

A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE ON DIGITAL MOBILITY

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Abstract

Adopting a social semiotic perspective onto digital mobility, i.e., reframing it in terms of socio-cultural changes in sign-making practices rather than defined by technological innovation, the paper identifies key features of the digital landscape, namely 1. user-generated contents and contexts, 2. multimodality, 3. mobility of media, modes, genres, participant roles, platforms and domains, 4. individualization and fragmentation, and 5. re-use. Analysis of their affordances and consequent sign-making practices enables the identification of today's priorities in media education (conceived of as education to, through and with media). These deal with new/renewed foregrounded/backgrounded abilities when notions of competence and literacy seem hardly applicable to the current needs in the combined use of media, modes and genres.

As an example of application in formal education, the paper discusses a higher education experimental joint-course – held in the academic year 2014/2015 in four classes at the universities of Firenze, Messina, Pescara, and Roma-Tor Vergata, Italy – that aims to integrate abilities of design/production and analysis/evaluation of multimodal digital textualities in the current curriculum of English for cross-cultural communication.

Keywords

Multimodality, genre, literacy, meaning-making, design

1. Changing media, changing semiotic practices

In the last two decades our ordinary media landscape has radically changed. As for the technology, along with the older media, most of us have convergent digital devices that afford both production and reception of highly multimodal texts. Semiotically, through these technologies, we can not only consume, but also produce and distribute texts that combine still and moving images, speech, music, writing etc. A good deal of ordinary text production is no longer 'from scratch' but is often generated through the forwarding, sharing, assemblage and editing of previously existing texts. Socially, the one-to-many model of prototypical mass communication (such as through TV, radio and the printed media) has given way to a many-to-many model; any text that we produce and upload online can be – at least potentially – as public as the texts we consume/receive. This implies not only that our own texts have a potentially wider and diversified audience, with different interests, understandings, backgrounds and expectations, in different contexts and for different purposes, but also that each of us is exposed to public texts produced by other 'lay' sign-makers, along with the texts produced by media-professionals. As a result of the multiplication of sign-makers in the public sphere, not only are genre conventions less fixed, with creativity, differentiation, variation and innovation no longer restricted to professional elites, but also are audiences particularly fragmented while the texts they consume depend on their interests and the specific social networks they inhabit; in this sense each person's cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is shaped by more individualized life-style choices than the broader social variables such as Bourdieu's class fragments, which were more apt to describe people's taste preferences, values and attitudes in a time when social groups were more homogenously defined.

The technological, semiotic and social changes that have invested text production and fruition in these last two decades can be all ascribed to the effects of digital mobility, when the label is refocused socio-semiotically, rather than solely technologically. If the 'digital' holds to the technology and one aspect of mobility is certainly due to the portability of digital devices, an over focusing on the technological facet of the phenomenon might however lead to a deformed analysis of reality. Indeed, in the contemporary media landscape, mobility invests not only the devices we use to communicate, but also the texts we produce/consume, the genres, the media, the platforms, the roles (of authors and audience, for example), the identities (such as professional and amateur), the public/private spheres and reach of these texts, and the semiotic modes which we use to represent our meanings. Finally, mobility involves always issues of power and access; along with an apparent reshaping of power roles among those involved in digital mobility (e.g. from more vertical/hierarchical to more

horizontal structures), dramatic inequalities still persist in terms of access to mobility (of people, technologies and texts), among different areas of the world and social groups within each of these areas.

In this sense, the present work takes a social semiotic perspective onto a so-conceived digital mobility by focusing on the changes in sign- and meaning-making practices resulting from the introduction of (more or less portable) digital means of communication in our lives – together with the questions and challenges that such changes pose to education through and to media. In so doing, the paper has no pretention of providing an all-encompassing account of digital mobility and the multi-faceted implications for media education; it merely intends to offer a contribution limited to key representational aspects of digital mobility that are demanding and/or foregrounding new learning tasks, skills and practices, while backgrounding others. Admittedly partial, such a perspective might be usefully combined with others coming from the social sciences, for a deeper and broader understanding of the phenomenon at issue.

2. A social semiotic perspective on digital sign-making

Digital environments enable an increased number of sign-makers to produce highly multimodal texts in any genre and re-use them selectively, distributing them through different media and platforms to a diversified audience. Hence, key features of current sign-making practices are 1. user-generated contents, 2. multimodality, 3. mobility, fluidity and intertwining of media, modes, genres, roles, platforms and domains, 4. individualization and fragmentation, and 5. re-use. If media education is interested in both learning to and learning through the use of media, an analysis of what is new in terms of knowledge needed to operate within such a changed semiotic landscape can be useful to highlight today's priorities in media education. A social semiotic perspective can provide some insights in this sense.

Assuming the social as prior, social semiotics (Hodge and Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005) is interested in how people develop, use, change and regulate resources to make meaning in the representations they create (sign-making) and in those they interpret (meaning-making). In analyzing representations (texts and communicative events) as social phenomena, social semiotics traces social values, identity features, ideologies, naturalized discourses and power roles entexted in them; in considering social phenomena as represented in texts, social semiotics offers an empirically-based lens to broader social dynamics.

