LINGUE
DI
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MULTIMODAL BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

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Introduction

Introduction

Multimodality is an approach to text studies and human activity that provides different answers in a wide-ranging set of social contexts.

Baldry (2008: 242)

1. A MULTIMODAL VIEW

The term *multimodality* distinguishes an approach to communication, and textual interpretation, which underlines the importance of the role played by images, sounds and gestures in expressing ideas, attitudes and feelings. In this view communication is seen as a complex "languaging activity" (Cortese 2001) realized by a combination of communicative resources (*modes*) other than *words* which co-occur in the making-meaning process. So, a face-to-face conversation is a multimodal *text* because it is realized through speech, gestures and visual cues and not just through speech only. Similarly, a web page is a multimodal *text* because it is realized through words on screen and visual cues on static pages as well as in speech, gestures and visual sequences, if audio/video materials are activated when available.

Multimodality is often associated to *multimediality*, an overused term which defines in computing "the use of sound, pictures and film in addition to text on a screen" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The term has been extended to other environments, like teaching and art, which now commonly draw on multimedia sources (and materials) to display information. The use of computers and interactive whiteboards in schools (Jewitt 2006, 2008) as well as multimedia facilities in museum exhibitions like photographic images (Pang Kah Meng 2004), videos and interactive devices are examples of this turn to technology-mediated learning, a multimodal environment designing the futures of literacy (Kress 2003; Sinker 2000; Snyder & Beavis 2004; Snyder 1998; Cope & Kalantzis 2000).

In technology-mediated communication, however, media display specific properties and *modes* which are not always the same. As Fairclough (2006: 98) observes:

> Specific media have both particular technical properties which constitute possibilities and constraints for communication – an obvious example is that television is a visual as well as auditory medium whereas radio isn't, so television allows communication which is multi-modal.

So, although *multimodality* and *multimediality* do not mean the same thing, they are closely inter-related and more complex multimodal (and multifunctional) texts are constructed as technology advances. Examples of this growing multimedia/multimodal complexity are smart phone models in the mobile phone sector and electronic newspapers and magazines. Both media have incorporated visual, acoustic, interactive options realized in complex multimodal *texts*. The growing tendency to amplify the range of interactive resources in communication media, that is to become increasingly more *multifunctional*, is an intrinsic feature of multimodality, as noted in Burn & Parker (2003: 9):

> Interestingly, the word 'multimodality' is currently being used in the computing and telecommunications industries to refer to the way in which devices are moving away from a specialism in one mode to the use of several – so that your mobile phone will not only be for speaking and listening, but will take and receive pictures, enable text, show moving images, and access the internet.

This move away from specialism does not only concern technological gadgets like mobile phones but, as mentioned above, is changing the format of traditional communication media, such as newspapers and magazines. This online turn demands new digital literacies. The electronic reader needs to become familiar with the hypertextual logic of web texts (Lemke 2002; Cranny-Francis 2004) as well as become aware of the fundamental structures and architecture that underlie the visual designs of the web (Walton 2004; de Vries 2008).

2. Social semiotics

> Social semiotics of visual communication involves the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted.
>
> (Jewitt & Oyama 2001: 134)

The approach to the analysis of multimodal texts is often described as a *semiotic* approach. *Semiotics* is the study of *signs* and images and relies on the idea that "similar understandings can be developed for systems of communication other than language" (Burn & Parker 2003: 1). Semiotics has a long history which dates back to pre-multimedia times. Traditional semiotics was developed at the

beginning of the 20th century and was modeled on de Saussure's (1916) theory of *sign-as-code*. His theory was based on the idea that *signs* (words, images, symbols, gestures) correspond to *meanings* (as a word corresponds to a concept/object) and that the connections between form (*signifiant*) and meaning (*signifié*) are fixed in a codified system, in a set of rules which can be shared and understood. Classic examples of this 'universal' union between *form* and *meaning* are the colour *red* signifying *danger*, the *stop* sign signifying *halt* in the highway code, a *nod* signifying *approval* in gestural communication (in the code of specific cultures) or linguistically, the sound/written word which realizes the meaning of a person/object/entity, like the sound form */tri:/* in the phonemic code and the written form *tree* indexing the corresponding object in English.

