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## The construction of meaning in the Second Language Classroom. A Multimodal discourse analysis.

Eva M. Mestre-Mestre\*

*Departament de Lingüística Aplicada, Universitat Politècnica de València, Camí de Vera s/n, València 46022, Spain*

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### Abstract

As technology increasingly shapes the world we live in, communication is affected by these changes. We can no longer talk about one mode for transmitting a message, since multimodality is common, and interaction between several channels to make communication effective is constant. The work presented here analyses from a multimodal point of view the creation of meaning by means of the interaction between images and texts in English as a foreign language by University students. The analysis uses the Descriptive framework of multimodality to study the role of images in the creation of meaning. Then, it analyses how students intermingle texts and images to communicate. The results show that different strategies are used for the communication of unlike types of concepts, and a greater relying on images as concepts increase in abstraction.

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### 1. Theoretical background

Technology and free access to information are transforming the way we communicate. It is more and more common that we use, combined, several channels to communicate a message, or that we receive a piece of communication in which more than one mode is used. Gradually, significance is created by a confluence of different modes of communication, which interact. What's more, it is argued that meaning is always obtained from at least two sign systems (Ruthrof, 1997), or subsystems (Norris, 2005). According to this, it is no longer possible to create

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34-962-849-438; fax: +34-962-849-309.

E-mail address: [evamestre@upvnet.upv.es](mailto:evamestre@upvnet.upv.es)

meaning in isolation, and thus the combined potential of various modes needs to be studied if we want to understand the way meaning is constructed (Kress 2000, Royce 2002).

On top of that, the extratextual context in which communication is produced is considered as part of the communicative act itself, which Kress and van Leeuwen regard as socio-cultural domain Kress and van Leeuwen, (2001, p. 20).

Social semiotics is concerned with “the way people use semiotic resources both to produce communicative artefacts and events and to interpret them... in the context of specific social situations and practices” (van Leeuwen, 2005, preface)

Consequently, both intermodal and extramodal contexts need to be taken into account when we regard communication globally, as a message needs to be interpreted in specific situations; and meaning is obtained by a combination of factors. Thus, if based on Halliday (1994) there are four types of meaning potential —metafunctions of language: the ideational; experiential and logical, for experience and logical relations, interpersonal involving social relations, and textual for organising the message, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) has to account for the co-occurrence of different modes, which interact to create meaning at these potential levels.

MDA considers the way in which the contextual variables field —what the communication is about—, tenor —who communicates—, and mode —how the message is transmitted— determine the choices in the linguistic system, organized in these three metafunctions of the language.

The different approaches to Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996, p. 2001), Norris (2004), O’Halloran (2004), LeVine and Scollon (2004), Van Leeuwen (2005) try to explain this new view of textuality as a blend. Indeed, they focus on the ways in which diverse modes contribute to it, creating a new global meaning, which surpasses the addition of the different partial modes. Thus, Chouliaraki (2004, p. 154) “Multimodality provides a discourse analytic point of entry into the procedures by which televisual texts articulate language and visuality, orality, and writing”.

Overall, the combination of these modes is what achieves communication. Jewitt (2009) sees language as part of a multimodal ensemble, in which each mode performs different communicative work and meaning is orchestrated through a selection and configuration of modes. The bottom line is that meanings of signs are social.

In order to describe the interactions that occur between these, extended literature has been dedicated to define the concepts of mode and medium. As is well known, Leeuwen, (1999); Kress and van Leeuwen, (2001); Constantinou, (2005), refer to modes as to loose concepts, which help group signs in order to confer them (social) meaning. Thus,

Modeness, [...] derives from the evolution of media according to the socio-cultural interest in using a particular medium to perform, fulfil or enable a particular social function.

Modes are supported by media, since, according to Sterne (2003:182), a medium is a set of contingent social relations and practices: “A medium is therefore the social basis that allows a set of technologies to stand out as a unified thing with clearly defined functions”.

