

Multimodal discourse analysis

ch.8

What is Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)?

- ❖ Based on Halliday's social-semiotic view of language
- ❖ Language is one semiotic resource among many (images, gesture, sound).
- ❖ Meaning is made through multiple modes working together.
- ❖ Communication is therefore understood as multimodal
- ❖ MDA studies how these modes create meaning in real social contexts.

Halliday's Three Metafunctions

In texts:

- Ideational → what the message is about.
- Interpersonal → relations between participants.
- Textual → how the message is organised.

In images:

- Ideational = images represent aspects of the world/ representational meaning
- Interpersonal = position or engage the viewer/ interactive meaning
- Textual = organise elements for clarity or effect/ compositional meaning

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Jewitt's Four Assumptions

- 1. All modes contribute to meaning equally (language is not dominant).
- 2. Each mode expresses different kinds of meanings—language alone is partial.
- 3. Meaning comes from how modes are selected and combined.
- 4. Multimodal meanings are social—shaped by norms, rules, genres, and context.

What MDA helps us understand

- How images, language, gesture, layout, colour, sound work together.
- How meaning is distributed across modes.
- How social and cultural conventions shape multimodal communication.

Examples of MDA

- Each mode has different affordances—unique things it can do or express (Kress, 1993; Gibson, 1977).
- Example: an image can show emotion instantly; a sentence must describe it.
- Meaning is shaped by history, repeated use, and social norms (van Leeuwen, 2005a).
- A mode's “meaning potential” depends on how society usually uses it.

Coverage of 9/11 attacks:

- Verbal reports informed audiences.
- Visual footage created emotional involvement, making viewers feel present but powerless (Chouliaraki, 2004).

The “Grammar” of Images

Visual Meaning-Making Tools

Gaze / Eye Contact

Direct gaze: creates demand/involvement

No gaze: offers information only

Angle

High angle: viewer “above” → subject appears weak

Low angle: viewer “below” → subject appears powerful

Horizontal angle: involvement/connection

Distance

Close-up = intimacy

Long shot = distance/observation

Other Elements

Lighting, color, focus, realism → shape interpretation (Feez et al., 2010).

Becoming Beauvoir Book Cover



Genre, speech acts and multimodality

Speech Acts in Multimodality

Speech acts have two dimensions:

- Illocutionary act → what the act aims to do (e.g., persuade via an advertisement)
- Perlocutionary act → effect on the audience (e.g., audience buys the product)

Multimodality is key: meaning is made through words + visuals + gestures + context.

Role of Genre

Genres provide templates for social actions (the “how” of communication).

- Service encounters → buying a product using words and gestures
- ATMs / self-checkout → written instructions + visual cues guide the user

Genres follow routine stages, often combining multiple modes for effectiveness.

Multimodal Integration

- Visual, linguistic, and contextual elements work together to:
- Achieve intended outcomes (illocutionary goal)
- Influence audience response (perlocutionary effect)
- Ensures successful communication and completion of social events.

Multimodality and global media discourse

- Machin and van Leeuwen (2007) → global media/ Cosmopolitan magazine → multimodality to achieve a perlocutionary effect
- Advertisements employ a problem-solution structure:
- e.g., a Health Diet Clinic ad presents skin problems through images and text (“Do you suffer from skin problems?”) and offers solutions via the Clinic’s Skin Care System.
- The ad concludes with unblemished skin, demonstrating the product’s effect.
- Words and images interact, constructing a persuasive message that combines visual and verbal modes to guide the reader toward a desired action.

A genre and multimodality framework

Bateman's genre & multimodality framework:

Bateman (2008) → modern texts are multimodal?

Genre → the conventions that organize how these modes work together.

Six analytical layers:

1. Content Structure: What information is being communicated.
2. Genre Structure: The stages/phases typical of that genre.
3. Rhetorical Structure: Relationships between ideas (e.g., main vs. supporting).
4. Linguistic Structure: Language choices used to express meaning.
5. Layout Structure: Visual arrangement, hierarchy, spatial design.
6. Navigation Structure: How readers are guided through the text.

Purpose:

To show how meaning is built by coordinating all modes—not just language.