Multimodality (*multimodal theory)* is a more recent semiotic approach based on *social semiotics*, a theory of sign-making (like traditional semiotics) which, unlike de Saussure's abstract, codified model, sees communication, and technology-mediated communication, as a process rooted in society (Kress 1998), so that the ways (*modes*) used in the communicative process are understandable if they are located in cultural/societal contexts. In this view not only is language the way it is, because it is used by people in real life, but also the other semiotic modes are culturally constructed and are shaped by societal changes.

This approach has been developed by Kress & van Leeuwen (1996, 2001). In their seminal book: *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design* they have provided a systematic inventory of visual configurations [1] placed in different contexts. Their main argument is that contemporary society is shaped by visual communication which takes various forms (images, written texts, graphic elements) and these forms combine to construct a visual *design*, an integrated text, a "semiotic landscape". Therefore, we need to develop visual skills (*new visual literacies*) in order to understand the complexity of these semiotic landscapes.

In this perspective signs are therefore analyzed and interpreted by allocating considerable weight to the various semiotic modes which co-occur to build up the meaning-making process: the visual, the verbal, the gestural. As a consequence multimodality is definable as: "the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 20).

Two basic considerations stem from this principle: first, that language in the form of 'words on paper' (or 'words on screen' in its computerized version)

[1] Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory of representation is a transposition of Halliday's (1978) systemic functional analysis to the visual.

does not necessarily play the leading role in communication; second, that by assigning the same weight potential to the different semiotic modes actively at work, we automatically assume that they are all contributing to the final product. Therefore texts are *narrative representations* (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996), *stories* told visually and interpreted on the basis of key concepts related to visual culture.

Social semiotics challenges the somewhat fixed, codified, static view intrinsic in traditional sign representation. In the light of social semiotics the more dynamic term *resource* has been preferred to the term *sign* used in traditional semiotics, as observed in van Leeuwen (2005: 3):

> In social semiotics the term 'resource' is preferred, because it avoids the impression that 'what a sign stands for' is somehow pre-given, and not affected by its use.

Semiotic resources are subject to constant change because they have to adapt to the communicative needs of society. For example, the manuals used for giving instructions on how to use computers have become much more visual than in the past (Iedema 2003) and this can be extended to all manuals providing information on how to operate machines.

Social semiotics is a key of access to many visual configurations used in business and economic texts. Several semiotic *resources* anticipated in Kress and van Leeuwen's work, have been applied to the texts analyzed in the present volume. To mention just a few, the visual resource of *point of view* defined on the basis of camera *angle*, shows how different viewpoints in taking photographs reveal different *angles* (attitudinal differences) in the people represented. Other visual ways to express points of view and directions are vectorial and circular representations of data graphics.

Geometric shapes in the form of vectors, circles and boxes are not only used to project factual information in graphs or charts. When used in other contexts, like advertising, these forms act as *containers* of meaning and tend to fulfill functions which go beyond the literal, 'natural' realization of their shape. This occurs, for example, when circles contain other circles to indicate conceptual links or, on the contrary, when circles are represented in isolation to indicate conceptual separateness.

Other "tangible images" (Gotti 2003: 57) used in business and economics are the visual representations of economic metaphors which in political cartoons take the form of caricature, so that the proportions of economic events and of the actors involved are reflected *literally* in the exaggerated big/small dimensions of the people/objects represented.

A final consideration related to the impact of the visual mode on communication regards the close correlation between *form* and *meaning* which visual cues generate. This is due to the tendency for visual signs to be less arbitrary

than spoken language, a property which explains why in this environment the *literal* and *metaphorical* dimensions of discourse often converge.

Bloomfield's (1950: 156) concept of *symbolic forms*, originally meant to identify the nexus between *iconic sounds* (evocative sounds) and their associative meanings (as in onomatopoeia, alliteration, assonance), restates the direct link between *signifiant* and *signifié*. In his words symbolic forms "have a connotation of somehow illustrating the meaning more immediately than do ordinary speech-forms […] to the speaker it seems as if the sounds were especially suited to the meaning". Indeed most visuals are *symbolic forms* which illustrate the meaning more immediately than do ordinary speech-forms and this explains why the ability to *read* images is an essential pre-requisite for *reading* society.

