Semiotic work
Applied Linguistics and a social semiotic account of Multimodality

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This article imagines a tussle between Multimodality, focused on ‘modes,’ and Applied Linguistics (AL), based on ‘language.’ A Social Semiotic approach to MM treats speech and writing as modes with distinct affordances, and, as all modes, treats them as ‘partial’ means of communication. The implications of partiality confound long-held assumptions of the sufficiency of ‘language’ for all communicational needs: an assumption shared by AL. Given MM’s plurality of modes and the diversity of audiences, design moves into focus, with a shift from competent performance to apt design. Principles of composition — e.g. linearity versus modularity — become crucial, raising the question at the heart of this paper: how do AL and MM deal with the shape of the contemporary semiotic landscape?

Keywords: multimodality, social semiotics, modularity, linearity, writing, affordances, design, audience

1. Applied Linguistics in the environment of a multimodal semiotic world

The semiotic world which “we” — generations above the age of say, forty or so — still regard as normal, is changing: rapidly, and in some ways changing out of recognition. ‘Language,’ confidently assumed (in the ‘West’) as the guarantor of what is distinctively human, rational, essential for reflection, capable of expressing every aspect of human life, is being challenged in its hitherto central position by other means of making meaning, by other means of shaping identity. That challenge goes by the name ‘Multimodality’ (MM). This article raises some points around that challenge and asks what significance and possible effects its assumptions might have on or in the domain of Applied Linguistics (AL).
The question arises where, in the disciplinary landscape between Linguistics — as the study of language — and MM — with its claim to be providing an encompassing frame for considering meaning in all its manifestations — do we place AL? Does it remain close to Linguistics still, drawing major inspirations, theoretical orientations and methods from there? There are areas of work in AL where the relation to Linguistics as a discipline and supplier of theory and tools is clear and close: contrastive linguistics, second language acquisition, lexicography, stylistics, forensic linguistics. Other areas of work in AL deal with issues which are strongly focussed on language — e.g. bilingualism, literacy, translation studies, language pedagogy / didactics — though without necessarily drawing on (core areas of) Linguistics: often drawing more strongly on sociological, anthropological, literary, psychological, pedagogic theoretical sources and methods. Yet other areas of AL also deal with language, though their connection with the discipline of Linguistics is tenuous or non-existent — Conversation Analysis (with its origins in Sociology), many forms of Discourse Analysis, as examples.

Given the large expansion of the kinds of work in AL, we might ask whether there has been a reasonably parallel development of the scope of Linguistics matching the widening interests of AL? Has theoretical development in the one been able to supply the tools newly needed by the other? To some extent, similar concerns did appear in Linguistics over much the same time: with research and teaching in Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics, Pragmatics, Stylistics, leading, at the very least, to a large area of overlapping interest and development between the two. This, of course, begs the question of the boundary between Linguistics and AL.

It is not my aim to trace or explore that boundary. Rather, it is to establish kinds and points of connection between AL and MM; or, how questions posed in and by the latter might affect the former. That would make it possible to speculate about effects which the emergence of MM might have on some or all the activities encompassed under the label AL. A cursory look at the activities supported by the International Association of Applied Linguistics — AILA, (or of national associations such as the British Association of Applied Linguistics — BAAL, in always distinctly different ways), shows a wide spread of work: it is not always clear whether or how ‘language’ is the focus (rather than say, pedagogy, or communication, or learning, or ‘recall’ for instance); or, directly to the point, to what extent Linguistics (of whatever kind) is drawn on, and ‘applied.’ In areas mentioned above — Contrastive Linguistics (e.g. Fisiak 1981); Second Language Acquisition (e.g. Lado 1957; König & Gast 2007; Ellis 2008); Lexicography (e.g. Hartmann 2003); Forensic linguistics (e.g. Coulthard 1992), Linguistics is clearly the source of theory, methods, description. In other areas that is less the case.
The history of AL provides the reason for its name: an involvement, in the anglo-phone world of the 1940ties and 1950ties, in Language Teaching and, somewhat later and to a lesser extent, in (Machine) Translation. For both of these, certain kinds of Linguistics (at that time largely structuralist versions) were essential tools. The application of structuralist linguistics during and after WW2 in vast programmes for the teaching of languages (“pattern drill” being the trademark form of didactics) left its legacy into the 1960ties and beyond. From there on, ‘application’ in an ever wider sense has characterized AL. One example is that of ‘Language Policy’ in the post-war era of decolonization. However, as the areas of application have changed, so, inevitably, have the disciplines and theories invoked and applied as tools.

If the characteristics of those earlier activities had provided the name, the shifts in the foci of work since then make a case for a more fitting label (a clumsy label, which I am not advocating, such as “Studies in Language-related issues” might not be a knock-out winner, but would indicate a direction). A real shift has occurred: from application of a discipline, to identification of a problem-domain and the assembling of tools relevant to dealing with issues in that domain. Linguistics remains a central resource whenever it is closely connected to the relevant problem; beyond that, it has become one disciplinary resource among others.

‘Language’, as speech or writing, remains an anchoring-point in thinking and working in AL. Here, however, the reference-point to be discussed is MM. Its material resources are many and varied; they go well beyond speech and writing. ‘Material’ in the sense here employed refers to those phenomena which are accessible to and for engagement by the ‘senses’, the (human) sensorium. All of these “material resources” impinge more or less closely on the present domain of AL, in ways both distinct yet closely connected. For one, the ever-increasing presence of multimodal texts in the world at large already has shaping effects on ‘central’ aspects of speech and writing. Two, there will be effects on the ecology of the landscape of meaning and communication, and with that, effects on the social valuations of speech and writing. Three, the increasing presence of multimodal texts poses a question: will AL expand its domain of ‘relevance’ overtly; and with that, will it have recourse to the disciplines, theories and tools needed to deal with newly prominent phenomena — semiotic entities, processes and relations — which go well beyond speech and writing?

