An interdisciplinary engagement with Kress's social semiotic concept of agency:

Future directions in multimodal research in museums and schools

TOPIC 1- Multimodality, evolution of the concepts and new directions

JAUME I UNIVERSITY- GRAPE webinar on multimodality 16.11.2023

Sophia Diamantopoulou

UCL Institute of Education

Outline and main argument

A retrospective to Gunther Kress' work and the archaeology of the social semiotic multimodality

This talk discusses instantiations of *agency* as key in the design of semiotic work we produce.

A discussion of the concept of agency and its material realisation through four examples arguing that multimodal texts bear signs not only of their design process but of the rhetoric that has informed it.

They index the position of the meaning maker towards the institutional discourses that have shaped their design. They bear traces of a dialogue between us and the institutions that regulate our semiotic action. Agency is understood as an act of compliance towards or defiance of institutional dictates.

Reflection on future directions in the field through the mapping of current debates.

Tracing the origins: Challenging linearity and the concept of evolution

'Multimodality is differently construed. Exactly how the concept is articulated and 'operationalized' varies widely, both across and within the different disciplines and research traditions… It is very difficult and potentially problematic to talk about multimodality without making explicit one's theoretical and methodological stance' (Jewitt et al, 2016: 1)

There have been several attempts to map the field. Each of them done from specific positionings. It is more an issue of mapping the breadth, diversity and discipline specific adaptations of concepts within and across traditions, rather than identifying development and evolution.

I will focus on transformations and development of concepts within the tradition of Kress's social semiotics, the theory underpinning this 'take' on multimodality' I have endorsed.

Jewitt, C., Bezemer, J. and O'Halloran, K.. (2016). Introducing Multimodality. London and New York: Routledge

Yang, Y. (2019). A Review of Multimodality Research: Origins and Developments. *Language and Semiotic Studies*, *5*(2), 119-141. https://doi.org/10.1515/lass-2019-050206

Gunther Kress

1940-2019

Linguist, semiotician and social theorist

Co-founder of:

Critical Linguistics,

Critical Discourse Analysis

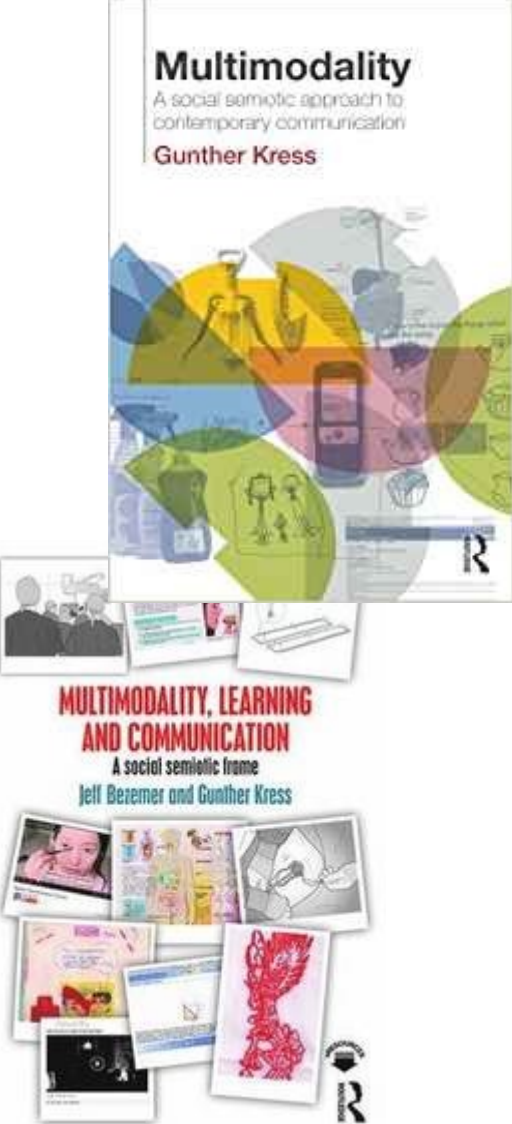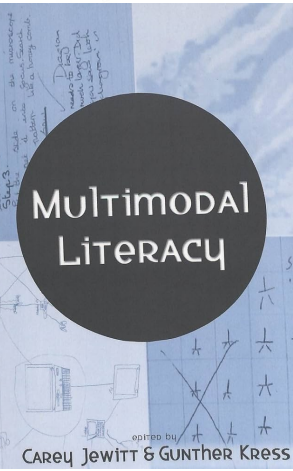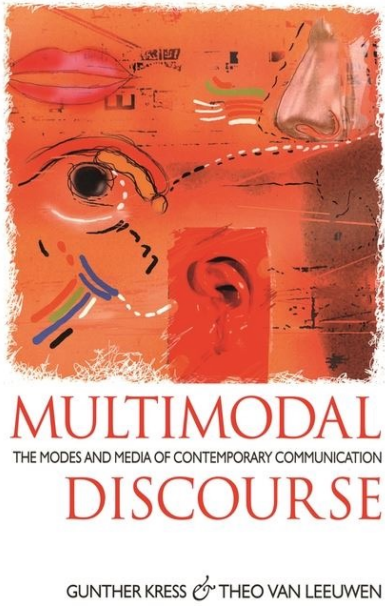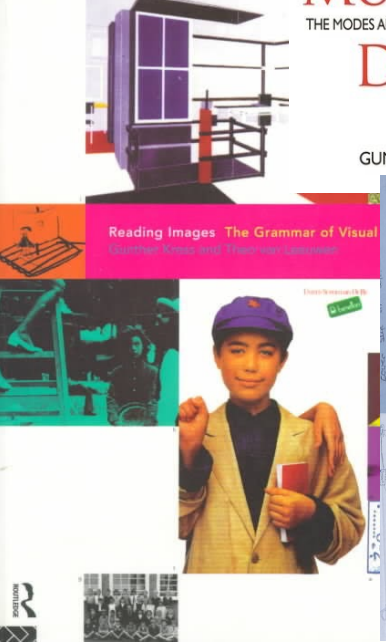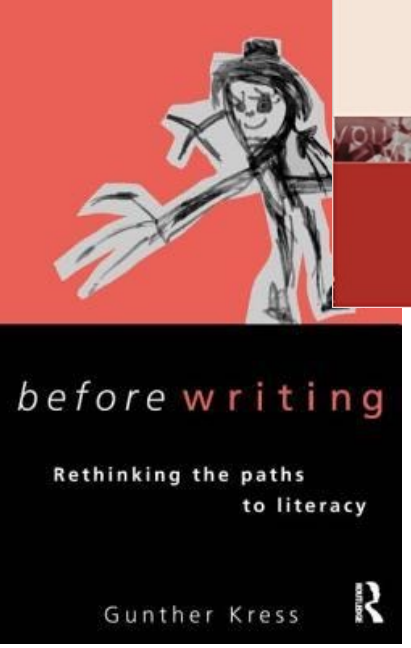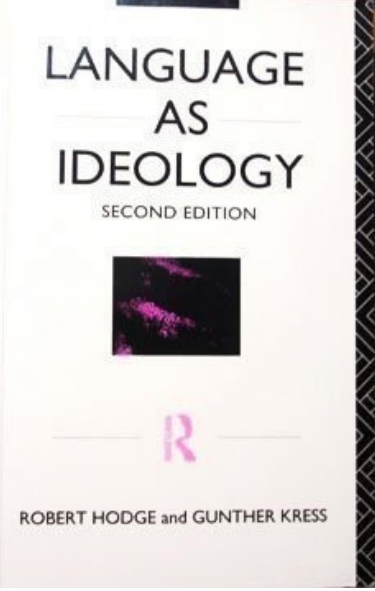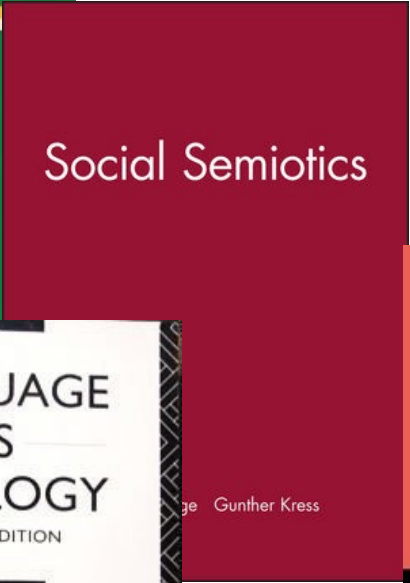Social Semiotics

Theorist of multimodal communication and representation

J. & Blommaert, J.(2012) Gunther Kress. In C.A. Chapelle (ed), The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics. Oxford. Wiley