1.

VISUAL CUES

Unit 1
VISUAL CUES

Seeing has, in our culture, become synonymous with understanding. We 'look' at a problem. We 'see' the point. We adopt a 'viewpoint'. We 'focus' on an issue. We 'see' things in perspective: the world 'as we see it' (rather than 'as we know it', and certainly not 'as we hear it' or 'as we feel it') has become the measure for what is 'real' and 'true'.

Kress & van Leeuwen (1996: 168)

1.1. FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

The *seeing* metaphor above sums up in a nutshell the extent of pervasiveness of visual culture in our society, not only as a representational medium but also as an interpretative tool, to the point that seeing has become synonymous with understanding.

Although a culture of the visual has always existed (there is nothing new about illustrating and representing reality with the help of images), the dimensions and scope of visual literacy have been increasingly magnified by technological progress. This has substantially favoured a gradual move from *page* to *screen* with repercussions on how screen pages are structured, on how we, as web readers, organize our approach to reading by deciding to adopt diversified **reading paths**, and on the very notion of *text* which is susceptible to constant change due the constraints imposed by the new media.

Just to have an overall idea of the impact that the page-to-screen move has had on texts, let us observe how information is organized visually on *The Economist* homepage (*Figure 1.1.*).

It is clear from the start that if we expect to adopt the *left-to-right* horizontal approach to reading, the **linear** reading method that we are used to applying when we read print materials, we are at a loss here. The web page is structured in a **non-linear** way, that is, it does not follow the natural (for us) left-to-right reading path. Moreover, information is anticipated in condensed form and contained graphically within *boxes* which act as information containers, or **framing devices**. It is also visually clear that the central part of the homepage, which reports in magnified format (hence visually foregrounds) a selection of

issues from the contents, indicates how information is prioritized on the page thus signaling **salience** (importance) and **newsworthiness** (what is new). Another important point is that the non-linear structure of the page allows web readers to choose their reading paths freely by selecting different trajectories, or **traversals** (Lemke 2002) and **anchor links**. The practice of reading hypertexts is defined in Burbules (1998: 103) as **hyperreading**.

Fig. 1.1. The Economist homepage (2008).

The non-linear structure of web texts has been compared to a set of Russian dolls:

> Electronic texts are a bit like a set of Russian dolls: as you read a screenful of text and click a link, you are taken to a new set of information and new links. You can keep going until all the links run out which, in some cases, will take the reader a long way from their starting point (often called a 'homepage').
>
> (Goddard 1998: 92)

Due to the capabilities of the web medium the process of choosing freely where to start and where to go, in order to retrieve the information we want to access, is simply faster than turning the pages of a printed book or newspaper, so the **web affordances** (literally what the web medium can afford) enhance our freedom to select information.

Moreover, the hypertextual nature of the medium, that is its organizational structure in layers, or **hypertexts**, favours a sort of *chain process* in information retrieval allowing more scope for expansion. It has been noted that hypertext discourse works like the spider diagrams commonly used for planning essays. This network-shaped structure for organizing information on the web generates the following navigation process:

> A page can be connected to maybe ten other pages, using hyperlinks, and then each of those ten pages can be connected to ten others, either on the same site or another site maybe thousands of miles away.
>
> (Boardman 2005: 15)

This *chain process* of intertextual linking has been defined by Ventola (2002, 2004) **semiotic spanning** because it involves extending the scope of web exploration to other fields (and discourses) not immediately related to the starting point of our navigation.

A cursory glance at *The Economist* homepage also reveals a certain amount of variety in the typology of informative materials within the framing boxes. Indeed, broadly speaking, these materials range from content reflecting the newspaper genre proper, such as the reproduction of the print edition cover page, the table of contents reported in the left column, the central section foregrounding newsworthiness and providing anchor links to the corresponding articles (leaders, special reports and so on). This homepage is also interspersed with promotional material of various kinds, such as the self-promotional material (*The Economist* advertising for *The Economist*) on the top banner, or the 'Advertisement' box at the bottom of the page.