The first of these points is already having effects on the ‘entities’ of speech and writing, as well as on larger-level principles of composition: whether syntactic (sentence forms, clause types, e.g.); textual (intra-textual and extra-textual entities and phenomena, such as ‘paragraphs’, textual organization, forms of cohesion / coherence e.g.); vocal or other features (e.g. tone of voice, intonation, principles and resources of meaning-making beyond those of syntax and lexis). The second
point, the change in the ecologies of meaning and communication, will be accom-
panied by a broad reconfiguration of the place of ‘language’ in the social / cultural / semiotic / epistemological world: it will quite rapidly lose its present pre-eminent, central place; that will be taken, as occasions demand, by other modes. The effects of this on epistemology and ontology broadly, and with that on every aspect of the domain of culture, cannot be assessed seriously at this stage.

The third point adds weight to questions around the appropriateness of the name ‘AL’, as much as to questions around its scope.

The effects will be far-reaching. For instance, things hitherto done by speech or writing will be done by other semiotic means. A concept might no longer be explained by ‘words’ but by an image or a gesture. That is, whereas language had been regarded as the resource that provided a ‘meta-language’ with its ‘meta-
forms’, now other modes take on the role of providing ‘meta-forms’ specific to particular modes. Or, increasingly, multimodal semiotic compositions displace the former largely written-only texts. This applies already in an especially evident manner with communicational practices and entities involving the screens of the ‘new media’. All these will change our present, still traditional and still relatively secure sense of what speech and writing are: what they ‘are for’. They will unsettle and then unmake our (still) present sense of their centrality in the social-semiotic world.

In this turbulent (social and) semiotic environment, every element affects every other. That extends to a crucial factor not mentioned so far: the impact of contemporary cultural technologies involved in meaning (-making) and in the means of dissemination of meaning-as-text. By ‘technologies’ I mean a range of socially-made, cultural resources, which are involved in making meanings material; which have shaping effects on the meanings made; and which are involved in the display and distribution of these meanings-as-texts. They are the technologies of representation — modes, used in making meanings material; the technologies of production, both material resources such as pens, paper, appliances — digital and non-digital, and non-material semiotic resources such as genres, frames, cohesive devices, discourses; and, third, the technologies used in the display / distribution / dissemination of meanings-as-messages: the media broadly speaking, both traditional and new. All of these have specific effects in making texts-as-messages.

In the Social Sciences and Humanities, MM is very new: just on twenty years old. However the energetic and enthusiastic take-up of the concept means that there already exist significant differences in understanding and uses of the term, and of empirical engagement with MM. Here it is essential to be aware of three distinct and connected factors. First, the ‘world now’ differs hugely from the world in which AL started its life; in fundamental ways. Second, disciplines accumulate a constantly growing baggage of issues over the course of their histories, loath to
shed any, yet ever more encumbered by their past. Third, the social, cultural, political, economic and technological world of the origin of AL would now be barely if at all recognizable in any of its major contours; with enormous consequences for its purposes, aims and its ethical possibilities. This leads to the core of this article: the notion of ‘communication’ of the early years of AL, which gave it coherence, has changed out of recognition: away from its then certain location in ‘language’ and now scattered across a wide domain of social and semiotic means, resources and practices.

2. A sketch of multimodality in social semiotic theory

It is not possible to speak ‘on behalf of’ MM; there is no agreed definition of MM as such. First, whether in my discussion here, or by others, there is a vagueness, a vacillation often, in the use of the term Multimodality: an ambiguity between naming a phenomenon ‘out there’ in the social-semiotic world, and the name for an ‘approach’, a theory for research and practice around that phenomenon.

Second, the ‘take-up’ of the term and its use depends on the interests and needs of practitioners, researchers or theorists. Attitudes to and uses of the term MM in the general area of the Humanities and Social Sciences range across a broad spectrum, from what one might characterize as “common sense positions” to “theory-based positions”. The latter themselves show significant differences. Researchers and theorists who use a “common-sense position” tend to leave their existing theoretical frameworks and assumptions pretty much in place: maybe with some ‘tinkering’ at the edges. Those who hold “theory-based positions” tend to integrate MM into the theoretical framework(s) which they use. To make my perspective clear: I locate myself in the “theory based position”; with interests clustering around meaning, meaning-making, meaning-makers, agency. The theoretical frame I use is Social Semiotics, which is centrally concerned with these issues.

“Common sense positions” might be represented by views such as “You know, I have always been interested in / done MM”, with many versions “MM has always been around; it’s nothing new”; “When I read a novel, I am very aware of its MM, say in the range of metaphors used”; “Of course I consider images, wherever they are used”; or “What makes you think that language and writing are no longer important?” A linguist might say, exasperated: “Of course I am aware that there is ‘tone of voice’ and ‘facial expression’; and yes, I know that these things mean! But extra-linguistic features are not my concern: they are extra-linguistic!” Within “common sense positions” — whether in practical activities or in research — MM is frequently seen as ‘adding yet another thing to be attended to’. “Adding to” is felt as ‘increasing the workload’, ‘increasing the complexity of the research materials’;
or as ‘diluting attention, distracting from the real focus of the work’; and so on. In research settings objections might emerge in the form “Tell me, who would have the time to transcribe all this stuff?”

