Critical Multimodal Analysis of Digital Discourse
Preliminary Remarks

Ilaria Moschini
Università degli Studi di Firenze (<ilaria.moschini@unifi.it>)

The theme to which the language section of *LEA* is dedicated this year – that is the relationship between Human Studies and new technologies – is a very relevant issue in the contemporary scenario. Indeed, it is an item of shared knowledge that the spreading of new technologies, along with phenomena like globalization and localization, have led to the pervasive creation and to the massive sharing of very complex digitally mediated texts that not only present varied semiotic compositions, but also feature multiple (and often hybridized) references to different socio-cultural contexts. In addition to that, many of these texts are frequently produced, exchanged and "experienced" without the mediation of traditional signifying (or normative) agencies.

In such settings, an awareness of how different semiotic systems concur to make meaning, together with the knowledge of the different linguistic and socio-cultural communities that may take part in a communicative act, constitute invaluable tools to help decoding both the instances of distributed textuality and the eco-social experiences signified in the same acts. Moreover – as the New London Group envisioned in the distant 1990s (Cazden, Fairclough *et al.* 1996) – these competences are the founding tiles of a "broader view of literacy", a "multiliterate" (ivi*,* 60) pedagogical process aimed at creating citizens able to cope with heterogeneous medial (and un-mediated) environments.

As a matter of fact, many and multidisciplinary are the skills that people are nowadays required to have if they wish to fully express their citizenship: at first, they need to be able to "crack codes", that is to recognize the different modal affordances used in multi-semiotic texts. Then – in order to use those artifacts functionally – they need to understand their compositional meaning (that is obviously influenced by the particular socio-cultural contexts out of which they originate), as well as the different cultural and social functions performed by the same texts in environments that tend to converge more and more. Finally, since "changes in discourse are dialectically interconnected with changes in other non-discursive social elements" (Fairclough 2011, 11), people need to develop a critical conscience if they want to detect and decode the worldviews that are entexted in such semiotic artifacts.

In this global and digitally networked scenario, "multimodality" can offer a valid help because it is an interdisciplinary approach that anchors sociocultural analysis to solid bases of linguistic and semiotic analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Kress 2010). Indeed,

Multimodality provides complex fine grained analysis to get at the details of texts and interactions in which meaning is understood as being realized in the iterative connection between the meaning potential of a material semiotic artifact/text, the meaning potential of the social/cultural environment it is encountered in, and the resources and knowledge that people bring to these. (Bezemer, Jewitt 2012, <http://www.ncrm. ac.uk/resources/video/RMF2012/whatis.php?id=32d3a00>, 11/2014)

Historically, multimodality stems out of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's seminal book *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996), where the two scholars drew upon Michael Halliday's functional theories of meaning and socio-semiotic approach to language to write their "grammar of contemporary visual design in 'Western' cultures" (3). Indeed, according to Halliday, there exists an indissoluble connection between society, culture and language, since culture can be defined as a "set of semiotic systems, a set of systems of meaning, all of which interrelate" (Halliday and Hasan 1985, 4), while semiotic systems are "system[s] of meanings that constitute the 'reality' of the culture,… the higher level *stratum* to which language is related" (Halliday 1978, 123).

Since the publication of Kress and van Leeuwen's pioneering work (1996), Multimodal Studies have flourished[1] and the interest in this research approach has progressively increased across many disciplines, because "as speech and writing no longer appear adequate in understanding representation and communication in a variety of fields,… the need to understand the complex ways in which speech and writing interact with 'non-verbal' modes can no longer be avoided" (Jewitt 2009, 3). In addition to that, multimodality – being concerned with socially and culturally situated constructions of meaning – is a powerful tool to decode how discourses are communicated and semiotically encoded and "can [thus] be applied to investigate power inequality and ideology in human interactions and artifacts" (Bezemer and Jewitt 2010, 180-181).

A rising strand in multimodality, named "Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis" (Machin 2013, van Leeuwen 2013, Djonov and Zhao 2014), aims at highlighting the above mentioned critical afflatus, which is pervasively affected by the founding example of Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge's work (1978, 1988). Indeed, as Machin (2013) affirms:

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[1] For a more detailed account of the development of multimodality and its main theoretical strands, see Moschini 2013, 647-655.

Discourses are communicated not only through political speeches and news items, but through entertainment media such as computer games and movies, in the social and material culture of everyday life… (347)

[These] semiotic resources are continually used in new and fresh ways and [can] be harnessed by different kind of interests to disseminate discourses that serve strategic ideological purposes. (354)

[Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies] dig deeper into communicative activities [and] help us to reveal discourses in ways not necessarily apparent at a casual viewing. (353)

In line with such kind of socio-cultural investigation, the present section of LEA explores the crucial theme of the multimodal analysis of digital discourse since "… the discourses that need the scrutiny of a critical eye are now overwhelmingly multimodal and mediated by digital systems…" (van Leeuwen 2013). With regard to that issue, four scholars – who have largely worked in the field of multimodality – have been asked to show the role that multimodal analysis (alone or in combination with other theoretical perspectives) can play in understanding and problematizing digital phenomenological instantiations that belong to different areas; as well as to offer hints for the decoding of their related discourses.

Indeed, in the first essay, Adami examines "crossposting", that is the activity of posting the same message to various online platforms, and sketches the basic steps of a framework to analyze the phenomenon. She also applies the theorized framework to the study of a UK food blogger, outlining how – through such digital recontextualization – the blogger shapes her identity and models the relationship with her audience in different semiotically constrained environments.

Shifting from bottom-up to top-down digital artifacts, Maier discusses the persuasive strategies exploited by the Coca-cola company to communicate their commitment to both environmental protection and gender empowerment in a *corpus* of short videos, produced in the context of a program designed to empower female entrepreneurs. The films are analyzed within an interdisciplinary methodological framework that encompasses corporate social responsibility communication, multimodal discourse analysis and gender theory.

On her side, Petroni reflects on hyper-modal meaning-making processes at a conceptual and theoretical level and explores three paradoxes of digital communication that underpin both the representations and the understanding of technology and that appear to encode some contradictory relations in contemporary society. These antinomies involve pervasive practices in online settings like "remediating", "framing", "linking" and "linguistic entropy", the "informational disorder of digital environments".

Dealing explicitly with the masking or the highlighting of personal identities in texts (Fairclough 2003), Sindoni's essay plunges into the blog that the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize Malala Yousafzai wrote in 2009, the authenticity of

which has been challenged. Interweaving tools from different fields of studies (such as corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, translation studies and multimodality), Sindoni's paper addresses the complex question as to whether Malala's text has been manipulated by corporate media.

The present section of *LEA* is enriched by the precious voice of Theo van Leeuwen, who is – as anticipated – one of the founders (along with Gunther Kress) of Multimodal Studies. Van Leeuwen has generously accepted to talk to us about a wide range of topics. Indeed, his interview covers issues that go from the development of Multimodal Studies to the critical analysis of global cultural industries; from the role of receivers in the contemporary global media scenario to the multimodal exploration of semiotic software; from the opposition between Cognitivism and Empiricism to the tension between specialized and interdisciplinary approaches.

Eventually, he has addressed the theme of the function of the Humanities in a technologically mediated world and, with an interdisciplinary perspective (also fostered by this journal), he has advocated the creation of new bridges, new collaborations among scholars from different areas, as well as among "people working in the field of Multimodality and the designers and engineers who shape the semiotic landscape today" (van Leeuwen, *infra*, 215-234).

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