❍ *Activity 1.1.*

Look at *The Financial Times* homepage below. How is information organized on the page (*Figure 1.2.*)?

Fig. 1.2. The Financial Times homepage (2008).

3.

CORPORATE VISIONS

Unit 3
CORPORATE VISIONS

> *[…] discourse plays an essential role in the construction of an enterprise as a unique and attractive entity. Discourse constructs and maintains the organizational self. It is by means of discourse that the organization remembers its history, creates visions for the future, and upholds its goals, policies and ideas.*
>
> Britt-Louise Gunnarsson (2005: 102)

3.1. CORPORATE VIEWS

> Organizations today take more efforts than ever in articulating and expressing their identities. New demands and organizational legitimacy require more explicit attempts to justify what the organization is and what it represents. A growing number of organizations feel the need to explain their existence through vision, mission and values statements, hence reflecting the intellectual and moral of individual leadership.
>
> Maria Isaksson (2005: 111)

There are many ways in which global corporations project their vision of *their* world both as an inside view, that is as a code of reference for training the company employees, and as an outside view, that is as a promotional strategy based on constructing a convincing image of the company to outsiders. Moreover, **corporate vision** is a societal matter. The values and beliefs conveyed by a corporation in the process of constructing a credible image are rooted in our society. As a result corporate culture, and corporate vision, can be influenced by societal changes and societal values.

There are various reasons why enterprises make their values and beliefs public. Broadly speaking, the need to acquire visibility on the global market is largely conditioned by the increasing global competition which forces companies to project their image strategically on the global market in order to keep up with their rivals. So, companies make their voices heard by stating their values and beliefs publicly. These public commitments are condensed in a company's **mission statement**, literally a statement of long-term entrepreneurial 'promises' imbued by a specific 'philosophy of life'. It has been noted

(Isaksson 2005) that mission statements are complex constructs characterized by the strategic interplay of *ethos* and *pathos*, that is to say that ethical and emotional linguistic traits are strategically located in this new emerging genre in order to construct credibility and appeal.

Which promises do global corporations make?

Let us look at the following extract taken from the Coca-Cola Company website:

(1) Our supplier diversity mission is to provide equal access to procurement opportunities for minority and women-owned enterprises (MWBEs). We have made a commitment to proactively building relationships with and purchasing goods and services from MWBEs to the maximum extent possible. This mission underscores our long-standing commitment to being a leader in supplier diversity and a model corporate citizen in the communities we serve. In addition, it is keeping with the Coca-Cola Promise "… to benefit and refresh everyone who is touched by our business".

The extract above highlights in a nutshell, the guidelines of the company's 'behaviour'. This entails the promise to foster business development in marginalized communities (and act as "a model corporate citizen" by fulfilling this charitable purpose) as well as the promise to benefit and refresh everyone who is touched by their business, in short the promise to refresh the globe both literally and metaphorically.

❍ *Activity 3.1.*

Compare the Coca-Cola Company's mission statement with the following extract taken from the McDonald's Company website.
Which similarities can you see?

(2) The mission of McDonalds Corporation Supplier Diversity is to deliver superior supplier performance through highly qualified minority, women, and small businesses that enhance the overall McDonalds Corporation Customer Experience; support continued economic growth in our diverse communities; and increase global market share.

The following two extracts (again respectively taken from the Coca-Cola Company website and from the McDonald's Company website) further reflect corporate promises. Note how business and ethos seamlessly interact in both examples:

(3) Our mission is to create a growth strategy that allows us to bring good to the world… by refreshing people every day and inspiring them with optimism through our brands and our actions.

(4) McDonald's Corporation's commitment to diversity is based on the recognition that it is not just a moral and ethical issue, but also a business issue. Diversity is an integral part of our current and future business success.

The Coca-Cola Company's 'biblical' mission of "bringing good to the world" responds to a precise "growth strategy" based on combining good actions with selling their products globally. So, the link between business and ethos is implicitly stated. However, in example (4) this correlation becomes explicit. Also the notion of *diversity* which is central in McDonald's global policy is justified through the voice of the corporation in business terms as well as in ethical terms. The close association of business and ethical purposes is also conveyed by visuals.

