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Multimodal Communication

A social semiotic approach
to text and image in print
and digital media

May Wong

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Multimodal Communication

“Professor May L-Y Wong’s book on multimodal communication is a valuable contribution to the growing literature on multimodal discourse studies. Based on the work of such classical authors as Theo van Leeuwen and Gunther Kress, her studies take an independent and innovative character by focusing on text and image in the Chinese context of Hong Kong. It is especially the variety of her studies that deserve attention, as is the case for magazine ads for women’s body enhancement, postage stamps, personal loan ads on TV, luxury residences, and digital photos of Hong Kong women on Facebook. Besides sophisticated analyses of the social semiotics of discourse, these multimodal studies also offer a unique view of the complex contemporary life styles in Hong Kong, often combining Western and Eastern norms and values.”

—Professor Teun A. van Dijk, *Department of Translation and Language Sciences, Pompeu Fabra University, Spain*, and Editor of *Discourse & Society*, *Discourse & Communication* and *Discourse Studies*

“This book makes a striking contribution combining Kress and van Leeuwen’s social semiotic analysis with extensive and fascinating in-depth historical research to bring insights into a range of print and digital media showing how multimodality can be fruitfully adapted with the sensitivity to non Western media.”

—Professor David Machin, *Department of Media and Communication, Örebro University, Sweden*

“*Multimodal Communication*, a semiotic analysis of Hong Kong’s everyday life, includes body images, digital photos, social and cultural phenomena evident on social media, and the branding and advertising of luxurious products. This multi-layered view introduces new perspectives to advance understanding of how the personal and cultural identities of the people of Hong Kong are being constructed and mediated in the postcolonial period.”

—Professor Anthony Fung, *School of Journalism and Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong*, and *School of Arts and Communication, Beijing Normal University*

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Dedicated to my beloved husband, Arthur Lo, who has married me for ten years (and counting) and has been exceptionally patient and supportive during the writing of this book

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I first dabbled in social semiotics when I was a doctoral student at Lancaster University (UK) and I was completely mesmerised (and I still am) by van Leeuwen's (2005) *Introducing social semiotics* (Routledge) that I stumbled upon in the university bookstore back in 2005. I wrote a short paper on analysing a magazine advertisement on Dove's *Campaign on Real Beauty* and shamelessly submitted it to my supervisor for perusal! 'Very interesting paper! Nice try, May,' said Professor Tony McEnery, a world-renowned corpus linguist. I am still very much indebted to him for his kindness and encouragement.

Ever since that very first attempt of a visual analysis, I have been sharing my thoughts on semiotics with my husband, Arthur, who, as a senior lecturer in interior design, has explored the semiotics of space in his MA dissertation. I am very thankful to him for many long talks on the topics and I cannot possibly express how grateful I am for his love and care for me. Special thanks go to Dr Lillian Yip, my medical doctor, for making every day of my life so much better.

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CHAPTER 1

Social Semiotics: Setting the Scene

Abstract Social semiotics is a social theory of meaning and communication modelled on Michael Halliday's theories of language as social semiotic and Systemic Functional Grammar with a particular focus on the agency of social actors and social context. Chapter 1 provides a fully up-to-date introduction to the theory (while peculiar aspects of the theory will be dealt with in subsequent chapters when they become relevant for discussion and application to the data), and argues that social semiotics serves as a useful multidisciplinary framework for analysing text-image relations. With an aim to contributing to the existing monographs of empirical social semiotic analysis in the fields of education and humanities, this chapter argues for focussing the analytical lens on visual analysis in other major areas of impactful social research which could provide a nuanced view of semiotic resources and principles pertaining to visual imagery and text as the most prominent modes of communication in contemporary society before identifying and describing the resources and principles that operate within and across other modes.