The following sub-sections discuss key social semiotic implications deriving from the above listed features of current sign-making. Section 3

will then exemplify their application in a higher education learning project on multimodal digital text design in EFL classrooms.

2.1 Meaning-making as situated learning

Given the increased diversity of sign-makers populating digital environments, tasks such as identifying, interpreting, revealing and questioning social values, identity features, ideologies, naturalized discourses and power roles in texts become crucial to an unprecedented extent. Navigation and orientation in an extremely differentiated and fragmented textual environment involve unavoidably learning every time when engaging with an online text. When making meaning of a text, learning deals with asking questions (Kress, 2008) such as

1. who produced this text?
2. for whom?
3. to which aims?
4. what aspects of reality are represented in it? (and which others are not?)
5. which resources are used?
6. how do these resources shape the reality that is represented?
7. with which assumptions?
8. whose interest is at work in the representation?

These questions have always been crucial for critical interpretation, yet when public texts were produced exclusively by professionals, one could confidently assume the same answers to these questions for all texts presenting the same features. Today's semiotic landscape is marked by mobility. In a semiotic environment where the 'hoax' has become an increasingly successful genre and media-professionals are no longer the unquestioned authorities of reliability in information provision, awareness in meaning-making requires asking these questions anew when facing each textual instance. The extremely mobile character of texts, genres, audiences, media and power roles requires awareness in engaging with texts to an unprecedented extent. Media education should be concerned with providing learners with 'navigational aids' (Kress, 2008), and should consider asking the above questions as a crucial learning requirement for awareness in navigation among and meaning-making of online texts.

2.2 Meaning-making and multimodality

Certain branches of linguistics, such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis, have long developed tools for the analysis of social

variables driving language use and revealed in it. In this sense, Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989; Kress and Hodge, 1979; van Dijk, 1985; Wodak, 1989) has provided an extremely refined theoretical and analytical apparatus to find the answers to the above-listed questions in written and spoken texts. Its tenets and tools have widely been adapted for learning purposes, for example for education into critical reading.

Given that digital environments afford the combination of different modes in representation, along with writing and/or speech, critical interpretation of language alone is no longer sufficient to account for the meaning of a text. A webpage might present its content as more or less reliable and/or its author as professional or amateur through the use of font, for example; we might perceive a text as addressing children or adults through the use of colour, font, image and/or sound. Awareness of the meaning potential of the resources of each mode and of their combination is crucial to the interpretation of digital texts; yet traditional literacy education is normally equipped only with tools for interpreting writing and speech.

Combining Social Semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis, Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Machin and Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2007, 2014) is developing analytical tools and methods for critical interpretation of multimodal representations. Given the increased multimodal character of texts in digital environments, the questions listed in Section 2.1 can find their answers only when considering each and all modes, rather than solely verbal language. Media education should consider training into the meaning potential of other modes, along with speech and writing, and of their combined use. Educators can thus find in Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis useful indications to equip learners with the apparatus needed to interrogate a text – any text – and its range of social meanings.

2.3 Sign-making and design

Today's semiotic landscape does not only require awareness in navigation among – and critical interpretation of – existing multimodal texts produced by others; it increasingly requires awareness of the meaning potential of semiotic resources for the design of one's own texts. Aware text design involves assessing which resources in one mode – say, colour – can be more aptly combined with others – say, font type or writing style – to produce a text that fulfills the producer's communicative purposes on the basis of the specific context and target audience. Traditionally established (mainly written-based) formal genres had rather stable conventions, in terms of structure and register; during the last decades, corpus linguistics (e.g. Facchinetti, 2007; Quirk et al., 1985; Sinclair, 1992) has provided writing instructors with a highly detailed body of work describing these conventions in each genre. To communicate successfully in each, learners had to acquire literacy, i.e., knowledge and

practice of conventions, which had to be followed when producing a text in a specific genre.

With digital mobility, not only are texts highly multimodal – and very little has been described for the conventions in the use of modes such as image, colour, layout and/or music – but also are conventions increasingly unstable, temporary and specific only to extremely fragmented social groups and contexts. As a consequence, the questions listed in Section 2.1 need to be reformulated not only every time a text is encountered online, but also every time sign-makers want to produce a text. Designing a text effectively in digital environments involves each time answering questions such as

1. what kind of identity do I want the text to communicate of me as its author?
2. what is/are the identity/ies of those I want to address?
3. which aims do I want the text to fulfill?
4. what aspects of reality do I want it to represent? (and which others do I want to exclude?)
5. which resources are most apt to do so?
6. how can they be combined to shape the reality that I wish to represent?

These questions are crucial when designing a text. Text design is a semiotic process that is increasingly required in everyday communication. Education to and through media should stimulate and scaffold learners' awareness needed both for critical interpretation and for design of multimodal texts.

