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Teaching's Concepts in a Social Field of Education

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Abstract: *This article aims to explore the potential of combining teaching's concepts with a social semiotic framework, the social semiotic theory of multimodality by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. Special attention is given to how this may qualify the description of multimodal meaning. At the same time, the paper presents the argument that merging semiotic and cognitive perspectives gives rise to new theoretical and methodological issues that have yet to be properly addressed in the literature.*

KeyWords: *multimodality, blending, mental space, emergence, social semiotics, semiotic systems.*

This article aims to discuss the extent to which incorporating cognitive concepts in a social keywords framework may qualify our understanding of multimodal meaning, for example when meaning is created through many simultaneous modalities or semiotic systems like writing, images, colors, typography, etc.[1]

In the research literature, several authors argue in favor of introducing cognitive theories in semiotic studies of multimodality, especially in social semiotic research, and combining different complementary perspectives have claimed that combining social semiotic and cognitive frameworks may solve identified theoretical and analytical difficulties when studying multimodal data. In addition, such an approach could help explain key aspects of the process of multimodal meaning-making and provide a better understanding of multimodality as phenomenon, as well as contributing to appropriate methodologies. [2.3]

One of the specific cognitive theories that have been discussed in this context is Fauconnier and Turner's work on mental spaces and conceptual blending, a theory of how people make meaning by building and processing ('blending') conceptual packets of information ('mental spaces').

In this conceptual article, I want to explore how teaching may specifically contribute to a more elaborated theoretical understanding of multimodal meaning within a social semiotic framework; yet this ambition gives rise to new unforeseen conceptual issues that have not been made explicit nor adequately addressed in the existing literature.[4.] Thus, on the one hand, this paper presents the claim that teaching's unique contribution to multimodality studies may be to account for emergent meaning i.e., the creation of a new (semantic) whole that is greater than its parts. On this view, Fauconnier and Turner's concept of *vital relations*, semantic structures between mental spaces appearing through a conceptualization process, might aptly describe such emergent meaning created through integration of multiple modalities[5.6]

Social semiotic multimodality is the study of the modalities or semiotic systems like writing, speech, images, music, gesture, color etc. that people use to communicate and interact in social settings, including both face-to-face interaction and texts. It examines both the processes and products (multimodal texts) of semiotic work in all social contexts.

As I pointed out in the introduction, several authors have suggested combining cognitive and social semiotic perspectives. While I acknowledge the usefulness of such an approach, existing work tends to focus on combining analytical tools. It is, to a lesser degree, concerned with how cognitive and semiotic perspectives may inform the conceptualization of multimodal meaning. However, I find this necessary in order to fully appreciate and evaluate a contribution of teaching for the study of multimodality. Thus, in this section, I discuss how meaning as a multimodal phenomenon could be understood. To discuss the conceptualization of multimodal meaning, and the extent to which one can integrate teaching into a social semiotic framework, I will depart from these two perspectives on multimodal meaning.[7.8]

While the interaction metaphor of multimodal meaning may be productive for analyses of multimodal texts, it introduces several problems. First, it creates an ontological problem of multimodal meaning potential because a multimodal phenomenon is conceptualized as a unity that can be analytically divided into atomic monomodal meaning potentials. However, from this does not necessarily follow that each of these monomodal parts has any individual significance. One might argue that it is only through their combination into a whole that they become meaningful. Thus, such a conceptualization relegates multimodal meaning to the backstage and focuses instead on the meaning potential of individual modalities and their individual contributions to the overall meaning. Second, the notion of multimodal meaning as combination seems to be a backward understanding of the multimodal phenomenon under study. I want to argue that the multimodal meaning should be the point of departure for analysis rather than its result.[10]

The integration metaphor conceptualizes multimodal meaning as qualitatively different from modalities that contribute to its creation. It is a whole that is more or greater than its parts; in other words, it is a gestalt. However, theoretical work on multimodal meaning that builds on this integration metaphor is less developed than its interaction counterpart. This article seeks to advance the theoretical development further.[9]