The image below is an example of how the Coca-Cola Company presents its ethical 'appearance' (*Figure 3.1.*).

The first thing we note is that the young Africans portrayed in the photo are shown against a neutral background and are arranged in a symmetrical fashion, in a closed circle. The circular frame of the composition suggests that the children belong to the same category despite gender or age differences.

The concept of community belonging is further enhanced by other similarities which unite the young Africans in the picture. These are the skin colour, the items of clothing and the children's smiling attitude. These similar features perform a dual function. On the one hand they connote each child in the picture, that is they are each child's *parts* or **possessive attributes** (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996: 89), on the other hand, because these attributes are the same, they create a visual concept of sameness. Moreover, this image functions as a symbol of ethical solidarity thanks to the re-freshing action of the Coca-Cola Company which is here reflected in the children's clothing and in their smiling attitude.

Fig. 3.1.
Ethical 'appearance'
(Source: The Coca-Cola Company website, 2008).

7.

DISPLAYING EVIDENCE

Unit 7
DISPLAYING EVIDENCE

Tell me, I forget.
Show me, I remember.
Involve me, I understand.
(Chinese proverb)

7.1. CLEAR AND SIMPLE

As we saw in Unit 6, data graphics display "measured quantities by means of the combined use of points, lines, a coordinate system, numbers, symbols, words, shading, and color" (Tufte 2001: 8). Data graphics are, therefore, **multimodal texts** whose three main purposes are presentation, analysis and data storage. Well-designed data graphics are useful instruments for communicating and reasoning about quantitative information in a simple but powerful way, which "is not tied to the unique features of a particular language" (Tufte 2001: 9). This last characteristic, the marginalization of words, is of crucial relevance in the face of the decreasing importance of verbal communication due to technology-driven globalization.

Nowadays, academic lectures and talks, management meetings of multinational firms, and organizational communication in general have to take into account their multicultural as well as visually literate audiences, who would rather watch than read. Thus, the ability to communicate and motivate through multimedia representations that dos not only depend on words is becoming more and more imperative (Schrage 2001: 25). From this viewpoint, data graphics are indeed a true means for multimodal communication, as they present information through numbers, pictures *and* words. The fact that some "900 billion to 2 trillion images of statistical graphics" are printed worldwide each year (Tufte 2001: 9) confirms the importance of this form of visual communication.

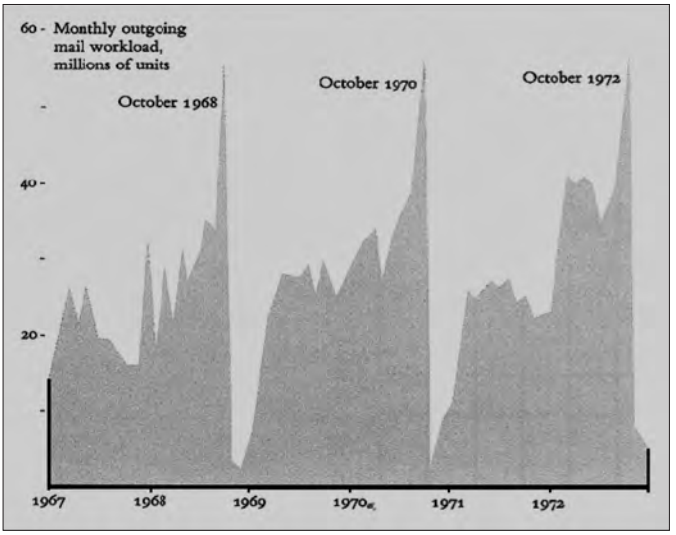
According to Edward R. Tufte, a leading scholar in the field of statistical evidence and information design, a well-designed data graphic – one that truly explains the quantitative data object of analysis – is a data graphic that communicates complex quantitative ideas with *clarity* and *simplicity* (2001: 13). In order to do so, data graphics must: (1) show the data and avoid distorting what

they have to say, (2) often present many numbers in a small space, (3) make large data sets coherent, (4) induce the viewer to think about the content, (5) encourage the eye to compare different pieces of data, and (6) be closely integrated with the statistical and verbal descriptions of a data set.