2.4 Sign-making through choice

One of the assumptions of social semiotics is that sign-makers produce signs by associating form and content in a motivated way (Kress, 1993) on the basis of their interests and the resources available to them at the time of production. In sign-making, meaning is given shape by selecting the most apt form available. Availability concerns both (social) semiotic resources – awareness of the meaning potentials of, e.g., colour – and technological resources, so colour nuances in a drawing will depend also on the utensils available (whether gouache or markers, for example) and on material/manual abilities in using them.

In digital environments, sign-making is more easily done through choice than through production 'from scratch'. When creating a digital text, such as a blog or a website, for example – as much as when producing a slide presentation – sign-makers are more easily prompted to select its multimodal design out of a range of ready-made templates, which can be possibly customized at a later stage. Text design through choice among

templates foregrounds semiotic knowledge over technological and material/manual abilities.

When (chiefly) handwriting and (to a lesser extent) drawing were considered as basic educational requirements, pupils had to spend a lot of effort and time practicing and developing their manual abilities in using the technologies for both. Contrary to what is usually common sense, with digital text production, the notion of resources available to the sign-maker deal less with technological and material aspects and more with semiotic aspects. As for the technology, given the availability of apt hardware as a prerequisite, Web 2.0 platforms – such as service providers for blogs, e.g. Blogger or Wordpress – are extremely user-friendly, at least for digital natives; after logging in, ‘wizard’ facilities drive a user step-by-step into the selection of the overall multimodal design of the text and into each of its parts, with rather intuitive indications such as «enter blog title here» or «insert image here», etc. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest or Instagram, for example, require very little technological expertise for their use, compared to older forms of digital media, which required knowledge of programming in DOS (earlier) and html language (later). Touch screen technology in convergent mobile devices too, has turned video/photo(/music)-production available with little technological/manual expertise. Materially/manually, sign-making through choice among templates requires only (type-and-)click/tap or drag-and-drop actions.

Against the increasingly wider availability/readiness of technological resources, availability of semiotic resources for text production-through-selection involves a greater amount of learning. When confronted with a range of possible modal options, in terms of font type, layout, colour palette, framing etc., awareness in selection depends on knowledge of the social uses of these semiotic resources in the specific context, combined with the ability of assessing which of the available options are more apt to express a given meaning in relation to the purposes and interests of the producer of a text. In other terms, the affordances of digital environments require a semiotically-focused more than (or along with) a technologically-oriented learning. In this sense, media education could consider foregrounding crucial abilities such as learning to choose among pre-given options; this involves the following three integrated tasks:

1. assessment of one’s interests in designing a text (thus answering the questions for aware design listed in 2.3);
2. critical interpretation of each of the options available for production-through-selection (thus answering the questions listed in 2.1);
3. selection of the most apt option as a ‘best possible match’ as answer to the two sets of questions.

2.5 Re-use as re-signification

Along with selection among templates, digital environments afford sign-making through re-use of previously existing texts. Text production as selection-(assemblage)-and-recontextualization through techniques such as copy-and-paste increases the mobility of texts in different environments, inhabited by participants having different interests, purposes and expectations, thus stretching even further Barthes' (1977) notion of the Death of the Author.

Besides questioning traditionally well-established notions of authorship, creativity and originality, sign-making through re-use requires consideration of the resignification processes involved with recontextualization, that is, of the new meaning that a given (portion of) text may acquire when re-posted in a new context. This has implications both for meaning-making and sign-making, and both require learning.

As for meaning-making, traditional literacy education in reading and in text analysis has involved learning to trace logical connections within a text (cohesive devices) and its relation with its context (coherence), in order to understand and reveal e.g. the development of an argument and the underlying assumptions and standpoint, along with the discourses and ideologies represented. When (portions of) texts are encountered in contexts that might be different from the ones where they were originally produced, text interpretation requires abilities in hyper- (or inter-)textual context reconstruction, in order to trace any possible changes in meaning that the recontextualized (fragment of) text might have undergone.

As for sign-making, traditional literacy education in writing production has involved learning to structure a text to make its meaning understandable to readers; this includes thematic sequencing along with the use of cohesive devices within a text, such as discourse markers linking sentences and paragraphs and making explicit intra-textual logical relations. With text production through re-use, sign-makers cannot act on internal features of a text, such as its thematic sequencing or intra-textual cohesive devices. When sharing somebody else's post on Facebook, for example, rather than acting on internal features of the text, sign-(re)makers need to be concerned with the devices that can construct coherence between the re-used text and the new environment where it is re-contextualized. Along with ethical issues involved with appropriation, privacy and authorship, sign-making through re-use requires assessing questions such as

1. how will the meaning of the text that I am re-posting/forwarding change, when deprived of its original context/contextual information?
2. how will the re-posted/forwarded text make meaning in relation to its new contextual and co-textual environment?

3. will my addressee(s) understand the meaning of my re-posting/forwarding?
4. do I need to frame my re-posting/forwarding to make my meaning explicit? (including, for example, whether the re-posting is intended as an endorsement or critique of its content)

In this sense, the ability to use framing devices is foregrounded against the use of internal cohesive ones. Media education, and education more broadly, should reflect on the different epistemic requirements of today's more modular, indexed and fragmented representational landscape, compared to older linearly coherent forms of text consumption and production.