To this regard, Royce (1999) describes these interrelations, which cooperate to create meaning as intersemiotic complementarity, and explains that the different meanings making resources are combined to create intersemiotic meanings when co-occurring. He also states that some meanings are specific to some particular modes, implying that not all modes communicate or can communicate the same way. Each mode provides specific potentials and limitations.

Crystal (2001, p. 28) exemplifies the ways in which these modes can offer different aspects in the construction of meanings, and particularises the case of speech and writing. Although it is true that it only applies to these two text types, it can be extended to others:

Speech is typically time-bound, spontaneous, face-to-face, socially interactive, loosely structured, immediately revisable, and prosodically rich. Writing is typically space-bound, contrived, visually decontextualised, factually communicative, elaborately structured, repeatedly revisable, and graphically rich.

Several authors point to the importance of image in texts, for instance Kress & van Leeuwen (1996, p. 16) talk of “the rising importance of visual communication in the modern world with the traditional and continuing dominance

of the verbal.” Kress (2005) and Royce (2002) also claim that there is a progressive displacement in the focus of communication from text towards image, and that different types of meaning relations occur across visual and verbal modes.

The objective of this work is to analyse the strategies students use to create meaning, that is, to communicate a given message, related to their field of study-expertise. In our particular case, meaning creation was studied in the projects elaborated by students to support their oral presentations in English as a Second language at a University level. Taking into account the multimodal character of texts, the study aims to analyse presentations, which include written texts and images in order to analyse how the mode is used to communicate (Donohue, 2012) and secondly to look upon the interrelations established between text and image in these texts. Some conclusions are drawn in relation with the social motivation of students in their way to represent and communicate meaning in the second language classroom.

## 2. Methodology

A corpus of presentations was analysed from an MDA point of view in order to identify and describe the types of relationships established between the images and texts contained within taking into account the mode and media of representation.

### 2.1. Corpus description and analysis

The corpus contains 350 slides, elaborated as the visual support to the oral presentation. The twenty-five presentations analysed had been prepared as part of a project elaborated by first-year University students of Tourism Management, who learn English as a Foreign Language at the Universitat Politècnica de València. In the context of their field of specialisation, the assignment consisted of the preparation of a Package Tour, which had to be later explained to the class during a 20-minute presentation. To do that, they used the Power Point software programme. They include both texts and images.

Although the structure of the presentations varied in their outcome, the students had been instructed in presentation preparation and delivery. Their assignment included specific instructions as to how to prepare the presentations. It also included a rubric for oral communication assessment.

Because of the variety in the projects, and as part of the analysis, the presentations were compared in order to find the areas in which there had been most agreement, and appeared in most arrangements, and the comparison of the choices made by the students in their construction of the transmitted meaning related to them could be best examined. Of all the sections included, the areas chosen for analysis were included in two big semantic fields: *sightseeing*, which included all slides showing sites, monuments, etc., and *food*, which grouped all the slides related to gastronomy, food, restaurants, etc.

The analysis carried out was twofold. First, it considers the study of the images themselves. To analyse images, Kress & Van Leeuwen’s 2006 [1996] *Descriptive framework of multimodality* is used. That way, it is considered whether images fulfil a representational or interpersonal role in the construction of meaning: that is, whether the image embodies the meaning, or on the contrary, it proposes a challenge to the interlocutor, deviating from that literal meaning. Following the framework, it also reflected upon the compositional meaning in the slides, and established whether images were central or marginal. An example of this can be seen in Figure 1 below.