Keywords Social semiotics • Theoretical background • Semiotic artefacts • Fields of application • Benefits of visual analysis

1.1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

Ever since the turn of the millennium, visual imagery has been heralded as a major mode of communication on a par with verbal communicative means such as speech and writing. It is therefore necessary for us to get to know more about visual communication and, specifically, the meaning making processes required to fully comprehend visual structures. Ever since it was first founded in the mid-1980s and fully developed in the early 2000s (see Jewitt et al. 2016: 28–61 for a full description of the early developments), social semiotics has been a social theory of meaning and communication in which semiotic resources with varying affordances are used as tools by sign makers for serving particular social needs required in a given social context.

Social semiotics, whose nuanced tenets will be fully discussed in subsequent chapters, is basically a theoretical framework that develops out of Halliday’s theories of language as social semiotic and Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday 1978; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). Language, as Halliday (1978: 21pp) argues, realises three types of social meaning/metafunctions (i.e. the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions). By extending Halliday’s conceptualisation of language to the visual arena, Kress and van Leeuwen demonstrate how these meaning functions can be realised visually through the semiotic resources of images (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 2006). More specifically, they describe semiotic resources as having meaning potentials and can be used to communicate ideologies and discourses.

There are four interconnected theoretical assumptions that underpin the social semiotic theory. The first assumption is that meaning-making is always multimodal, drawing on a *multiplicity of modes* such as image, gesture, posture, gaze, action, music, colour, 3D objects, alongside speech and writing, all of which have the potential to contribute equally to the meaning being expressed (Jewitt 2009a: 14). The role that multimodality plays in meaning-making, as Kress (2015: 62) puts it, lies precisely in the process of exploring “the different potentials for providing means of expressing views, positions, attitudes, facts; and to enable the production of what is best suited to a specific task or need”, which is inextricably related to the second assumption central to the theory of social semiotics, i.e., that semiotic resources are used by people in a given *social context*. The social context shapes the resources available for meaning-making and how these resources are selected and configured. In

social semiotics, therefore, sign-making is conceived of as a social process (Hodge and Kress 1988: 1); “[s]igns, modes and meaning-making are treated as relatively fluid, dynamic and open systems intimately connected to the social context of use” (Jewitt 2009b: 30). Closely related to the notion of context is that of *the motivated sign*, which forms the basis of the third assumption. When making signs, people bring together the available form that is most apt to express the meaning they wish to represent at a given moment in a specific social context. The connection between form (i.e. signifier) and meaning (i.e. signified) within the social semiotic multimodal analysis is, therefore, not arbitrary but motivated and transparent. Finally, social semiotics is built on the assumption that it is the sign-maker’s *interest* that guides his or her selection of semiotic resources. Kress (1993: 174) defines interest as “the articulation and realisation of an individual’s relation to an object or event, acting out of that social complex at a particular moment, in the context of an interaction with other constitutive factors of the situation which are considered as relevant by the individual”.

Recently, Kress (2010: 26–27) has postulated a rhetorical approach to representation and communication in the spirit of the social semiotic theory. In the rhetorical approach, the social world is still regarded as a dominant feature. Thus, there is a great deal of emphasis on the social environment and the social relations which are enacted in it and the resources available for shaping the communicative event, in keeping with the social semiotic tradition. What appears to be a ‘new’ feature in the model, however, is the primary focus on the rhetor and the interpreter. The rhetor is the maker of a message. Prior to sign-making, Kress believes that the rhetor has to make an assessment of all aspects of the communicational situation, i.e. (i) his or her interest; (ii) the characteristics of the audience; (iii) the requirements of the communicative issue at stake; (iv) the resources available for making an apt representation; (v) the best means for dissemination. Kress goes on to suggest that these aspects can fall into two broad categories, namely design and production. Design gives shape to the interests of the rhetor, takes into account the audience and what the matter to be communicated demands as well as accesses the potentials and constraints of the semiotic resources which are available for the most transparent representation tailored towards the goal of the communicative event. On the other hand, production is the implementation of design with the material resources available in the world in which the communication takes place. In production, Kress (2010: 27) notes, “meaning

is made material and becomes subject to review, comment, engagement and transformation”, which paves the way for the role of the interpreter.

