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Research in progress

Reports from British Association for Applied Linguistics

with Cambridge University Press seminars 2024

Multimodality in Applied Linguistic Research: Current Trends and Methodological Implications

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Introduction

In April 2024, we had the privilege of hosting an online BAAL/Cambridge University Press seminar entitled ‘Multimodality in Applied Linguistic Research: Current Trends and Methodological Implications’.

Multimodal approaches have been steadily evolving in the last twenty years in a range of fields, including linguistics, social semiotics, communication and media studies, sociology, anthropology, and organisation studies, all of which articulate and ‘operationalise’ multimodality differently (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2018). Depending on the theoretical tradition, field, and discipline, different terms have been employed to refer to the, broadly speaking, use of body in interaction, resulting in over 200 different word combinations that fall into nine groups: NONVERBAL/NONVOCAL, EMBODIED, BODY, (MULTI)MODAL, VISIBLE/VISUAL, GESTURAL, KINESIC, SEMIOTIC, and PHYSICAL (Nevile, 2015).

Traditionally, linguistic research has privileged linguistic units; more recent work on social interaction, however, has been marked by a rise of interest in the body. This shift is traced back to the early 2000s by Nevile (2015), who labels it the ‘embodied turn’. Other relevant terms describing this direction change in the fields of humanities and social sciences are the ‘multimodal turn’ (Jewitt, 2014) and the ‘visual turn’ (Mondada, 2016). Even within these turns, however, certain semiotic resources, such as gaze and gesture, are more thoroughly studied. Issues of materiality, on the other hand, remain underrepresented, or are viewed as peripheral, particularly in the field of discourse studies – a primarily logocentric field (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2020).

Despite multimodal approaches being on the rise, some common challenges, particularly related to methodological issues, have been noted, including systematising methods in multimodal research and ‘building “stable analytical inventories” of multimodal semiotic resources’ (Jewitt, 2013, p. 263); bringing various semiotic modes together under a cohesive analytical framework (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001); and integrating different tools and techniques for analysing multimodal interactions (Norris, 2004). This seminar aimed to begin addressing this gap.

Focus of the seminar and contributions

The relationship between theory and analytical operationalisation needs further articulation. Building on this agenda, this seminar focused on methodological implications, bringing together theory and practice. Core issues addressed included theoretical approaches and cutting-edge debates, transcription approaches, and practical recommendations.

To facilitate discussions and maximise engagement, our seminar involved a variety of theoretical talks, practical workshops, and breakout sessions. We had the honour of being joined by two guest speakers with valuable experience in multimodality, with their

contributions shedding light on various research settings and methodologies. Sophia Diamantopoulou (UCL Institute of Education), in her talk, ‘The multimodality of English language learning: A social semiotic approach’, started with an overview of multimodal theories and methods underpinning applied linguistic research. She then introduced Kress’s (2010) multimodal social semiotic theory for communication and explored its implications for the school subject of English, attending to various aspects of teaching and learning, ranging from textbook design, classroom interaction and layout to assessment issues. Our second guest speaker, Dr Marina Cantarutti (University of York) in her talk, ‘The multimodality of everyday cooperative (inter)action: a conversation-analytic perspective’, reviewed key Conversation Analysis/Interactional Linguistics contributions to multimodal studies, highlighting key findings and challenges. Drawing on co-animation cases in everyday interaction, Marina illustrated how participants jointly solve interactional contextualisation ‘problems’ smoothly through multimodal GESTALTS of lexico-grammatical, prosodic, and gestural detail. Next, Professor Jo Angouri (University of Warwick), joined by Linyu Liu (Aalto University), provided an overview of multimodality and leadership in institutional settings, before drawing attention to material aspects of interaction, through the analysis of the use of smoking spaces in a corporate setting. Finally, Dr Polina Mesinioti conducted a hands-on workshop on video recorded clinical encounters, providing an insight into the trajectory of multimodal analysis. Polina walked attendees through data collection, transcription, and analysis of video recordings, with a particular focus on ethical considerations in multimodal research undertaken in sensitive contexts. Participants were allowed time to work on simulated data and make their own observations about the multimodal accomplishment of leadership in the context of obstetric emergencies. Overall, the speakers’ joint expertise and perspectives facilitated the discussion of methodological issues and questions related to multimodal applied linguistic research.

Approximately 40 participants, including PhD students, early career researchers (ECRs), and senior academics, attended at least some of the sessions. Attendees were provided with the space and time to raise questions relevant to their own research, engage in discussions, and reflect on key theoretical and methodological issues. We also held three breakout sessions on ‘Methods for multimodal analysis’, ‘Language Learning and Multimodality’, and ‘The ethics of multimodality’, providing participants with opportunities to discuss topics of interest, build connections, and plan next steps. We concluded the seminar with group discussions and plans for an edited collection on ‘Methodological considerations of multimodality in applied linguistics’, which Polina has now started organising.

Outcomes

The following objectives have been achieved:

- Provide an overview of multimodal theories and methods underpinning applied linguistic research.
- Address practical implications, illustrating the ‘how-to’ aspects of conducting multimodal analyses.
- Provide PhD students and ECRs with networking opportunities.
- Start discussions on an edited collection on multimodal methodologies used in applied linguistic research, bringing together experienced and early career researchers.

Overall, timely issues of multimodality and materiality in applied linguistic research have been covered, with a strong focus on practice. We are grateful to BAAL and Cambridge University Press for the opportunity to host this seminar, to our speakers, and participants for allowing critical reflections to come to the forefront. Polina would also like to thank the University of York and the Department of Health Sciences for their administrative support. We look forward to furthering the dialogue on this important topic.

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