2.6 Time and space in sign-making: Learning 'against' affordances

One of the most obvious affordances of mobile devices is availability of information and communication everywhere anytime. Time and space are lived differently in the age of digital mobility. Sign- and meaning-making practices are affected in this too. As discussed earlier, an increased number of sign-makers, increasingly multimodal texts, an increased availability of convergent mobile devices for communication and, overall, and increasingly mobile media and semiotic environments require a certain amount of learning every time we engage with a textual instance and every time we produce one. Learning involves asking a series of questions about purposes, authors, audiences, and representational resources, such as the ones listed in Sections 2.1, 2.3 and 2.5. Asking questions and finding answers, especially when texts are fragmented, interconnected and re-contextualized, involves searching in different spaces; and this requires time and effort. Spending time and effort in asking questions and searching for answers requires working against the social/cultural affordances of today's communicative landscape.

As part of broader social dynamics in (at least) Western societies, digital mobility has enhanced speed in acting and interacting. When pace increases, perception of space shrinks. Speed in communication combines with brevity and, again, fragmentation. As instantiated by the affordances of social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, the fast-paced updating and succession of posts on our digital 'walls' combines with limitations in the length of posts immediately viewable. Compared to traditional printed newspapers, online news outlets too present as readily viewable only an indexed portion of the news item (in this regard see the notion of 'news bites' in Knox, 2009). With renewed affordances in terms of time and space, come along new reading (viewing/listening) habits. Contrary to common fears in relation to fruition of digital and online texts, digital environments do not foster a lesser amount of reading or writing; rather, social and semiotic limitations and possibilities in terms of time

and space in digital environments foster the reading (along with the viewing and listening) of shorter portions of texts, one after the other, produced by different sign-makers in different spaces.

Modularity and fragmentation in the composition of our screens/web pages associates with modularity and fragmentation of reading and writing practices. When layout arrangement becomes modular, multiple reading options/paths open. When faced with a multiplicity of different items on the same screen, we can choose to click/tap on an indexed post to access the full text and read it linearly, or we can choose to 'hop' from one text bite to another across what is displayed on our screens. The fast-paced rate of posting, with their notification alert options, combined with the many platforms converging in our devices – such as instant messaging, emailing, video-calls etc. – facilitates a hopping/skimming-through modality of text engagement. Such a fostered modality leaves little time for reflection and for in-depth searches, which are instead highly needed to attempt to reconstruct a broader picture out of each textual bite displayed in such a modular and fragmented layout.

In this sense, besides developing abilities that can respond to the new/renewed foregrounded sign-making practices afforded by digital mobility (such as brevity, re-use and multimodality, for example), media education and education more broadly should also consider training into learning practices that work against the afforded sign-making practices and that nevertheless are highly required for aware sign- and meaning-making; these include taking time (and space) for asking questions, for searching for answers and for reflection. Crucially, they also include training into spending time and effort to think 'outside the box' – in terms of what is left out of the range of pre-given available options – and to explore new possibilities for design.

The discussion in this section has highlighted some key requirements deriving from the affordances of sign-making in today's extremely mobile digital landscape. User-generated contents, multimodality, fluidity, individualization and fragmentation of textual practices, along with sign-making through choice and re-use foreground a need for

1. situated learning every time a text is encountered, rather than acquired literacy of pre-given genre conventions
2. making meaning of each and all modal resources used in a text rather than of language alone
3. abilities in multimodal design and hence awareness in sign-making
4. semiotically-oriented (more than technologically-oriented) learning to match available options with one's design interests
5. inter-textual coherence reconstruction and framing devices

6. searches and reflection in spite of the time and space constraints of today's communicative environments

The next section exemplifies briefly those learning requirements as applied to a project on multimodal text design in the EFL classroom.

3. Applications: The case of MoM for multimodal text design/evaluation in the EFL classroom

Social semiotic research has produced various work focused on digital environments and learning (e.g., Jewitt and Kress, 2003a, 2003b; Jewitt et al., 2007; Jewitt, 2006, 2007, 2008). In this perspective, stemming from the assumption that, even when extended from writing and speech to multimodal ensembles, 'literacy' intended as 'knowing the conventions of a genre and knowing how to apply them to produce a text' is inadequate to be successful rhetors in today's extremely mobile semiotic landscape, a collaborative research and teaching/learning project has been held in the academic year 2014-2015 involving four classes of English as a Foreign Language in four universities in Italy, i.e., University of Chieti-Pescara, University of Florence, University of Messina and University of Rome-Tor Vergata. The project, named *MoM-Multimodality on the Move*, has aimed to integrate learning of English as a Foreign Language with abilities in multimodal digital text design/production, analysis and evaluation.

