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Response to Evangelos Kourdis’ “Multimodal, polysemiotic, multisemiotic: a necessary demarcation for semiotics and translation studies”

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I welcome Evangelos’ paper which points to a wealth of key issues, many of which are topic of lively discussions also in Multimodal Studies. I’ll focus only on two concepts, “multimodality” and “mode,” and on their space/import in relation to “semiotics” and “translation studies.”

Let me first say that I always find it both frustrating and illuminating to encounter views from another academic space. Frustrating, because I must relate them to my own semiotic universe; illuminating, because in doing so, I learn. It’s a healthy reminder of the paradox of communication: across semiotic spaces, meaning is (re)made through translation – always imperfect and polysemous. While part of us craves certainty and stable systems, this (mis) translation is inevitable and ultimately necessary for new understanding and forms of life to emerge.

1. The multimodality “hype” and Multimodal Studies

I find it useful to distinguish between multimodality as a concept and Multimodal Studies as a field. “Multimodal” is used in various disciplines to specify that a text/interaction under analysis is not just written/spoken words. Could polysemiotic/intersemiotic/syncretic be used instead? Sure, as some do, in Translation Studies too. Undeniably, multimodality has had more traction for many reasons. Power inequalities in academia shaped towards Anglocentric hegemony have played some role, on top of the immediate relatability for linguists of the analytical framework of Kress and van Leeuwen’s *Reading Images* (1996; the term “multimodality” did not feature in the first edition however), and its timing coinciding with socio-technologically driven changes in text composition practices.

Multimodal *Studies* is the archipelago of diverse research that takes multimodality as its main subject of investigation. Rather than just using multimodality-as-a-concept, scholars in this field are interested in the relations between those different resources (let’s hold from calling them “modes” for now), with various foci, including researching how meaning is produced and society is reflected, represented and (re)produced in these

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combinations, how people develop them, communicate and interact through them, alongside developing descriptive frames. What is new, or at least heightened, in Multimodal Studies is a declared focus on the relations between these resources and an explicit tenet on language being neither necessarily the main resource nor paradigmatic of all semiosis (as also Evangelos acknowledges, most traditions in semiotics attribute some primacy to language instead).

So, although possibly frustrating for those wanting to adopt multimodality in other fields, there is no “multimodal theory”; there is a concept used by many and there is a field of study with with different theoretical approaches (Social Semiotics being one, varied within itself, and developed before “multimodality” was introduced, Hodge and Kress, 1988), each with related conceptual tools, including different definitions of “mode”, developed reflecting each approach specific take and focus on multimodal analysis. When arguing specific contributions and limitations of multimodal research, it is wise to be explicit and refer them to the related theoretical approach.

2. Social Semiotics shift to practices. Mode as a heuristic

Reading Kress and van Leeuwen’s works through time, the term “system” becomes rarer, and so does “code.” Van Leeuwen has also increasingly favoured “semiotic resource” over “mode.” (see his discussion, also in relation to media, in van Leeuwen 2021). Semioticians too have grappled with boundaries between sign systems, as is normal with basic concepts/units in many fields; just reading Evangelos’s exemplifications of sign systems (“image, colour, layout, typography, graphic design”; “proxemics”; “opera,” “theatre,” “cinema”; “natural language,” 725–727) made me wonder how these could fit a possible definition. Incidentally, I have also found confusing what seems a conflation of system, text and process when he evidences systems and sub-systems citing Lotman’s text within the text and Eco’s communicative processes (720). Regardless, Social Semiotics has shifted the focus from *systems* to *practices* since Kress and van Leeuwen (2001).

While agreeing that there is not one definition of mode, I find this unavoidable and necessary. Evangelos writes “it is by knowing the composition of the semiotic system which consists of subsystems that we are able to know how they work together to produce meaning” (720). This is a standpoint akin to more systemic perspectives in Multimodal Studies. Social Semiotics has shifted the focus from systems to *practices* instead (as declared since Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). *To me* different social practices under analysis call for different categorisations (see the example I make of wine as mode in wine-tasting). People have different (dynamic, relational, emergent) semiotic universes, influenced by the social dynamics and histories of their situated practices, and if I’m interested in understanding people and practices as revealed through how they communicate/interact, I need flexibility in conceptual categorisations, with definitions accounting for different interests (in Kress’ 2010 sense) and practices, also in relation to their developed resources for meaning making (aka modes). This is why mode for me is not the object to describe, but a heuristic for analysis of meaning making in situated practices.