“Adding to” misses the point. As with all theoretical effort, the aim is to get a better ‘handle’ on what ‘the world in the frame’ is like, and how it might best be accounted for. At the most general level, the aim is to achieve a comprehensively transformed perspective of a problem domain, and to turn that new perspective into the ‘taken-for-granted’ basis informing research and practices.

At the other end of the spectrum are the “theory-based positions”. Here MM (in its ‘strong sense’) is treated as constituting one integrated, coherent domain of resources for issues central to the respective discipline and theory. Given the novelty of MM, neither the domain and its theorization nor its categories and entities are anywhere near fully understood, described, ‘established’. Most scholars working with MM understand that most or all the cultural resources for representation included in the frame of MM, have been the object of attention previously in a range of distinct disciplines, over often long periods. Art History had dealt with image; Psychology with gesture; Literary scholarship with writing; Film Studies with moving image, lighting, music, soundtrack, among others; Anthropology with dance. In each case, a discipline had brought its questions to the exploration and theorization of a specific cultural resource, image, say, or movement, and had elaborated an understanding from its perspective with its specific questions. Often several disciplines had given extensive attention to (the ‘same’) resource; often one discipline had given attention to several of these resources.

MM is not a theory; it marks out a domain for social-semiotic action and interaction, of research and of application. Putting it differently, MM names and describes a domain for work; it does not name a theory. Nevertheless, once there is a larger domain to be accounted for, there is then the need for an integrating theoretical frame which fully ‘accommodates’ and accounts for all the entities within it. This becomes important in thinking about points of connection, and possible effects of MM for AL. While the name ‘MM’ draws attention to the domain in which work is done — the relevant ‘field’ — the theory, here ‘Social Semiotics’, provides (most of) the categories and tools. Social Semiotics and MM are differently relevant to AL — always assuming that they are! The former provides the theoretical frame and the analytical and descriptive categories as tools; the latter sets out the scope and a broad characterization of the domain for work.

All those who work with MM — as researchers, theorists, practitioners — bring with them and work within the frame of their specific discipline and its theories. These provide, explicitly or not, an integrating account for the use of MM as well as (most of) the tools for description and analysis. Instances might be Archaeology, Musicology, Psychology, Museology, Pedagogy. Discipline and
theory jointly shape the kinds of questions that are put to MM; or, which, con-
versely, become possible to ask, within the extensive frame of MM. With Social
Semiotics as the over-arching and integrating theory, the kinds of questions are
largely given: they are about meaning and meaning-making, about the resources
for making meaning, about social agents as meaning-makers, and about the char-
acteristics of the environments in which they act. Essential in all these are the
rhetorically oriented questions of agency and audiences, and questions about the
distribution of power.

The core questions of Social Semiotics seem relevant to and apt for work in
most, maybe all, areas of AL, even if in different ways. Its categories realise the
social interests and needs of the communities whose members have shaped, de-
developed and are constantly (re-) shaping semiotic resources. They include both
material means, the modes, and non-material, conceptual means, the categories
which shape the social and cultural world. They are categories for conceiving enti-
ties, actions and relations; genres; frames; forms of cohesion; categories for dealing
with time, space; kinds of realism and factuality; and so on. In a Social Semiotic
approach to MM, all the modes, together with these non-material semiotic cat-
egories, constitute one integrated domain of cultural/semiotic resources of a com-
munity.

At this point in the development of MM it is important to ask what theoretical
assumptions might lend unity and coherence to MM as a ‘project’?

Minimally, there might be two, perhaps three. One would be: ‘language’ alone
— whether as speech or as writing — is no longer sufficient as the route — ‘only’,
‘central’ or ‘major’ — for access to criterial questions of a discipline. A second as-
sumption might be: all ‘modes’ together constitute an integrated resource, each
mode being endowed with the distinctive and significant characteristics of its
affordances. A third: if several modes are drawn into an account, whatever the
theory, all modes need to be integrated theoretically, at some level of generality.

The ‘multi’ in MM suggests, that there are a number of modes commonly avail-
able for all members of a community to draw on. For a practitioner of AL, the pos-
sibility of comparative work would hinge on that. A researcher in AL might want
to know whether the modes in the groups with which she or he was concerned
were specific to that group, or whether they were shared — in always distinct ways
— across many groups. Many (though not all) modes occur in a wide range of
communities — writing, gesture, image, as examples. Speech for example is a mode
which is not available to members of the community of the “speech-impaired”.


3. Multimodality in the social world

The manner in which material “stuff” has been elaborated into modes will differ according to what, in a specific community, have been and are salient and shared issues, practices, values, needs, which require means for articulation; depending on what the affordances are which ‘inhere’ in the material in which a mode is socially shaped. ‘Valuations’ of semiotic resources are bound to be different in different communities. The social / cultural / semiotic world of every community depends on how the senses have been and are valued, fostered, developed in a community. In the semiotic world of those who do not ‘have’ ‘sight’, sound and ‘hearing’ will have a totally different position than in a ‘sighted’ community.

Different communities ‘populate’ their social world with different ‘names’. We might say that that which is needed or now needs a means for ‘making evident’ — be that a ‘name’ or entities in specific modes, such as gesture, image, etc — has, broadly speaking, got a ‘name’ or other sign; or can get one. Such needs may exist and coincide across different communities, or they may not, so that there are bound to exist ‘semiotic gaps’ not just in speech and writing but in all modes in use in a community. A case evident for most of us is the mode of gesture. Not being French, I am very aware of ‘gestural gaps’ in my semiotic repertoire, when in France. In this regard as everywhere, there will be complementarities and differences, across and within communities and their cultural / modal resources.