Using English as a medium of instruction, a first set of 'core' sessions has introduced basic notions in multimodality, supported by a series of 'core readings' (Bezemer and Jewitt, 2010; Bezemer and Kress, 2008; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Lemke, 2002) agreed among the four home teachers of the four classes (E. Adami for Chieti-Pescara, I. Moschini for Florence, M.G. Sindoni for Messina and S. Petroni for Rome-Tor Vergata). After the core sessions, delivered in class by the home teachers of the course, four workshops have been held in each of the four classes. Every workshop has focused on a specific multimodal digital text type (using English in writing and/or speech), namely blogs, fanvids¹, video-chats and website pages (more specifically the About Us Page). The text types chosen offer a wide range of communicative features and situations, encompassing both monologue and dialogue, synchronous and asynchronous interactions, still and dynamic texts, public and private communication, written- and spoken-based texts, corporate and user-generated texts. Given the scholarly expertise of the four researchers/teachers involved in the project (Adami for blogs, Moschini for fanvids, Petroni for webpages, and

¹ A fanvid is a widely popular genre among fan communities; it is a user-generated remix of selected scenes from a TV series combined with music and writing/speech, intended to homage the TV series; for more details on the genre, see Moschini (2011, 2014).

Sindoni for videochats), each of them has run one specific workshop in all four classes, thus functioning both as the home teacher of their course and as a guest teacher in the other three courses. The activities in the workshops have been paired with reading materials, consisting in two papers for each workshop, published by the related teacher (Adami, 2015a, 2015b; Moschini, 2011, 2014; Petroni, 2011a, 2011b; Sindoni, 2014a, 2014b). As a final assignment for the course, by choosing one of the four text types of the workshops, students had to:

1. design and produce their own blog, fanvid, video-chat or webpage (using English for writing and/or speech)
2. write (in English) an analysis of the meaning made by the selected multimodal resources in relation to the text's purpose, by applying the concepts of the 'core' sessions and the text-specific workshop
3. peer-assess anonymously (in English) the text and analysis produced by a student in another class.

Final assessment has combined home and guest teachers' evaluation of the students' assignment, taking into consideration the evaluation resulting from the peer-assessment.

Innovation in the project resides mainly in the combination of 1. implementation of a shared syllabus and coordinated shared activities in different classes in different institutions; 2. research-led teaching in praesentia in all classes by scholars coming from different institutions, offering students a face-to-face non-mediated contact with expertise in different theoretical takes in multimodal analysis of the text types in each workshop; 3. blind peer-assessment through cross-class pairing of assessed and assessing student, thus pre-empting known limits of peer-assessment among students in the same class²; 4. learning objectives, which combined both abilities in design/production and analysis/evaluation of multimodal digital texts for international communication, thus also 5. a redefinition of learning to communicate in international context as learning to use all semiotic resources rather than only the resources of a foreign language. Within the Italian context, innovation has involved also the type of assignment, since course assessment in the EFL classroom is usually done through written and oral exams, which students need to take on site; hence the online production and submission of a multimodal assignment, using software tools and

² Research (Pond et al. 1995) has indeed shown a series of issues in peer-assessment among students working in the same class; these include *friendship grading* (i.e. students assigning high grades to peers because of friendship), *collusive grading* (i.e. lack of differentiation between peers, especially frequent with high stake assessment), and *decibel grading* (i.e. students assigning the highest grades to the most active peers). [The author wishes to thank Maria Grazia Sindoni for the references on extant research in peer-assessment].

digital technologies perceived by students as part of their everyday rather than formal learning environment, constitutes a further innovation for EFL teaching/learning in Italian higher education.

The innovative part of the project relevant to the discussion in the previous section has invested the approach to taught contents and the learning objectives. As an exemplification, the discussion will consider the workshop devoted to the blog text type. Drawing on the methodological indications for a multimodal analysis of the overall configuration of blogs (Adami, 2015a) and of their interactivity (Adami, 2015b), the workshop has used neither a merely descriptive approach nor a prescriptive one; rather, the approach has focused on students' meaning-making process through search, analysis and reflection, aimed to assessment and design. Rather than describing genre conventions and teaching literacy, i.e, what needs to be done and what needs to be avoided in designing the multimodal configuration of a blog, the workshop has trained students to derive the meaning potential of modal resources of layout, font, image, colour, and writing (along with their use in interactive signs/sites), by asking students to find answers to the questions listed in sections 2.1 and 2.3 as applied to blogs retrieved from ad hoc searches online. Then, for the production of their own blog, the workshop has asked students to address the questions listed in section 2.3 and choose the most apt modal resources accordingly. The analytical part of the assignment has further required students to reflect upon their choices, make them explicit and justify them, again in relation to the questions listed in section 2.3. Finally, the peer-assessment phase has required students to assess those questions for evaluation purposes of a peer's designed text and justification of choices in his/her analysis. As an example of the process, compare the multimodal configuration of the blog pages in Figure 1 and 2 (i.e., two of the many retrieved and examined during the workshop).