As Kress puts it, “the interpreter’s *interest* produces *attention*; *attention* shapes the form of the *engagement*; this leads to *selections* being made; the selections are *framed*; there is the subsequent *transformation* and *transductions* of the elements in the frame; and, in that, the (‘*inwardly made*’) sign is produced” (Kress 2010: 42; original emphasis). This model of communication rests on two central assumptions: “that *communication is the response to a prompt*; that *communication happens only when there is ‘interpretation’*” (Kress 2010: 35; original emphasis). Communicational environments are always complex and multimodal. Any aspects of the communicational situation can, potentially, act as prompts; whether they are or not depends on the interest of the interpreter. As can be seen from the ‘communicative sequence’ proposed by Kress, the interpreter’s interest directs his or her attention to a prompt in the communicative event; the interpreter then engages with features of the prompt and forms his or her interpretation. While the meanings of the semiotic processes of ‘selection’ (i.e. the highlighting of the characteristics and the ‘shape’ of the prompt which constitute the ground on which the interpretation proceeds), and of ‘transformation’ (i.e. meaning change through re-ordering of the elements in a text in the same mode within the same culture or across cultures) and ‘transduction’ (i.e. meaning change resulting from a change in mode) can be understood with ease, the notion of framing needs further elaboration. As noted in Kress’s other publications on the social semiotic theory, framing is invariably referred to as the disconnection of elements of a visual composition by frame lines, pictorial framing devices (boundaries formed by the edge of a building, a tree, etc.), empty space, discontinuities of colour, and so on (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001: 2, 2006: 203–204; see also van Leeuwen 2005: 6–14).

1.2 AIMS AND SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

The social semiotic approach, as initially envisaged in Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) *The Grammar of Visual Design*, has been applied in a wide range of materials including newspaper articles, websites, journalistic photographs, textbook illustrations, children’s picture books, social media photographs, etc. (e.g. Dreyfus et al. 2011; Jones and Ventola 2008; O’Halloran 2004; Ventola and Guijarro 2009; Ventola et al. 2004; Unsworth 2008; Zappavigna 2016). The aim of the social semiotic

approach is to make visible the social dimensions of meaning-making by focussing on the agency of the sign-maker and the social context in which the sign is produced. More specifically, it aims to account for how ideology and power are mediated through communicative acts (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress and Hodge 1979) through a systematic study of semi-otic artefacts (e.g. women's magazines, video games, children's drawings) as sites of ideology. In keeping with this analytical research tradition of the social semiotic framework, this book aims to explore various mundane semi-otic artefacts in both print and digital media such as magazine advertisements, postage stamps, TV commercials, and digital photographs on social networking sites from the post-colonial city of Hong Kong with eastern and western cultures so clearly intertwined as a way of focussing on specific social issues (e.g. female body idealisation, consumerist luxury and hedonistic lifestyle, changing social identity) that frame institutional discourse as a form of social practice to constitute and transmit ideology and power. By so doing, the book demonstrates a multidisciplinary perspective for the analysis of image and text (Bateman 2014; Pauwels 2011),¹ bringing together insights from social semiotics and multimodal critical discourse analysis as well as insights from various other scholarly fields such as corporate branding studies, sociological studies, art history and design studies.

Moreover, the present volume hopes to serve as a valuable contribution to the fields of application of the social semiotic framework which presently is significantly utilised in the field of education, notably in relation to literacy, learning and pedagogy (see, for example, Bezemer and Kress 2016; Jewitt and Kress 2003; Kress et al. 2014; Unsworth 2001). Studies in this area have used social semiotics to explore the situated literacy practices of young learners and their processes of meaning making mediated by the semi-otic resources of different written script systems. While there has been a growing body of occasional research publications (journal articles, book chapters with 'social semiotics' in their titles or conceptual frameworks) on applications of social semiotics in various fields such as institutional branding, political and national campaigns (e.g. Teo 2004; Thurlow and Aiello 2007; Michelson and Álvarez Valencia 2016; Wignell et al. 2017; Wong

¹A similar approach is presented by Jewitt and Oyama (2001: 138), who contend that "[i]n studies of the use of semi-otic resources, visual social semiotics can only ever be one element of an interdisciplinary equation which must also involve relevant theories and histories". Hence in the present project I integrate visual social semiotics with theoretical categories and propositions that reside in various disciplines in arts and social sciences.

