we argue, are not suitable for the kind of critical enterprise we have in mind. In fact these differences tend to get glossed over in the literature reviews of research papers which present themselves as carrying out multimodal analysis. And there is generally little to no open acknowledgement of these differences.

The sub-threads of multimodality include more strictly systemic functional approaches, socio-linguistic, cognitive-metaphor and social semiotic. Each of course has its merits to those working in that specific sub-field. But at this point it is important to bring these differences to the surface in order to be clear about what is required, and what is certainly not required, for the kind of critical multimodal approach that we have in mind.

One major criticism of multimodality has been that it has, as yet, insufficient consistency or agreement in how concepts are used or defined and that it is characterised by a flourishing of new terms which are for the most part descriptive and may provide very few explanatory insights behind the complex terminologies and systems (Forceville 2010). To some extent, we would argue, this is certainly an impression easily given to those looking
from outside in to the field, since there are simply a range of approaches which tend not to define themselves. It is also because there is little dialogue between these sub-fields. And as Forceville (2010) argues, these research strands tend to forge ahead, expanding into new fields, building even newer terminologies, without really pausing to test them. Even some of the landmark, inspirational, texts in multimodality tend not to have received any considered critical attention.

There is another important and specific reason for this flourishing of concepts and models in multimodality. Understanding this process is key to allowing us to make our case for a multimodal approach that is in the first place problem solving, and, like CDA, reveals the discourses buried in texts, which may not be apparent to a casual viewer. The concept-driven multimodality (which focuses more on theory making than problem-solving of real social issues) is, in part, a symptom of the origins of multimodality in a specific form of linguistics.

SFL-inspired multimodality tends to be driven to establish the grammar or system underlying any kind of semiotic resources. The systemic part of meaning-making becomes the object of analysis, rather that the phenomenon under investigation. In linguistic SFL, context has been largely overlooked where only the actual text is subject to categorisation and analysis. From our point of view this is problematic as it means that both immediate and wider sociological context can be ignored. And this creates a huge problem for a critical form of multimodal analysis since, as Holmberg (2012) points out, it disconnects the systems from their actual use and from the kinds of power and interests infused into their use and in specific instances of their deployment. The consequence is that more and more obscure theory is being produced and real problems in social life (e.g. discriminatory processes of exclusion and erasure) are being relegated to academic discussions that do not reach social life. And here too we are brought directly to one reason for the flourishing concepts which can become characteristic of multimodality. How can we contribute to changing our world (one of the aims of CDA) if we don’t apply these theories to events in social life, if we are not offering concrete insights?

The critical approach we have in mind for a multimodal approach in gender, language and discourse will certainly be interested in understanding the effects of particular semiotic selections out of a pool of potential alternatives. It is in these choices that ideology and power are encoded. But this is not to be the focus in itself.

All the very innovative and original papers in this collection offer compelling examples of how such ideological work is achieved linguistically/discursively. Bouvier, for example, is interested in unveiling the meaning
potentials carried by a variety of different textures and fabric weight in hijab fashion in Egypt. Brookes, Harvey and Mullany examine how the options of bottle vs. breast-feeding in contemporary health promotion in the UK are driven by neoliberal assumptions about health and risk, which in turn disseminate unequally valued images of (ir)responsible motherhood. Caldas-Coulthard and Moon describe how the semiotic choices in representations of grandmothers and older women in images and text (re)produce intersectional stereotypes of gender and age, which ultimately contribute to invisibility, disappearance, marginalisation, trivialisation and ridicule. Machin and van Leeuwen explore the gendered indexicalities of different sound options, which relate to the extent that players engage in the game world. Roderick is interested in the choices in office design and the kinds of gendered work and workers that they promote. Jaworski is interested in silence and erasure in art as way through which artists articulate their non-normative gender identities.