The screenshot shows the home page of the blog 'Becky's Book Reviews'. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation links like 'HOME', 'ABOUT ME', 'REVIEW POLICY/CONTACT ME', 'MORE DETAILED REVIEW POLICY', 'FAVORITE AUTHORS', 'OPERATION ACTUALLY READ BIBLE', and 'HORRIBLE REVIEWS'. The main title 'BECKY'S BOOK REVIEWS' is prominently displayed. Below the title, there are several sections: 'REVIEWS BY AGE GROUP AND GENRE' with a list of categories like 'Adult Fiction', 'Adult Fantasy', etc.; 'NEW(ISH) BOOKS' with a list of years from 2007 to 2015; 'BLOG ARCHIVE' with a list of years from 2015 to 2011; and 'ABOUT ME' with a profile picture and bio. The central content area features a book review for 'Indian Captive (1941)' by Lois Lenski. The review includes a book cover image, a quote, and a detailed analysis. The page also has a 'SUBSCRIBE TO' section with options for 'Posts' and 'All Comments', and a 'FOLLOWERS' section with a list of members. At the bottom, there is a '2015 READING CHALLENGES' section and a 'SUBSCRIBE TO BECKY'S BOOK REVIEWS BY EMAIL' section.

Fig. 1. Home page of the blog Becky's Book Review (<http://blbooks.blogspot.it/>) Retrieved 15.04.2015)

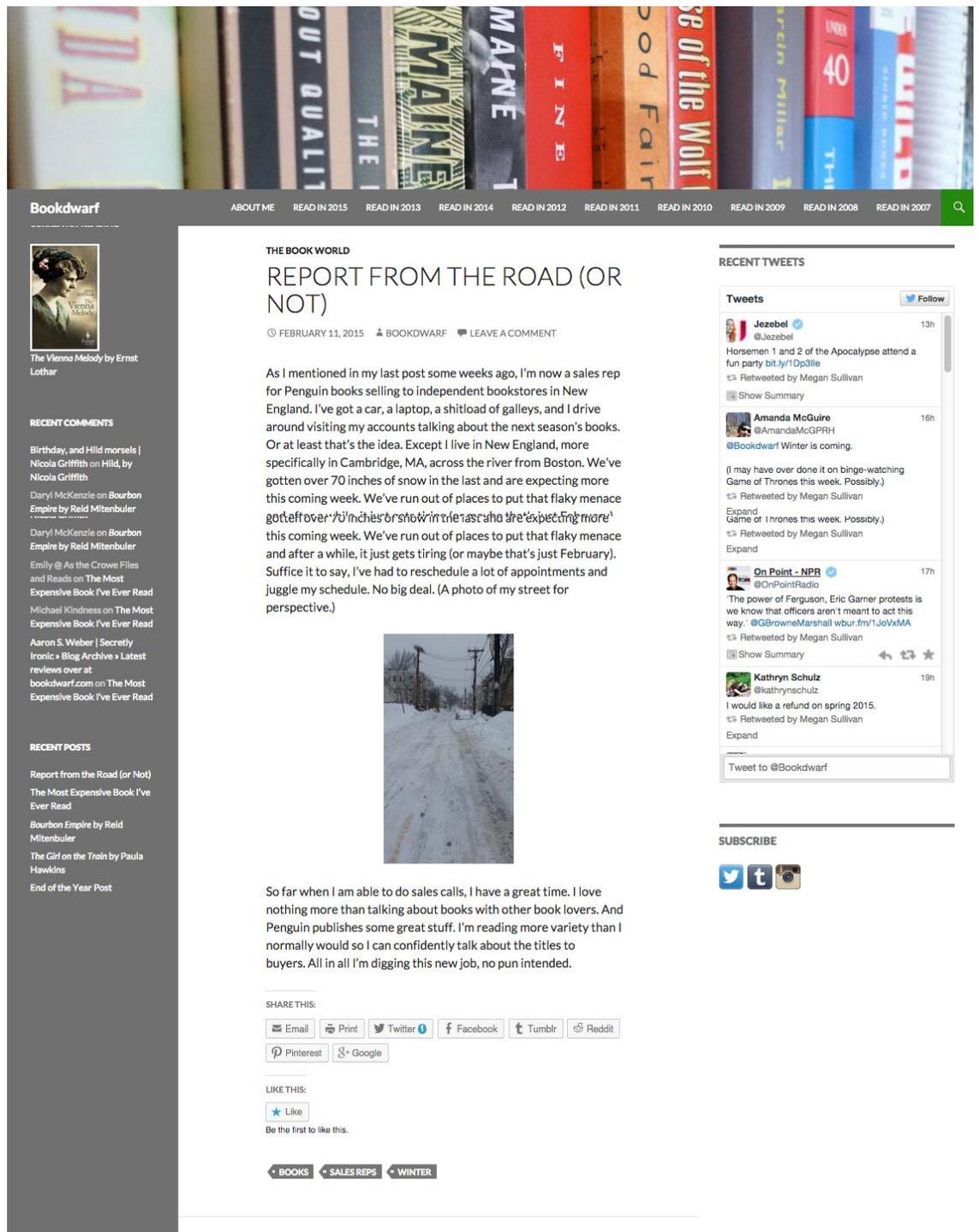


Fig. 2. Homepage of the blog Bookdwarf (<http://www.bookdwarf.com/> Retrieved 15.04.2015)

When discussing the multimodal resources displayed in the two blogs, students have been asked to derive the different meaning potential of font, colour, image and layout, along with writing style/register.

