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Book review: Analyzing multimodality in specialized discourse settings,
innovative research methods and applications

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Book review

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Veronica Bonsignori, Belinda Crawford Camiciottoli and Denise Filmer, Editors. *Analyzing Multimodality in Specialized Discourse Settings, Innovative Research Methods and Applications*. Vernon Press, Wilmington, Series in Language and Linguistics, 2022, 174 pp., ISBN 8781648891038, Hardback €69, E-book 76 €, Paperback 41 €.

This edited volume originates from papers presented at an international congress held in Pisa in November 2019 entitled ‘Knowledge Dissemination and Multimodal Literacy: Research Perspectives on ESP in a Digital Age’ that in its turn showcased research output from a nationally-financed project entitled ‘Knowledge Dissemination Across Media in English: Continuity and Change in Discourse Strategies, Ideologies, and Epistemologies’ coordinated by Marina Bondi, who wrote the volume’s foreword. The main aim is to extend understanding of specialised discourse studies through multimodal analysis with an eye on using this pedagogically but also in developing methodologies for the multimodal analysis of discourse in specialised settings.

Each chapter explores an original domain of application or discourse genre: academic, economic, scientific, marketing, legal, medical, and political. Heightened interest in intersemiotic studies of specialised social settings suggests that multimodal studies are having an impact in areas that have traditionally been difficult to describe. Take, for example, the legal aspect. In Chapter 6, “‘What are Miranda rights?’: The case of video FAQs on a criminal law firm website”, Gianmarco Vignozzi focuses on the video FAQs often embedded in law firm websites and aims to identify the specific linguistic devices and semiotic means that distinguish this genre. These short videoclips in which lawyers answer set questions about legal issues are an example of expert to non-expert specialised discourse. The professional knowledge the lawyers disseminate has a promotional and engaging function, with legal facts being verbally and nonverbally popularised to fulfil this function.

The volume succeeds in presenting a variety in theoretical and methodological approaches to multimodality, including synchronic and diachronic corpus-based and corpus-aided studies, critical discourse analysis, and systemic functional linguistics. Analytical tools such as multimodal critical discourse analysis, multimodal transcription, and multimodal annotation software capable of representing the interplay of different semiotic modes are used. In so doing, the volume brings together two academic strands: specialised discourse and multimodality. It does this through the incorporation of notions from: Swales (1990) on analysing texts according to recurring linguistic and rhetorical features; Gotti (2008) on the separation of specialised discourse into communication between experts as opposed to communication from the expert to the

non-expert; multimodal studies [Kress and Van Leeuwen \(2020\)](#), [Baldry and Thibault \(2006\)](#); together with other studies such as those by [Prior \(2013\)](#), and [Plastina \(2013\)](#).

For discourse analysts, the volume will heighten their awareness of multimodality and methodologies that address the complex interplay of semiotic resources in specialised domains offering experiences of methods and tools in a specialised social context. For example, in Chapter 3, “The *I-you* connection in Humanities and Social Sciences lectures: Multimodal insights”, Belinda Crawford Camiciottoli focuses on educational discourse with her study which builds on the awareness that lecturers’ use the personal pronouns ‘*I*’ and ‘*you*’ to establish and maintain rapport with student audiences, while rendering largely monologic discourse more dialogic. She incorporates the nonverbal dimension in an *I-you* analysis of university lectures in Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines. Through the integration of corpus methods and multimodal annotation software, *I-you* patterns in a dataset of six video-recorded lectures were investigated. The results show that the verbal production of *I-you* patterns often co-occurred with other semiotic resources (e.g., prosodic stress, gaze direction, and hand gestures) in a rich multimodal symphony to shape and reinforce interpersonal meanings.

For those specialising in comparative corpus-oriented multimodal studies, the volume offers examples of tools and methodologies that could well be used to underpin and illustrate other experiences of specialised multimodal discourse. For example, in Chapter 7, “‘As my Right Honourable Lady knows...’: A multimodal critical discourse analysis of Prime Minister’s Question Time comparing Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May”, Veronica Bonsignori and Denise Filmer present the preliminary results of a pilot study on the multimodal construction of meaning in Prime Minister’s Question Time (PMQs) during the premierships of Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May. This highly specialised setting is a special stance on the far more general gender relationships in public and especially political life. Extracts from original television recordings were examined for both verbal and nonverbal cues using ELAN. Multimodal critical discourse analysis and a comparative, historical approach provide the theoretical framework for the analysis. The researchers investigate the ways in which semiotic and verbal resources work together to produce meaning; and the way in which these women leaders compare, in terms of communicating political messages and disseminating “knowledge”, in the context of a predominantly male parliamentary culture. Despite occasional similarities regarding rhetorical strategies for persuasion, the findings indicate that the two women in question have different ways of delivering their message, both verbally and nonverbally.