As Turner writes, the construction of blended meaning is achieved by projecting and condensing the selected elements and relations in and between input spaces within the blended space, whereby meaning is created that goes beyond what is signified by the individual elements of the various input spaces. To Fauconnier and Turner, structural relations across input spaces are responsible for establishing new relations within the blended space; these are what they call “vital relations”. [11.15] They distinguish between outer- and inner-space relations, with the former compressed into the latter within the blend. Only through blending is it possible to establish inner-space relations, and they only exist in the blended space, constituting emergent meanings. In the Grim Reaper example, there are several vital relations of Cause-Effect: Death causes a chain of effects, e.g. from death of a human being to a corpse; from a corpse to its burial; from the decay of a living body into a skeleton. Some of these vital relations, not all, are structurally connected into another Whole-Parts vital relation that in the blend condensed into one and the same entity- a new, emergent entity labeled Uniqueness where e.g. the body and the skeleton become parts of the Grim Reaper (the example also includes other vital relations, cf. Fauconnier & Turner. [17.14]

I want to go beyond this claim to make an argument for TEACHING as a theory of multimodal meaning that explicitly explains how this cognitive perspective complements social semiotic theory and addresses multimodal meaning in a novel way. Especially, this aspect of the theory – the concept of vital relations –

is a significant contribution to a theoretical understanding of multimodal meaning from an integration perspective on multimodality.

This integration enables the web user (quite unproblematically) to perceive, think about, and refer to “Anne Anker” and “communication adviser” not as two separate pieces of information but as a unique, unified entity, “communication adviser Anne Anker”. This way, teaching enables us to analyze more precisely the part-whole structure that the social semiotic analysis described. This is just one out of several vital relations that could be identified in the example. [16]

For purposes of clarification, teaching might (again) benefit from reflections found in social semiotic literature on the “gains and losses” of different modalities and differences in terms of the affordances that different modalities provide for making meaning. An essential insight in this regard is that meaning is both dependent on resources and situationally anchored, so even if we would attempt to talk about similar meanings constructed in different modalities, they would in fact be different due to usage in different situational contexts. [12.13]

At first glance, cognitive and semiotic frameworks work with a concept of meaning-making prompts. To Kress, “communication is the response to a prompt [in the social environment]; that communication happens only when there is ‘interpretation’”. In the words of Wong “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 attention”. Semiosis, therefore, involves an active process of constantly interpreting meaning. Thus, Kress’s notion of “prompt” could link social semiotics to a cognitive perspective on how a (multimodal) text triggers conceptual processing in the interpretation process. But when we analyze the concept of prompts, i.e. initiators of blending processes, I suggest that there are differences in the grammatical devices that cognitive and social frameworks identify as prompts for (multimodal) meaning construction, and that therefore it is questionable if the combination of these frameworks is a “perfect fit”.

To make this argument, we first need to draw a parallel between a social semiotic visual and a linguistic grammar to be able to imagine how a social semiotic account of visual prompts might correspond to a social semiotic account of linguistic prompts. The argument will then be: Wong describes the visual structures in social semiotic terms and goes on to claim that these structures would be prompts in teaching’s terms. These visual structures would either be ‘narrative’ or ‘conceptual’. In images, narrative structures are realized by vectors, or lines in the image indicating actions by participants; by contrast, conceptual structures have no vectors, but are statically displayed organizations of entities realized by a group of similar, aligned elements or as a part-whole structure. Next, if we turn to language, we can express similar ideational content, in terms of social semiotic grammar ‘material processes’ expressing actions (doing and happening), and ‘relational processes’ expressing structures and relations between elements (being and having). Both are realized by verbal groups. Participants involved in these processes are realized by nominal groups.

Thus, if we imagine material processes in language to be analogous with narrative structure, and relational processes with visual conceptual structures, then following Wong’s line of thought, material and relational processes may be said to function as linguistic “prompts” for conceptualization.

However, if we compare the social semiotic description of grammatical elements that might serve as linguistic prompts to the grammatical devices described by Fauconnier as prompts, we can see that he is actually pointing to different elements. In his work on mental spaces, Fauconnier describes prompts in language as grammatical devices for construction and connection of mental spaces. As an aside, he also points to prompts in similar studies of non-verbal discourses, such as in images, music, human–computer

interaction, theater, gesture, and drawing, thereby demonstrating that these cognitive phenomena are not exclusive to language alone. Among others, Fauconnier lists the following linguistic categories:

This paper has critically discussed Fauconnier and Turner's work on mental spaces and blending as a theory of multimodality from the perspective of social semiotics. I have argued that teaching could be a way to advance our understanding of multimodal meaning as an integration of modalities that create emergent semantic structures. But on these key terms, teaching is still underdeveloped, entailing theoretical, methodological and analytical problems for analysis of multimodal data: First, the concepts of modality and multimodality, second, indifference to the specific modalities of communication used in a text, and finally, inconsistency in cognitive grammatical descriptions of multimodal prompts which makes teaching incompatible with a social semiotic framework.

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