TABLE 1
Elicited aesthetic meaning potential of each modal resources in the two blogs and in their overall multimodal configuration

	Fig. 1 blog	Fig. 2 blog
Purpose/theme of the blog	Book reviews	Book reviews
Which blog looks more personal/professional?	Personal	Professional
Images: differences in style	Amateur photography	Professional photography
Colour:	Warm	Cold
- derived differences in style	Emotions -> personal	Technique -> professional
Font:	Serif	Sans-Serif
- derived differences in style	Traditional	Modern
- recalled genres	Literature	Science
Writing:		
- written content	Personal/amateur book reviewer	Professional book reviewer
- writing style	Personal (consistent with the other modal resources)	Personal (mitigating/nuancing the professional aesthetics communicated by the other modes)
Interactivity:	Less interactive	More interactive (Tweet section)
- derived differences in style	-> traditional	-> technological up-to-date
Overall aesthetics communicated by the multimodal configuration of the blog	- passion for reading; - traditional imagery of reading, as a personal activity - carried out within the warmth of a room surrounded by books in wooden bookshelves; - literature as the preferred genre subject to review	- expertise in reviewing; - reading as a professional activity; - a more modern and technologically-oriented reading environment; - contemporary book formats which might as well include non-literary works

As summarized in Table 1, first observations have dealt with the type and general purpose of the two blogs, both devoted to book reviews. When asked ‘which of the two blogs looks more personal and which one looks more professional?’ all students have intuitively replied that Fig. 1 blog looked more personal while Fig. 2 blog looked more professional. This has set the ground for prompting awareness of the meaning potential of each modal resource in the two blogs. First, students noticed the blogger’s picture in the first blog; it indeed has a modality (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) that recalls amateur photography, in terms of use of colour, framing, perspective etc. They also assessed the image of books used as the masthead of the second blog as more professional-looking; foregrounding/backgrounding effects in the photo are indeed an index of professional photography. After that, students were prompted to focus on

other modal differences, such as colour, font, and layout. In observing them, students have been asked to elicit adjectives (or descriptors) and to make analogies with uses of the same resource in other types of texts. The question 'how does the colour palette in the two blogs differ?' elicited 'warm vs. cold' as an answer. The question 'what do these two colour palettes recall?' elicited 'emotions vs. technique' as an answer. These in their turn elicited 'personal vs. professional'. Combined with the differences in the images, in the density and type of interactive signs, and the 'serif vs. sans-serif' fonts used in the two blogs (which elicited 'traditional vs. modern' and 'literature vs. science' as an analogy to printed genres that conventionally use the two font types), the reflection has moved onto relating these adjectives/descriptors to the overall theme and purpose of the two blogs, i.e., publishing book reviews. The first blog's (Fig. 1) multimodal configuration has triggered a passion for reading as the motive of the blog along with a traditional imagery of reading, as a personal activity carried out within the warmth of a room surrounded by books in wooden bookshelves, and literature (idealized in leather hardback covers, recalled by the textile brown background of the blog page) as the preferred genre subject to review. In turn, the second blog's (Fig. 2) multimodal configuration has triggered notions of expertise in reviewing, of reading as a professional activity, of a more modern and technologically-oriented reading environment (signified also by the *Recent Tweets* section), with contemporary book formats – elicited by the masthead picture – which might as well include non-literary works. Coming to writing, in the end, students noticed that written content in the two blogs confirmed the personal/amateur vs. professional identity features of the bloggers as projected by the other modal resources – indeed, the About Me section of the blog in Fig. 1 states that,

«I love reading. Always have, always will. The views and opinions expressed on this blog are mine and mine alone».

While the first sentence in the post of the second blog (Fig. 2) states that,

«[...] I'm now sales rep for Penguin books selling to independent bookstores in New England».

However, notwithstanding the content expressed, the writing style in the two blogs does not differ much, as students have been prompted to notice. In particular, the second blog post (Fig. 2) employs a markedly personal register, in its frequent use of the first-person pronoun I and of personal expressions of emotions *I love nothing more than talking about books with other book lovers*, with occasional informal and colloquial uses, e.g. *No big deal; Penguin publishes some great stuff; I'm digging this new job*.

This observation has led to a reflection on how different modes can be used consistently, to reinforce a given meaning – as with colour, font and image, in the examined case – but also on how one modal resource (such as writing style in this case) can function as to mitigate or to enlarge/enrich and diversify the range of meanings communicated by the others.

Such a training into searching for answers on the meaning potential of modal resources and their combined use in relation to the text's purpose has been paired with observations on differences between notions of implied vs. real author/reader (Eco, 1979; Iser, 1974), aimed to raise students' awareness on the fact that what a text communicates about the blogger's identity might well differ from the actual identity of its author, which is a prerequisite to awareness in manipulative uses of sign-making resources, as a crucial learning objective today for aware meaning-making of digital texts (e.g., the extreme instance of the hoax mentioned in section 2.1).