Our aim, however, is not to understand all these options as a system, and to label every part of this system. The point is rather to understand what affordances are used by communicators in each context of usage, and what ideological purpose they are meant to accomplish. More specifically, the papers show how these affordances and their canons of use have ideologies built into them, in particular those related to gender. These become deployed in actual contexts and can shape and re-contextualise social practices. Fashion can be form of social control, but can also embody acts of resistance that reflect particular ideological interests. Office design can frame workplaces to suggest neoliberal values such as ‘flexibility’ and ‘self-management’. Grandmothers are desexualised and excluded from many practices simply because they are old. Their representational patterns point to the junction of ageism and sexism. The semiotics of the photographs and visual design used to represent feeding babies by breast or bottle shows how these tend to realise a discourse of self-management, again related to neoliberal ideas and values. Sound in software can communicate very specific ideas about how men and women can engage in the world and each other. Silence and absence in art too can be used as a means to express power. What we are arguing here is for an affordance-led type of critical multimodality (see also Machin and van Leeuwen 2016).

As an important part of this affordance-led approach it is crucial to have something to say about each particular kind of semiotic material, how it is used and what is special about it. The assumption carried by some of the subfields of multimodality is also that modes can be treated in the same way. In SFL, of course, there is the view that the semiotic behaviour of sign users is guided by more or less the same conventions regardless of the con-
texts and semiotic modes. In cognitive metaphor theory too there is a tendency to suppress all kind of semiotic resources and materials to the same models and principles. These approaches run the risk of treating all kinds of semiotic materials as being the same. In contrast, Kress (2010) argued that all modes of representation can be harnessed for meaning-making, but that these resources are never of the same order. A critical approach must be able to show why one kind of semiotic material is deployed and not others. Why do information leaflets for breast versus bottle feeding communicate the difference through design and images rather than in language? Why do young women in Egypt use fashion as a way to negotiate agency? What is it about the affordances of the semiotic materials in each case? What is the connection between typography and the representation of older women? What is lost if we look at both language, material, sound and form through a single theoretical concept? The very aim of critical multimodal analysis should be to show how different semiotic materials are deployed by communicators precisely for the unique way they work. And, although all the papers in this collection explore diverse social practices and analyse different semiotic resources and contexts, gender is the pervasive ideology that link them all.

As part of the journal aims and scope, gender is defined along two key dimensions. First, social relationships are infused with assumed differences between the sexes. These assumptions are ideological, and can be shown to be constructed in language, other forms of representation, and in social practices and institutions. This seems, to us, to be a fundamentally multimodal project.

The papers we bring together in this collection examine language, but also photographs, visual design, sound, clothing, office furniture, typography and art. In each case the analysis is able to reveal how gender is here encoded. And in each case the analysis is able to say something specific about the affordances of each kind of semiotic material. If the aim of critical analysis is to point out discriminatory ideology in communication, so that they can then be challenged, then it needs to show how this is the case in this specific way. As the papers in this collection show, our analyses are supported by a socially driven approach. The aim is not in the first place to concoct new concepts nor models through which we look at our societies. The aim is to show how different semiotic material have affordances that can be deployed for ideological purposes.

Second, gender imbalances never operate alone but intersect with other axes of inequality, and, more than ever, these complex nexus points need to be addressed (see also Baker and Levon 2016 for an intersectional perspective on CDA, which however does not take into account the visual and
other semiotic modes). Such intersectional approach also runs through the papers in this collection. But again this takes place in different ways through different semiotic materials, for example as gender and taste are communicated in art, as gender and religion are communicated in clothing, as gender and ageing are communicated in commercials, in images and children's books.

Gender bias in design, sound, fabrics, typography and colour is a relatively unexplored field. This is the contribution of this special issue to the field. As Foucault (1972) argued, discourses are never necessarily present in any single text, but are infused throughout culture. And we argue that it is through multimodal CDA that we, as linguists and semioticians, must help to reveal problematic gendered discourses as well as highlight important moments of resistance to them.

In terms of structure, we have decided to line up the papers in this special issue following a multimodal logic that can be simplified as follows. While all papers are to a certain extent underpinned by an analysis of visual elements in relation to written/spoken language, they do so to different degrees. Therefore, we open with two articles (Caldas-Coulthard and Moon; Brookes, Harvey and Mullany) in which the visual/written dynamics is under most thorough scrutiny; we then move on to consider the meaning-making affordances of materiality – textiles and furniture (Bouvier; Roderick); and we close with the semiotic role played by sound and silence in relation to gender and sexuality (Machin and van Leeuwen; Jaworski), a silence, however, that politically screams louder than words.

About the authors

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