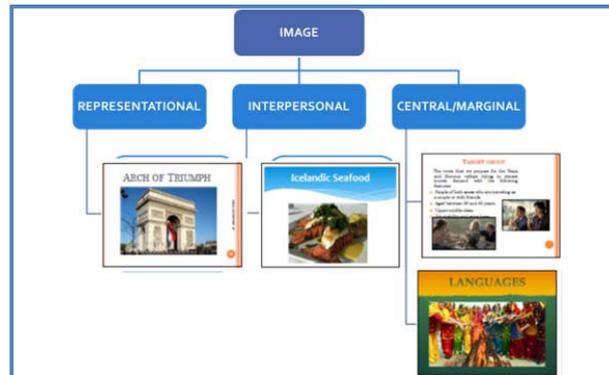


Fig. 1. Image analysis following Kress & Van Leeuwen's 2006 [1996] *Descriptive framework of multimodality*

Then, it studied the relationship between images and texts, following Martinec & Salway (2005). These authors try to establish interclausal relations in order to describe how meaning is transmitted. In our case, we studied the associations and effects between different modes of communication, images and texts, eliciting their rapport. Thus, three types of relationships were established for the analysis of the slides: elaboration, in the case when a mode (image) clarified the other (text), extension, if images added information to texts, and enhancement, if images prompted information such as how, when, where, or why the text was taking place.

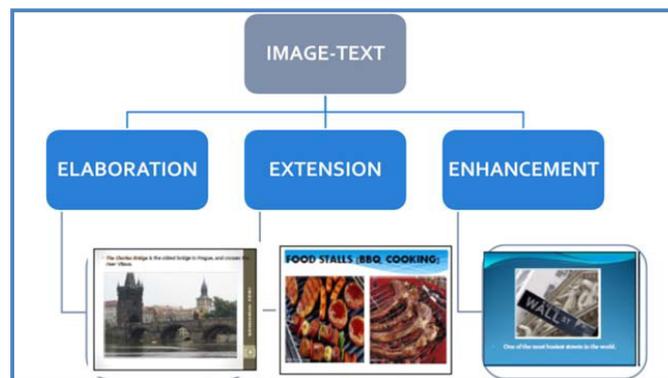


Fig. 2. Image-text rapport analysis following Martinec & Salway (2005).

### 3. Results

The results showed that the strategies used by students to communicate their meanings were different in all cases. In the first analysis, a comparison was established between the representational and interactive meanings shown in the slides. The results are shown below in figures 3 and 4:

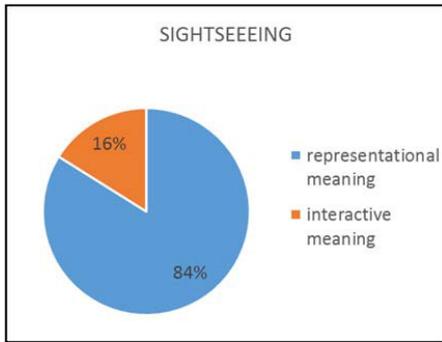


Fig. 3. Image meaning in "Sightseeing"

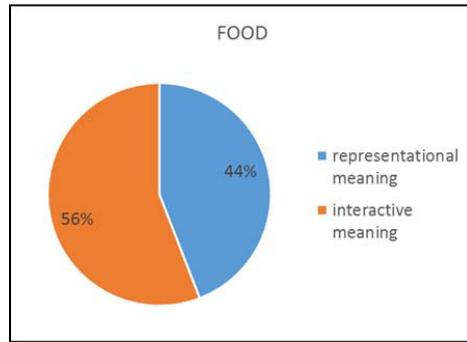


Fig. 4. Image meaning in "Food"

As shown above, regarding interactive meaning, 16% of images are under this category in the case of sightseeing, and 56% of images in the case of food. On the contrary, 84% of images show representational meaning in the case of sightseeing, and 44% in the case of food. Figures 5 and 6 below show the results related to the compositional aspect, looking at the placement of the images on the slide.