Given the question-search-analogy-answer methodology applied onto analytical processing of single modal resources, later combined in a final phase of synthesis, these search, reflection and assessment tasks have proven to be easily transferrable to the students' design phase for their own blog. Here again, indications have not consisted in prescriptions; rather they have stressed the need for reflecting onto the most apt resources to be selected to express the intended meaning in consideration with the desired identity features of the implied author and presumed intended addressees, along with the overall purposes of their blog. Explicit indications for students' assignment productions have included expressions such as 'there is no right or wrong way of doing this, no right or wrong colour/font/language use per se; rather, there is motivated selection of apt resources for the purposes and needs of your text and intended audiences'.

While the entire workshop has focused on semiotic resources and their meaning potentials, further indications have mentioned copyright and ethical issues in reusing material retrieved on the Web, along with existing possibilities for protecting ones' own creations (such as Creative Commons). Only five minutes have been devoted to technological indications for producing the blog; these have consisted in 1. showing screenshots of the three most frequently used blog service providers (Blogger, Wordpress and LiveJournal), indicating the signing up facility and pointing to the wide range of templates available for selection, together with customizing options, 2. suggesting that 'whenever in doubt, ask google', thus pointing to the wide availability of online tutorials and information, once again, stressing the crucial role of searching for aware sign-making, and 3. reminding students to test their created text by opening it with different devices (Mac, Pc and mobile devices) and

browsers, thus stressing the wide range of viewing possibilities of today's extremely mobile media landscape.

After completion of the course, students have anonymously submitted evaluation forms on the course content. Student's evaluations have expressed a general appreciation of the course content and methodology; most frequent observations have stressed the novelty in combining the learning of English with practice into the production of digital genres, perceived as extremely useful for their personal and professional lives. Suggestions for course improvement have mainly pointed to a need for more time devoted to the workshops (rather than the core sessions) within the course; yet, in the case of the blog workshop at least, the need of extended time has in no case been related to more indications and practice into the use of the technology; rather, all have asked for more 'hands-on' work in class for students' searches, text production and discussion of selected resources and their meanings.

When digital mobility is refocused socio-semiotically, rather than exclusively technologically, foregrounded priorities become the changed set of abilities and practices required in today's media/semiotic landscape, rather than the specific contents or devices used in and outside the classroom. This perspective fosters the need for integrating education with and through media into any taught/learned subjects, as exemplified in this project in the EFL classroom (which indeed has made no use of mobile devices and/or their specific forms of texts).

4. Concluding remarks: Power

Rather than focusing on the use of mobile devices for media education, the perspective adopted in the paper has redefined the term 'digital mobility' in the sense of an increased mobility of genres, modes, participant roles, domains and audiences deriving from the affordances of today's media landscape. It has thus examined the impact that a so conceived digital mobility has on sign-making and meaning-making practices, and the related new/renewed priorities for learning.

A fast-paced changing media landscape like today's foregrounds design choices and options. In a time when social relations (and their semiotic counterpart, i.e., genres) are fluid and texts are increasingly multimodal, when conventions are no longer fixed and sign- and meaning-makers are everyday faced with a wide range of choices for representation, there is a strong need to prepare learners with the abilities needed for an aware design of their texts along with an equally aware design of their meaning-making processes and their forms of engagement with texts. When representation is not only conceived as a record of society but also as contributing to shape it, the agency of sign-makers is foregrounded not

only in their creative use of resources to express meaning, but also in the potentials of these for (social) change.

Along with the technologies, i.e., mobile devices, there are other key aspects of today's digital sign- and meaning-making practices that have not been considered in the above discussion. A crucial one is power and how that combines with the affordances of digital media. When meaning-makers are increasingly consuming/retrieving information from what appears on the walls of their social networks, gatekeepers of information provision/selection are no longer media professionals (with their underlying ideologies); rather, social network platforms are the primary distributors of what we are most/less likely to encounter, which is the result of their extremely opaque algorithms: Their logics are driven by the social networks' corporate interests, which include chiefly maximizing profits from online advertising. So, searching and reflecting upon the underlying ideologies of a given text is only part of a broader learning requirement in terms of awareness of the partiality of what is displayed on our screens and on the broader market-led dynamics (and underlying ideologies) driving this selection – a selection which is (at least in part) pre-given, beyond our control and not at all transparent in its driving criteria (Shadoan, 2014).

The increasingly multimodal nature of communication combined with a wider availability of technologies for public dissemination can certainly be seen as a trend towards a democratization of resources available to everyday sign-makers; however, the current multimodal landscape does not escape broader social dynamics of power. Not only is technological development – and what it affords as preferred/dispreferred modal choices – driven by the (huge) interests of corporations operating in the field, but also access to and awareness of the meaning potential of modal resources is differently distributed within societies, where broader power dynamics are always in place.

In this regard, a social semiotic perspective can merely observe the affordances of digital mobility and provide insights on how these may impact on habitus. Media education and education more broadly could use these insights and combine them with findings in other social sciences, to scaffold broader priorities in learning today.

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