Lexical gaps in speech, or clear differences in gesture, point to social arrangements which may not call for the existence of a particular ‘name’ or a gesture for instance. What a community does not need, it does not produce.

The availability of several modes has the effect of fostering complementarity in the design of modal ensembles: that which is ‘missing’ in this mode here is likely to be available in that mode there. Two or three or even more modes used in conjunction can jointly provide means for expressing what the maker of the message wants to express.

Certain modes may not exist in some communities — as just mentioned — for a variety of reasons. Across the world, many communities had not and still have not developed the resource of making marks on surfaces into writing as mode. And certainly, this possibility has been developed very differently, as is evident in deeply differing script systems, or evident in the purposes for which that material/semiotic resource has been used, in the recording of culturally significant factors — historical, economic, mythic, or other. If a mode is ‘missing’ (by comparison with another community) it may be because it had not been essential for the effective working of that community. Communities of the ‘speech impaired’ could not develop the mode of speech; instead they developed the material affordances of a range of bodily means for making signs, means of articulation using...
combinations of body and of movement — gesture, facial expression, etc — into the highly elaborate(d) mode of \textit{signing}, a four-dimensional mode, combining the logics of \textit{time} and \textit{space}.

In communication, several modes are always used together in \textit{ensembles of modes}, in which the affordances of each mode are used for the purposes which seem to the maker of signs on a specific occasion most aptly served by the mode. The use of modes in combination offers a fuller means for conveying meaning, richer than the comparatively sparse capacities of the linguistic modes of speech and writing — especially as recognized in linguistic theories.

Material ‘stuff’ has inherent qualities and characteristics; these can be seen as semiotic potentials and developed into modes. \textit{Sound} happens in \textit{time}; it is temporally instantiated; \textit{sculpture} or \textit{still image} are produced in \textit{space}; they are spatially instantiated. \textit{Sound} is subject, inherently and necessarily, to the logic of time; \textit{sculpture} or \textit{still image} are subject to the logic of space. Even though both \textit{sound} and \textit{gesture} are subject to the logic of time, their \textit{materiality} differs. And both of them differ from, say, the mode of (still) image, or any modes of 3D objects: both in the terms of the spatial / temporal differences, as well as in the material affordances which each offers (each in different ways) for its elaboration in materializing meaning. Given their distinct material characteristics, a Social Semiotic approach treats \textit{speech} and \textit{writing} as distinct modes, and focuses on the distinct affordances of each arising out of that and their social development. It regards the category ‘language’ as imprecise and misleading; something which becomes markedly evident when we deal with societies with non-alphabetic scripts. Again we might ask: is this a point which AL might need to consider?

A \textit{multimodal ensemble} — a \textit{designed complex of different modes} — can be seen either as a \textit{sign-complex} or as \textit{text}. Seen as the former, the emphasis is on its modal composition; seen as the latter, the emphasis is on the function of the object, usually in an interaction: as a ‘message’, for instance. The maker has brought together signs in different modes into a semiotically coherent entity. Each of the signs (in its specific mode) plays a part in constituting the meaning of the ensemble, from the maker’s perspective. That is, the meaning of the whole arises out of the contribution of each part in its interaction with all other parts. The complex modal ensemble is the result of the semiotic work of \textit{design} by its initial maker. As \textit{message}, it becomes subject to the subsequent semiotic work of \textit{interpretation-as-redesign}, by the person who engages with the message/ensemble. Given that the overall meaning (both for the initial maker and for the subsequent re-maker) depends on all parts of the ensemble/text considered, it is evident that the contribution of each element separately — of each sign in each mode — provides a part only of the meaning of the whole. That is, each mode’s contribution to the meaning of the whole is partial.
4. Applied Linguistics: A look with a social semiotic multimodal frame

The implications of partiality of modes are profound. In the ‘strong’ conception of MM, its effects have consequences for AL. If each mode is partial, then speech and writing too are partial (as well as being distinct in significant ways). That confounds the long-held and naturalized assumption of the sufficiency of ‘language’ for all human social, representational and communicational needs: an attribute regarded as an exclusive characteristic of language. Its effect for AL is to suggest that in as far as it limits itself to dealing with ‘language’, it can only ever deal with partial meanings of an overall message. In MM the question about ‘language’ is: in what ways are speech or writing, as well as other modes in this complex partial? It is a question that affects AL, irrespective of which of the two positions is adopted: AL as application of a discipline, or AL as a problem-domain, with tools relevant to dealing with problems. The question “in what ways is language a partial ‘carrier’ of meaning?” needs an answer.

If the aim of language teaching was to support communication in its ‘full’ form, then speech and writing would need to be taught as parts of MM ensembles. Curricula and teaching practices would need to be adapted accordingly. Each ensemble would have its characteristics and effects. Without an awareness of MM we have some pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, not knowing which pieces they are, and which might be needed in order to make sense of the whole.

Assume our interest was in learning and teaching, based on the widely held assumption that language and learning are entirely connected; that language provides full access to the curriculum; and that speech and writing can provide a full account of what had been learned. From a MM perspective, a reliance on speech and writing holds two problems: each provides a partial account; and the ‘partiality’ of each is not that of the other mode. Epistemologically, and in terms of their affordance, speech and writing, even in communities using an alphabetic script, are significantly different, and each has its distinct route to ‘knowing’. Any attempt to get a full sense of what had been communicated — or what had ‘been learned’ — needs to rely on an understanding of meaning in all modes. That could give a fuller sense of what students had actually encountered, and what meanings they had made (see Kress et. al. 2001; Kress 2010). As each mode provides an epistemologically distinct perspective, different to every other mode, MM offers the potential a full(er) picture of learning, of teaching, and of knowledge, whatever the subject.