As for Evangelos’ proposal of devoting “mode” for channels of perception or senses, besides noting that this definition does not correspond to how O’Halloran refers to “modes” in more recent works (e.g., on intersemiotic translation, O’Halloran, Tan, and

Wignell 2016), I would find it problematic both epistemologically (for the learning/things it would allow or not) and ontologically (for the essence of reality this relation would entail). As for the former, I would not find “modes=senses” and “semiotic systems=representational resources” suitable. It would make “mode” redundant, as I already have channels of perception/senses when needed, and would not enable me to use either to account for individual aspects of sign- and meaning-making (not sign-use!) in relation to the social (or even to a presumed system). As for the ontological issue, in fact an entire area of research, in deaf studies (e.g., Kusters 2017), ethnomethodology (e.g., Mondada 2014, 2021) and other phenomenology-related approaches (e.g., Sekimoto 2012) uses multimodality in relation to senses, as the combination of *modalities*. This might seem closer to Evangelos’ proposal of resignifying “modes.” However, modalities are related to experience rather than representation and are about *sensing*, not about assigning a specific “modality” to a specific “sense.” While Evangelos mentions the five senses, one thing that sensory research agrees on is that senses are not five. Not only is the debate still open on how many senses human perception can be better categorised into, but also has sensory research increasingly questioned sensorial boundaries (e.g., Howes 2005, 2018). In sum, with Evangelos’ proposal, we would only move “mode/multimodality” from occupying a space that is problematic for some, to another that would be equally if not more problematic.

3. Multimodality and translation studies

I do not consider “multimodal translation” and “intersemiotic translation” as synonyms. In my reading, “intersemiotic translation” is translating from one mode/semiotic resource into another, after (broadening the scope and directionality from) the Jakobsonian concept. “Multimodal translation” refers to translation from/into a multimodal text. In this, the phrase alerts the translator/analyst to the fact that meaning is multimodally made in the texts being dealt with; so, rather than isolating writing (or speech for audio-visual translation and interpreting), it is vital to consider the source and the target text holistically, as multimodal wholes, to make/analyse translation choices. Even when translation is intrasemiotic (as in much interlingual translation practice), the meaning potentials of the source and target texts as multimodal wholes change unavoidably, precisely because by changing the stuff in one mode, new meaning relations are established with the other modes in the co-text. Using the two phrases and discussing their potential import in Translation Studies can be extremely beneficial, also for the challenges the field and profession are facing. I mentioned it for multimodal translation in the paper cited by Evangelios; I can add here also the possible applications and fields that would open in actual intersemiotic translation, where machines cannot perform that well (yet). GenAI translates from written input to image now, with varying and unsettling results; prompt engineering is needed to strengthen the results of intersemiotic translation, and multimodality-informed translators would be extremely well positioned in this, while critical analyses of AI-generated intersemiotic translations would be needed too, to reveal the biases in the (hegemonies that corporate algorithms contribute to shape as) distributed knowledge base on which AI draws its responses, for example.

In closing, the structuralist in us wants univocal and agreed terms and meanings, associations between signifier and signified; but codification holds valid and certain

only for very limited contexts of human communication – in spite of what we teach students of specialised/technical translation, academic terminology, especially in the humanities and social sciences, is not one of these. The poststructuralist in us accepts (and perhaps ends up welcoming?) the unavoidable fact that people make different meanings out of the same stuff and even more, their meanings change the very moment they are signified into some form. In this I fully stand with Kress saying that people make signs anew every time they use a resource - hence sign-making. What we can do to try to understand each other is to explain further, (re)define and contextualise more where we come from and stand when we use a certain word – at the same time never forgetting that, while doing so, we unavoidably change our meanings too, because our thought process has, even if minimally, already changed by the very fact of making that sign. Something I've just done here too, thankful to Evangelos for allowing me to make new meanings, once again.

Disclosure statement

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