2016), research monographs on how the social semiotic framework could be applied in diverse and possibly innovative areas to explore meaning making are still emerging (see Böck and Pachler 2013; Bowcher 2012; Djonov and Zhao 2014; Jones and Ventola 2008; Norris 2012; O'Halloran and Smith 2011; Royce and Bowcher 2007; Seizov and Wildfeuer 2017; Ventola and Guijarro 2009; Ventola et al. 2004; Wildfeuer 2015; Zhao et al. 2018). It has to be acknowledged fully the contributions made by these publications to the development of the social semiotic framework and thus this book aims to build on this increasingly popular and valuable research tradition on multimodal analysis and focus particularly on the analysis of visual imagery and text in social research. One of the advantages of (re)focussing the analytical lens on specific semiotic modes is that the analysis could provide a more nuanced view of semiotic resources and principles pertaining to visual imagery and text as the two most prominent modes of communication in contemporary society as a solid foundation before identifying and describing the resources and principles that operate within and across other modes (e.g. gesture, spatial design, fashion, etc.). At the time of writing, there has been only one book—John Bateman's (2014) *Text and image: a critical introduction to the visual/verbal divide*—specifically dedicated to a social semiotic study of visual imagery and text. The dearth of focussed scholarly discussion of the visual and verbal modes has been problematised by Pauwels (2012: 250) who argues that “[m]ultimodal research is an ambitious venture given the fact that even most forms of mono-modal or single mode analysis (for example the analysis of static photographs) are still underdeveloped, i.e. not able to tap into the full expressive potential of this medium [mode]”. The approach proposed in this book strives to contribute to this emerging niche area of text-image relations insightfully crafted in Bateman's (2014) work, with a strong focus on the visual and verbal modes by proposing a refined and elaborate multidisciplinary analytical tool to address the detailed and multifaceted ideological aspects of the visuals.²

²The difference between Bateman's (2014) work and the present volume lies in the fact that the former is intended to be a textbook introducing a wide range of perspectives on text-image relations whereas there is a clear research agenda in the latter. This book aims to deal with the study of communicational practices through words and images and the way in which they are connected to the organisation of societies and everyday lives. It sets out to address the central and pivotal research question: ‘how do texts and imagery reflect and conceal specific interests, power relations and communicative strategies in specific institutional or social contexts?’, providing analyses that illuminate the everyday and the socio-political significance of representations.

Another advantage of the proposed approach is that by drawing its visual data from a given geographical region (in this case, Hong Kong), the book could possibly gain deeper insights into the significant social conditions that are shaping the communicational landscape as well as the full range of semiotic artefacts that are salient within the same social context, rather than a few haphazard spatial locations across the globe assembled and encompassed in these prior studies. While there is a distinct local bias to the selection of these visual texts, print and TV advertisements, postage stamps and digital personal photographs are found more or less the world over, and thus, the proposed analytical approach should have wide applicability elsewhere also, as well as applicability to other kinds of visual texts not addressed explicitly in this book. Certainly, specific cultural resources and meanings will need to be taken into account in different places and for different kinds of texts, and the analyses adapted accordingly, but the fundamental framework will still apply. Hopefully, through unpacking the multiplicity of meanings embodied by text-image combinations in various genres across multiple disciplines (semiotics, discourse analysis, sociology, art and design), this book could provide a distinct contribution to the empirical applications of social semiotic theories and concepts to significant semiotic artefacts that are socially shaped within a community.

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