Do the following data graphics conform to the principles of clarity and simplicity? Why is it so?

The area chart shown in *Graphic 7.1.* is, for Tufte, a well-designed data graphic that conforms to the principles of clarity and simplicity (2001: 37). The chart is worth 700 words, the number of words used in the news report titled "Franked Mail Tie to Voting Shown" from *The New York Times* (June 1, 1973). The report describes how incumbent representatives exploit their free mailing privileges (franked mail) to advance their re-election campaigns. The area chart shows, *simply* and *clearly*, the core piece of information of the whole article; namely, that the outgoing mail of the U.S. House of Representatives peaks every two years, just before the Election Day (the Tuesday between November 2nd and 8th).

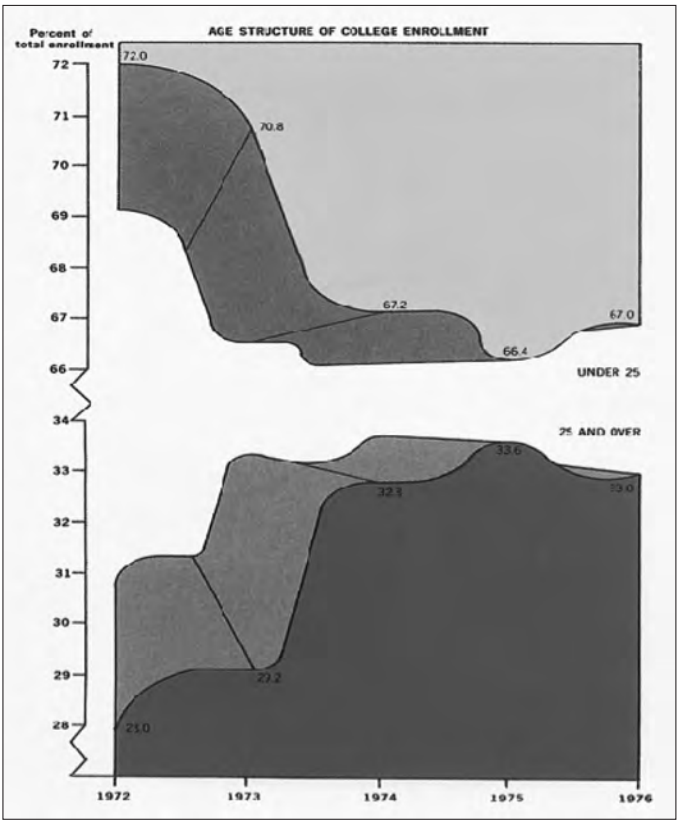
On the other hand, the area chart shown in *Graphic 7.2.* is, in Tufte's words, possibly "the worst graphic ever to find its way into print" (2001: 118). Published in an issue of the magazine *American Education* in the 1970s, it is an attempt to embellish the data structure with a fake perspective. By doing so, it draws the viewer's attention to the graphical decoration instead of drawing it to the substance of the data.



Graphic 7.1. Outgoing mail of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1967-1972 (Source: Tufte, 2001).

However, what makes this area chart a bad data graphic – a "chartjunk" (Tufte 2001: 107) – is not only the three-dimensional display but also the unnecessary use of as many as five different shades of grey (five different colours in the original) to report only five pieces of data, since one can easily calculate the share (i.e. percentage) of students above 25 by subtracting from 100 the percentage of students below 25. As a consequence, a data graphic is *clear* and *simple* as long as it shows the data, avoids distortions, makes especially large data sets coherent, encourages comparison of different data items, and serves a specific purpose. This area chart is neither *clear* nor *simple*.

A much clearer and simpler visual display of the data set discussed is the bar chart in *Graphic 7.3.*, where each bar represents the percentage of students over 25 enrolled in each year (from 1972 to 1976). As observed above, the percentage of students under 25 is ease to see from the chart.



Graphic 7.2. Age structure of college enrollment, 1972-7 (Source: Tufte, 2001).