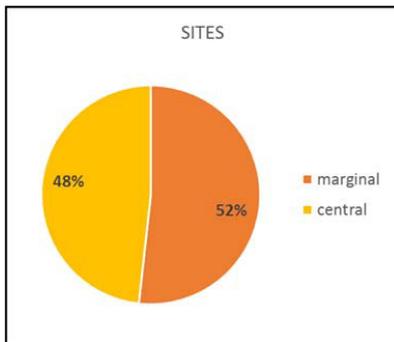


Fig. 5. Location of images in "Sightseeing"

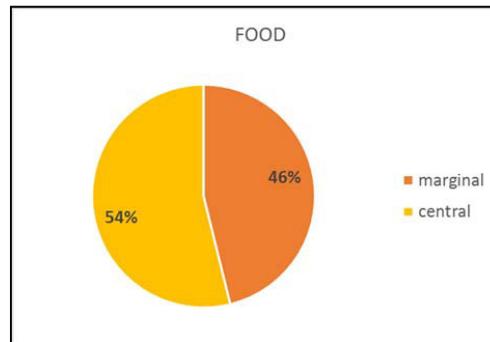


Fig. 6 Location of images in "Food"

In this case, results were much more similar, both in the distribution of images and in the two different groups, although most images (54%) were central in the case of "Food", and in the case of "Sightseeing" the majority were marginal (52%). As regards the relationship between image and texts, the results obtained showed significant dissimilarities regarding the distribution of the possible interrelations.

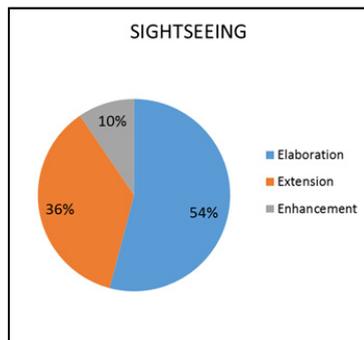


Fig. 7 Text-image relations in "Sightseeing"

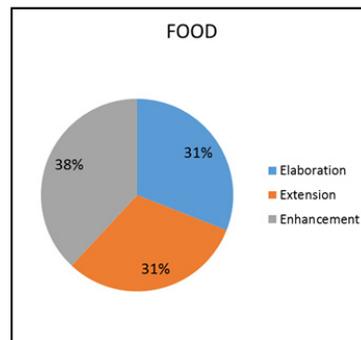


Fig. 8. Text-image relations in "Food"

First of all, whereas the types of relations established for "Food" are quite evenly distributed into the three categories proposed, in the group "Sightseeing" the majority of the relationships found (54%) were of extension

(images extended texts). The greatest group found for “Food” was enhancement, with 38% of occurrences, which was the smallest for “Sightseeing”, with only 10% of occurrences. The results for the category “extension” were quite similar in both cases, as can be seen in Figures 7 and 8 above.

#### 4. Conclusions and Discussion

This work has studied communication in the particular setting of the second language classroom, and at proficiency levels where students can communicate but are far from proficient in the second language. Two different modes in combination were analysed in order to describe the types of intersemiotic resources used by the students.

The representation of two dissimilar semantic groups were chosen for analysis. On the one hand, the group labelled “Sightseeing”, which can be related to narrative representation patterns, showing sites, places, monuments; and on the other “Food”, which included processes, eating, gastronomy, culture.

The results show that students chose different strategies combining texts and images to construct their meaning, depending on the type of concept they were trying to communicate. In the case of sightseeing, the majority of cases relate to representational meaning, showing that the image embodies the meaning, whereas in the case of food most slides show ideational meaning, inviting the interlocutor to play a more active role in the interpretation of meaning. In support of this, as regards the compositional meaning, photographs were marginal for sites and central for food.

As regards the relationship established between texts and images, the results also differ; in the case of sightseeing, there is clear majority of cases in which images are only used to support the text, whereas in the case of food, most slides show images and texts at the same level.

It is thus clear that the textual and the visual complement one another, and that students rely particularly on images when they have to explain abstract, or complicated concepts, and not so much so when they have to talk about narrative situations. Thus, images are crucial in oral communication. However, the relationships established between images and texts show that texts are crucial to support speech.

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