For specialists in education, the volume offers both tools for research and also pedagogical processes that can help students, especially L2 students, analyse and become more familiar with the genres of the specialist discourse domains they are preparing to enter with their course of studies. Indeed, in Chapter 4, “Using Google Talks in ESP educational settings: A multimodal approach”, Elisa Mattiello analyses a small specialised corpus she has constructed of 10 Google Talks, in the domains of business and economics. She investigates how these videos can be used as multimodal ESP materials for linguistic improvement and professional development. In the spirit of ‘intersemiotic complementarity’, Mattiello shows how verbal features can be integrated with still and moving visuals (charts, images, photographs, videos) and hand gestures (iconics, deictics,

metaphorics) either to represent data and figures, to explain more abstract concepts, or even to provoke emotional reactions from the audience. This study can be employed in various L2 educational settings to develop student multimodal awareness in meaning-making processes, and aid their understanding of modes, beyond oral discourse alone, to produce effective texts.

Full of suggestions about how specialised discourse settings can be analysed inter-semiotically, the volume the editors have put together provides studies that can be compared and contrasted as regards their adaptation of traditional corpus techniques to the analysis of (mainly) video genres in such settings. Naturally, the degree to which this is the case varies from discussions of some videos in the specialised context of workplace websites (Chapter 5) to systematic descriptions of video genres using a corpus-based approach (Chapter 2). In the former case (Chapter 5, “Representations of the ideal workplace in multimodal texts: Employer branding on the Career pages of corporate websites”) Costanza Cucchi and Francesca Seracini consider corporate websites as tools that target multiple audiences via different channels. It looks at the Careers Section of corporate websites, focussing on the way in which multimodal presentations and involvement strategies are employed to communicate corporate values as well as to attract and inform users. The research was carried out using the Employer Branding Multimodal Corpus which she describes as including texts where, besides employee testimonials, companies describe themselves and state their values. Pauwels’ framework for website analysis (Pauwels, 2012) was applied as was a corpus-assisted discourse studies approach (Partington et al., 2013). The study considered the visual component of the webpages, focusing on the ideational function instantiated by images (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2020). The results illustrate are both the involvement strategies used in company websites as well as value assessments in relation to positive interpersonal relationships, learning opportunities, creativity, innovation and social inclusiveness.

In the latter chapter, Chapter 2, “Video abstracts in EMP: A corpus-based approach to the analysis of rhetorical structure in multimodal medical genres”, Francesca Cocchetta investigates the genre of video abstracts, short film (4/5 mins) presenting the research article’s background, methods, results and implications of the research, as a form of knowledge dissemination. The chapter exemplifies how researchers can reach an audience beyond the members of their own research community, provided they acquire specific competences to produce videos that make full use of a range of their semiotic resources. The study investigates a corpus-based method of analysis of this emergent genre to gain insights into its construction. In other words, the chapter focuses on the potential social impact of this new genre and suggests ways of increasing awareness of how experts convey interpersonal meanings, both to other experts as well as to wider audiences.

The prevalence of data-driven, corpus-based methods is unmistakable as is the incorporation of videos into research studies. The variety and diversity of methods deserving further critical reflection, especially those that motivate and empower students is evident in the very first chapter, “Corpus-assisted approaches to online multimodal discourse analysis of videos”. Here Anthony Baldry and Deirdre Kantz focus on student-led construction and annotation of online video corpora. This chapter describes the participation of students from medical and language-related degrees in the construction

and exploration of a corpus of videos on the theme of Community Health Services. The chapter shows how corpus-based comparisons of online videos contribute to stimulating students' awareness of such services. It describes the benefits for different groups of undergraduate students in understanding the communication challenges raised by public health issues but also reflects on key issues in multimodality such as: promotion of students' digital and multimodal literacy and critical appreciation of service-oriented teamwork; the tools and methods used in the construction and annotation of searchable online video corpora; the value of learner analytics in allowing students and teachers to search and manage corpus data within a formative approach to self-assessment. As such, this chapter is a reflection on the changing role of learner-centred and student-as-researcher methodologies in online pedagogical practices.

There were at least five international congresses held in various parts of Italy in 2019 on multimodality. Had the COVID-19 pandemic not struck blocking initiatives for two or more years more congresses that have led to publications (e.g., [Vasta and Baldry 2020](#); [Moschini and Sindoni 2022](#); [Sindoni and Moschini 2021](#)), would presumably have been held on specialised multimodal themes in Italy and indeed elsewhere. Even so, those undertaken have encouraged the reviewer's organisation, with others, of an Italian-Slovenian cross-border symposium in which critiquing methods of video analysis, with a special focus on their role at all levels of education, will be paramount. This underscores the value of meetings and publications in specialised social and pedagogical settings in the wider international academic community, and especially in European countries where multimodality's influence can benefit from cross-border partnerships and EU funding mechanisms.

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