Modes are produced over time through semiotic work to meet the social needs of a community. It is evident therefore that areas — and kinds of partiality — will vary from one culture to another. That is of fundamental significance for communication in societies constituted in diversity, whether in a classroom or in larger
social settings. It is of course of absolute significance in professional areas such as translating or interpreting.

Given the diversity of audiences the questions of rhetoric and design come into the foreground: what modes are best given the social characteristics of this audience, in relation to that content, with these platforms. The scope of design is extensive and complex, interconnected at all points and at all levels. Design of 'platform' links with the design of the compositional potentials of a site; that links with design as selection/choice of modes apt for audience and for 'content'; these link with the design of the ensemble of the mode-complex, and its overall layout and 'look'. In terms of the 'generational position' of an audience, for instance, the designer needs to judge what platforms might be preferred; what principles of composition are likely to conform with — or affront — an audience's expectations. The principles of composition — e.g. linearity versus modularity — have to be understood and integrated into the design. Design is a matter of a multiplicity of interconnected choices, all made in relation to a prior rhetorical assessment of the environment in which communication is to take place. The task of design as selection and arrangement of resources proceeds according to criteria which have to be clear. It is a matter of principles of selection in relation to a range of factors: the modes best suited in relation to audience, to content, to design of the platform, of layout.

Assume the task is to design a website. The range of tasks required is squarely within the ambit of a social semiotic multimodal approach. It is a task demanded by the characteristics of the contemporary social world. Clearly, many aspects and features overlap with tasks handled within AL. Many go well beyond, for instance, the competent production of a written or spoken text for a given audience, a task which had been required in a differently configured social world: one marked by (relative) stability and (relative) homogeneity. There are questions, about power and 'formality', as there would be in a traditionally conceived, 'mono-modal text', simply written or spoken; but also those that go beyond former questions: about the 'canonicity' of modes to be used, for instance. In a social semiotic MM frame all these are questions of rhetorical assessment marked, always, by power, and shaped in design.

Many go well beyond. To provide a simple illustration of just some of these points, consider two screenshots from a website, recently updated: The Poetry Archive, Figure 1a, and the Children's Poetry Archive, Figure 1b.

The design-team knows what they wish to communicate; with whom they wish to communicate: they have a sense, to their satisfaction, of salient characteristics of their audience; and they have chosen the platform they will use for the possibilities it offers. (It would be interesting to know something about the design-team’s composition in terms of social provenance, specialization and 'interest').
We immediately note a difference between 1a and 1b, for instance in choice of modes. The amount of writing differs vastly; as does its function. We can say that writing is the dominant and foregrounded mode in 1a. Compositionally, it is traditional in its linearity; “we” (those of us socialized maybe before the 1980ties) recognize familiar units and organization of the text: paragraphs, headings, subheadings, etc.

There are some differences with the look of a ‘traditional’ page: the menu-bar on the right, for instance. There are images, though these do not challenge the centrality of writing. This ‘screen’ (not a ‘page’) follows a design format with which we are now (becoming) familiar — from screens as well as from the print media, such as newspapers and magazines.

The impact of MM (in compositional principles and entities: modular entities and the principle of modular arrangement) is starkly apparent in the screenshot of 1b. Writing is not dominant in terms of quantity, nor foregrounded in terms of function. Image is in the foreground, in quantity and in function: whether in the images made by (presumably) young visitors to the site, or in the photographs of poets who are to be introduced to the children. Writing is present largely as ‘caption’ for images. The images made by the young visitors are given a dominant position. The implicit message is: ‘we, the image-makers, may not be able to write (yet), but believe us, we can communicate’ (or, from the perspective of the rhetor/designers of the site: ‘They may not be able to write, but believe us, they have their views’).
Affordances of modes come to the fore here. There is a clear (if implicit) statement made in the use of the images (and other features, such as ‘arrangements’ using the compositional principle of modularity): the design team knows how it has to use the affordances of the different modes. "We are clear who is being addressed here; we are clear that as social subjects, and in their identity, these young people differ from an older generation; and we know that they like to make their choices rather than being told how and where to enter a ‘site’ and where to ‘go’ in the site". ‘Navigation’ — as entry point and successive movement through the site — is not determined by an author or the design team; it is decided by the visitor’s interest (even if within the limits of the site).

The modular arrangement of the screen in Figure 1b (rather than the largely linear arrangement of the screen of Figure 1a) marks a crucial difference. Modularity is a semiotic indicator (a signifier) of a social factor (a signified), hypothetically, here, of social ‘fragmentation’. Relation with the audience is established by ‘offering choice’ from a set of possibilities — much as promulgated by the neo-liberal market. Choice is the route for engagement with the site. The ‘visitor’ is accorded agency in deciding how to enter the site, by choosing an element corresponding to her/his interest as an entry point. By contrast, linearity appears as an indicator of a former social relation (of hierarchical order hardened into ‘convention’): ‘you’, the reader, need to follow the order indicated by the author. Modularity suggests that “the design team has assembled stuff that will interest you. You decide how..."
you wish to engage with it. You can enter this screen where your interest leads you.” *Linearity* suggests “I/we, as authors, have assembled stuff for you and organized it in an order that makes sense of it; which you will find useful, provided you follow the route laid down here”

The *semiotic* features of *linearity* and *modularity* realize central *social* differences. Profound social change is amplified by technologies of representation, and by technologies of display / distribution / dissemination, evident in the multiple effects of the *screen* as site of display. *Design*, based on the *rhetor’s* assessment of the occasion of communication, is in the foreground, and not *competent performance* in line with established conventions.

These kinds of tasks, these kinds of texts, are now utterly usual. The question is: what is needed theoretically to deal with what are now these compositional / communicational givens?

Image allows those who cannot (yet) write to communicate; enables the producers of the drawings to make strong ‘statements’ about their world. In that respect, the images might be seen as the visual equivalents of the verbal *poem*. From a social semiotic multimodal perspective, it is not useful or appropriate to privilege the one or the other. Rather, relevant and revealing questions might be: What does each mode achieve? What can the one do that the other cannot? And: What social evaluations are made of each and of what each does? *Writing* and *image*, and texts produced with their use, offer different means, different ‘takes’ — at times alternative, at times complementary, at times contradictory. Ontologically and epistemologically the two modes go in different directions. Either or neither might be ‘prior’, better able to achieve what is needed, or less. Institutional power and social valuations might point in yet other directions: in formal educational settings, for instance.

The point of MM is, precisely, to explore 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. A visual ‘statement’ — *the world shown* — ‘captures’ different aspects of the world ‘in the frame’ to a verbal one, which gives insights into *the world told*. As modes, *image* and *writing* offer different lenses, provide different perspectives. The ‘front on’ drawing of the red-haired girl, framed by two trees, can give rise to as much exploration of a world *shown* — of ‘a world view’, or of ‘character’ — as a poem might: even if in (epistemologically and stylistically) entirely different ways and with quite different resources. In the examples of Figure 1a and Figure 1b *image* and *writing* demonstrate, reciprocally, the partiality of each of the two modes, their advantages, their limitations, and their function in complementarity.

The two screen-shots of Figures 1a and 1b differ profoundly in terms of the compositional principles employed. The design team not only encourages the
young visitors to communicate; it also understands that the compositional principles which organize the screen of 1a are those of a different era, arising out of a different social world to that which the young image-makers know and treat as normal, as 'natural'. The predominant indicator and sign of the social change is the semiotic shift from linearity (in 1a) to modularity (in 1b). Each has its social origins and meanings, and its social effects. In the case of 1a, it is clear, by and large, to readers who can ‘read’ such texts, where they should enter the page, or at the very least enter the main, written, text. In 1b that decision is left to the ‘interest’ of the person who engages with the site. Each screen is constructed, implicitly, to address a specific identity (and agency); the makers of each screen are aware of a difference that matters.

Readers of the linearly organized text acknowledge the authority of an author; accept the author’s ordering of the matter; allow the designed coherence of the written text to carry them along: they follow the traditional rules of reading. The second text offers ‘topics’ selected by a production team to a ‘visitor’ of the site, presented as designed modules of image and writing. The ‘modules’ are not arranged according to a discernible order or prioritization. It is left to the reader’s interest how or where he or she wishes to enter the screen/site and how to ‘navigate’ on from there.

5. Reflecting on the contemporary communicational world

The overt question underlying this article is: how do two approaches, AL and MM, deal with the shape of the contemporary semiotic landscape? Implied is the question: can one of these offer tools, perspectives, approaches which might be essential to the other? This is not a searching account of limitations of AL; nor is it the place to engage with the criticism that neither Social Semiotics nor MM has ‘objective’ means of description and analysis of the multimodally constituted semiotic world. The various linguistic theories drawn on in AL have highly elaborated principles and tools to use in description and analysis. Some, or many, of these might, at a suitably general level, be ‘transportable’ from Linguistics (and AL) to MM. The description of the two screen shots in Figures 2a and 2b is an attempt to show how this might happen: even if slowly.

To gain an insight into the compositional principles and processes evident in parts or the whole of a multimodal text, such as a website, or any other text, one can use processes such as commutation, or substitution, both taken from (structuralist linguistic theories). Commutation (inverting the order of selected elements within a structure) can reveal what semiotic / meaning effects changes in ordering of elements have or might have. That would reveal that one is dealing with
Substitution would show what units / entities can occur in that position, and thus reveal classes of similar elements. In Figure 2a, the module consists of two components: a ‘block’ of writing and an ‘image block’ (the awkwardness of naming shows that no (accepted) names exist as yet (for laypersons — or for new theorizing — at any rate) for such entities. Applying the two exercises of commutation and substitution in this example, reveals compositional positions and elements, principles and meaning-effects, which do not exist in writing. That is, these elements are not equivalent say, to, either ‘subject’ or ‘object’, or to ‘sentence’ or ‘paragraph’. They ‘belong’ to resources of MM text-making and to texts of a different kind. Their ‘syntax’ — their principles of composition — gives rise to meanings specific to texts of this kind: not to those constituted in the mode of writing.

In parts of the discussion so far I have had recourse to some terms and categories which do not belong to linguistics, to language or to writing, and not, maybe, to AL. The need for them, however, is becoming ever more evident, whether on digitally realized screens, or in magazines. Linguistics does not have and cannot supply the terms necessary for dealing with these. A toolkit of linguistic categories can supply some of these but not all. Nor is MM yet able to supply all the terms needed. It offers some (e.g. orchestration, multimodal complex, sign, complex sign and sign-complex, modularity, affordance), which owe their origin to a ‘semiotic look’ in describing and analysing.

The processes of commutation or substitution, bring about a change in meaning, as do all semiotic processes: subtle, yet significant. Applied to the MM
examples of Figures 2a and 2b, they reveal units ('modules') and meaning effects (akin to 'orientation', perhaps) which do not come from either speech or writing. If however we move 'one level up' in generalization, it is possible to recognize affinities with meanings of arrangement, ordering and sequencing, and their effects, which are about 'orienting' to semiotic material in specific ways. At that general level, there are analogues with linguistic modes: akin to theme; or given and new (in Hallidayan linguistics); or to categories such as focus or topic in other linguistic theories. In images, categories for arrangement, ordering, are needed, for function and meanings similar to those in other modes, including speech and writing. In image, they might be used to realize meanings such as centrality and marginality.

Three points are worth making here. First, by moving "a 'level up'" we uncover semiotic affinities across modes through this generalization / abstraction. Linguistics ceases to be the dominant discipline: it is shown to be part of a larger semiotic frame. Second, it becomes evident that a text arranged / organized in a modular manner is closer, in certain principles of arrangement, to the mode of image.

The third point is related somewhat less directly. One criticism made of MM or of Social Semiotics (a hang-over from the era of 'linguistic dominance'), is that accounts of image (or gesture, or music, or most non-linguistic modes) and of meanings made using these modes are 'merely subjective'. All modes are the product of social-semiotic work by members of a community, just as are the modes of speech and writing. They realize the regularities of the communities which produced them, differently in the case of each mode; but no less regular. The general kinds of principles just mentioned — commutation, substitution — quickly reveal regularities of form, arrangement, meaning, in all these modes. The fact that very little or no theoretical attention — and work — has so far been paid to these modes from a semiotic perspective, provides good reason to put emphasis on the work of establishing what the entities, the 'units', and the principles are. It provides no warrant for claims that these modes are not organized in terms of semiotic principles. The elaboration of gesture into the mode of signing (as 'sign languages' so called) ought be evidence enough to the contrary.

If a mode does not display the kinds of categories we know from linguistic theories, we are not therefore dealing with subjective judgement. The point of MM in its strong sense is precisely to insist on the distinct affordances of each mode: which inevitably means that shared semiotic categories will be expressed with the means afforded by this specific mode. The mode of signing does not have the descriptive categories of writing; yet few academics would now be wanting to state that those who use that mode are limited to “subjective statements”. If I have chosen to eat at a vegetarian restaurant it would be strange to complain about the lack of steak on the menu.
6. Recognition, power and semiotic work: An apt theory of communication for the contemporary period.

It may be best to start this section with a disclaimer. To speak of “the contemporary period” is both too grand and too unspecific, too ‘insular’. Certainly it is unwarranted. The world is not the same everywhere, globalization notwithstanding. Hence a phrase such as “the contemporary period” needs to be localized. Two terms will have to do here: ‘anglo-phone’ and ‘neo-liberal’. There are places even in Western Europe where a sense of the significance and still relative solidity of ‘society’ remains strong, even if less securely so than say thirty years ago. Beyond that, the world is increasingly kaleidoscopic socially and politically.

To recapitulate here, in slightly changed form, a set of points from the end of the first section. First, the ‘world now’ differs in fundamental ways from the world in which AL started its life. Second, disciplines are ever more encumbered by weight from their past. Third, the social, cultural, political, economic and technological world of the origin of AL is unrecognizable now, in any of its major contours; with consequences for its purposes, aims and its ethical possibilities. The issue at the core of this article: conceptions of ‘communication’ which held sway in the early years of AL have changed out of recognition: away from a clear location in ‘language’, fragmented now across a wide domain of social and semiotic means, resources and practices.

The changed social world might be characterized by a few phrases: using an a-causal construction, the disappearance or deliberate destruction of former social givens, has led to profound diversity; to provisionality; and to an as yet a merely shadowy sense of new forms of the social. These have led to entire instability in present semiotic arrangements. This situation demands theorizing communication from the bottom up for these still changing social-semiotic configurations. Strategies for action or means for understanding cannot be achieved by tweaking the theories we have.

The destruction of formerly relatively stable social structures, particularly at the meso- and meta-level of “society”, has already led at the micro-level of social lives, to the disappearance of both social and semiotic ‘conventions’ (seen as ‘the relative stability of practices’ at meso-levels). It has left ‘individuals’ isolated, needing to fend for themselves, in social as much as in semiotic matters. Agency (or at least certain forms of agency as the requirement to act in one’s own case) and responsibility have been and still are being shuffled off ‘downward’, from social institutions to individuals. That has not been accompanied by a parallel distribution of power or other resources. At this stage it is difficult to know to what extent this move could constitute gains in potentials for agency for most individuals in their everyday lives. The strong suspicion must be that promises to that effect are
mere ideological smoke and mirrors to distract attention from changes with long-lasting detriment for the many. Resources have not been made available to build, renew, to rebuild or renovate social organizations. This will lead to further fragmentation and isolation of individuals.

In the absence of workable social institutions, and a diminishing of shared social responsibilities and allegiances, much more and a wider range of (social and) semiotic work than ever before has to be done by everyone individually. Without conventions, without the previously relative stability, without the support of institutional power of different kinds and in different degrees, ‘individuals’ are required to act and to perform semiotic work on their own behalf on the basis of individual ‘self-interest’.

To make evident the extent of the fragmentation of traditional models — social and semiotic — take the example of the still widely used conception of communication, abbreviated in the Sender — > Message — > Receiver model. In conditions of profound diversity, of social fragmentation, there can be no assumption of a ‘shared code’. Terms such as ‘encoding’ or ‘decoding’, or a ‘shared code’ have no relevance. When the ‘authority’ of the sender, whose message was to be decoded has been taken away, or is not acknowledged, there is no point in speaking of ‘having received ‘a’, never mind ‘the ‘message’. The ‘message’, now, is that which someone who has engaged with a prompt, has ‘transformed’, has interpreted that prompt to be. The model now states that ‘communication has happened when there has been interpretation’. In that move, the ‘new social’ is one where every ‘interpreter’, informed by her or his interest and principles, has moved into the centre. (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2010). It is a model that does not assume homogeneity of principles or of codes. Given the theoretically equal status of the interpreter with the initial maker of the message, communication is now more aptly seen as a horizontal and reciprocal relation, one where meaning is made twice: once by the initial maker of the message, and once in the re-making of the transformative engagement by the partner in a dialogic relation (see also Blommaert this issue).

This model does not deny the reality of (unequal) power; it does assume a reciprocity of semiotic work. Accepting this model amounts to an entire rethinking of the organization of the social and semiotic world: not as an effect of the politically / ideologically motivated move of shuffling responsibility downward; but a the recognition of the agency of all who participate in social exchange and interaction. However it may well be that the situation changes when those who can, begin to act on what they seem to be offered.

MM as the resource from which to select apt signifiers, requires that significance is accorded to the selections — as choices made — of the semiotic means, both the material and the conceptual means. This constitutes the semiotic work of design, by sign-makers. The assumption that the sign — as the motivated relation
of form and meaning — is made on the basis of the sign-maker’s interest, legitimates a ‘reading back’ from signs made in all and any modes to uncover the meanings and values attributed by the sign-maker to the cultural/semiotic resources used, and of course a reading back to her or his interest.

As a theoretical position this has revolutionary effects in all domains. It provides tools, hitherto unavailable, for recognizing meanings via two distinct and connected routes. One is agency. Meaning-makers are seen as agentive in their semiotic work. Ignoring their work requires a deliberate act: denying recognition to the worker, counter to a foundational assumption of social semiotic theory. The other is awareness of the diverse material resources with and through which the semiotic work of sign-making is done in a MM world. Each mode has its distinct affordances, providing different insights into meanings made, well beyond the recognized possibilities available in ‘canonical’ means for representing. Bringing previously unrecognized resources into visibility, also brings into visibility previously unrecognized and hence hitherto invisible semiotic work.

These characteristics of the theory decisively shift attention toward according ‘recognition’ to semiotic work and semiotic workers, to the outcomes of that work, in all modes and modal ensembles. This is the case in a strong version of MM; it may well need to become an essential component in relevant / related areas of AL as well. The overlapping areas of the political, social, cultural and semiotic world dealt with by both AL and MM quite simply demand that.

7. Ethics, and a theory of communication in and for environments of radical diversity and provisionality

Theories are social constructs: they are elaborate metaphors providing accounts of that part of ‘the world’ with which they concern themselves. As metaphor they are, as are all metaphors, inevitably and necessarily produced from a specific perspective. As theories, they are produced, in the main, to provide the best possible, at times perhaps the most useful account of that part of the (social) world for which they provide the account. As an academic / theorist, I have that as the aim for the theory which I have (helped to) produce(d).

Notwithstanding the academic’s view, given that theories are social constructs, produced from a specific position, that position is an inevitable part of the theory; it is coded into the theory. Every social ‘position’ has its ethical bases. There is, as far as I can see, no possibility that a theory can avoid the ‘invisible shaping’ of the world in which a theorist works and lives; that includes its ethical shape. I am certain that that applies to all theory and that all theorizing is founded on moral / ethical bases, usually not accessible to those who hold and work with a theory. As
a theorist my priority is to have / use / develop a theory which is apt in relation to what the world is like, which provides the best, the most plausible account of that world. As an intellectual I would not wish to subscribe to a theory whose ethical bases — and ethical implications — I could not support. Having used that term, as an intellectual I assume that I have a large responsibility to play my part in producing accounts of the world which are both apt, and which are not designed to advantage certain groups to the detriment of others.

This provides me with a measure, a ‘metric’ of the ‘aptness’ of the theory which I have outlined and of its ethical implications. The brief overview of a Social Semiotic theory which I have provided at the end of the previous section can be turned — with some elaboration — into such a metric. As far as I am concerned that account does not, in its ‘inner constitution’ — unlike the Shannon and Weaver S — > M — > R model, say, or many others — privilege any one member of a community over any other. It does not, however, and cannot account for the uses of power. What it does do is to provide a model for potentially equitable communication in communities located in a social world of radical diversity and provisionality, marked by profound fragmentation.

The concept of **semiotic work** assumes a common social participation in the shaping of cultural/semiotic resources. The **notion** of interest acknowledges the fact that I have been shaped, and have shaped myself, in the social worlds — in the communities — in which I have participated: having been agentive in my engagement with the resources of socially shaped, culturally and semiotically specific communities, using the tools — of whatever kind — shaped by generations of those engaged before me, in my new shaping of resources, in my use of them.

My present use and development of the theory of Social Semiotics conforms to that. It is not my invention, but a choice, taken with others, in a search for accounts that would better reflect how the world seems to be and presented itself to me, theoretically, socially, personally. It is a theory which insists that semiotic work — work done by everyone, constantly, everywhere — be accorded recognition. At the very least that theory does not stem itself against uses, applications, that might be beneficial to and for the semiotic worker. It might, from the angle of theoretical aptness and pragmatic usefulness prove to be essential in acknowledging the contribution of all those engaged in semiotic work, and the constantly creative work evident in the always new making of a community’s semiotic / cultural resources.

**References**


Bibliographic note

Here I list key works which have informed my discussion of Multimodality in this paper.
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