A retrospective: the archaeology of multimodal social semiotics
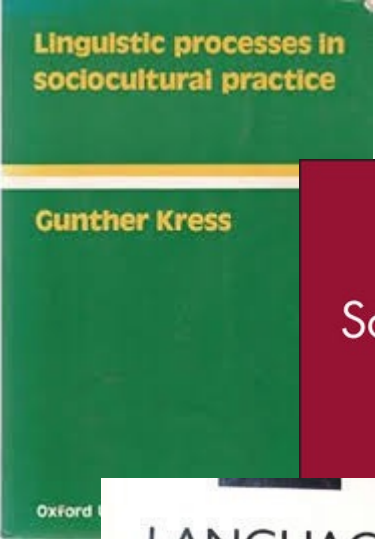
Gunther Kress' multimodal social semiotics: Key concepts and tenets of an evolving paradigm

- Sign
- Mode
- Modal resource
- Transduction
- Multimodal orchestration
- Modal specialization
- Transformation
- Design
- Rhetoric
- Agency

Kress, G. (2010). Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication. Abingdon: Routledge.

Theorizing agency (1)

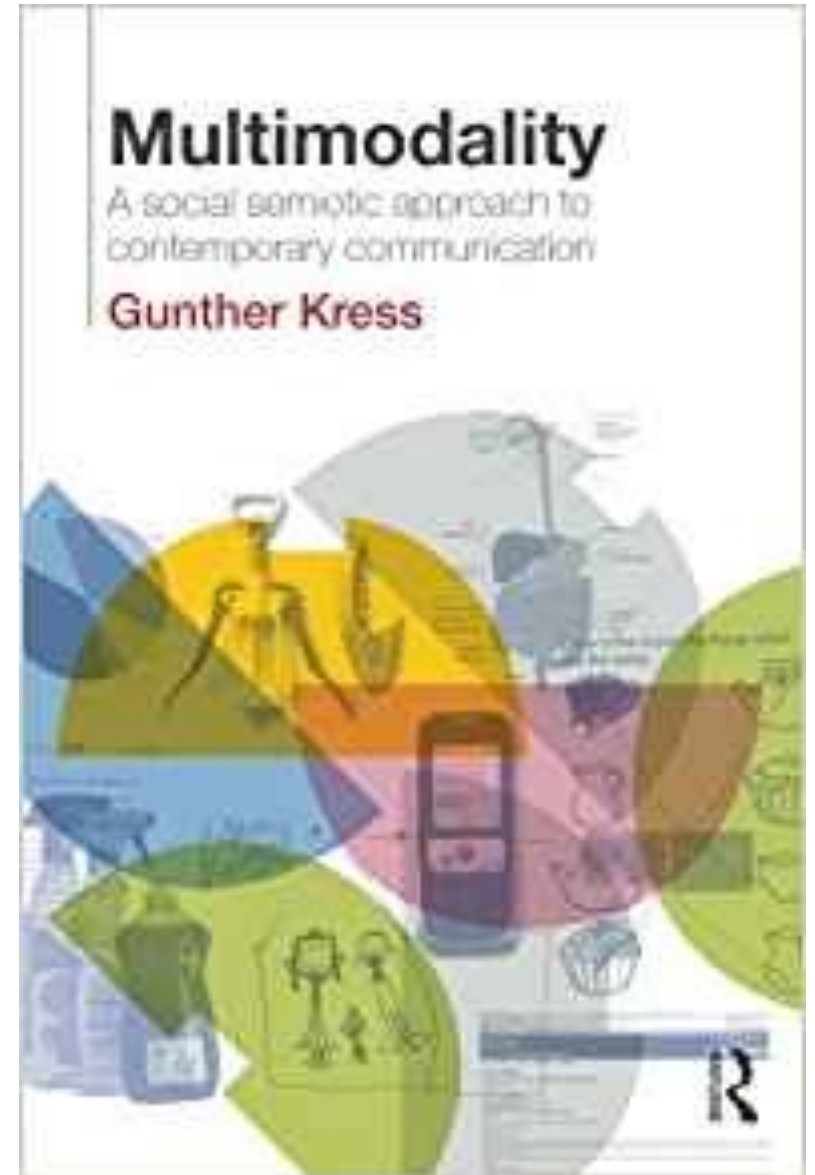While agency has been extensively theorized from various social theory, philosophy and social psychology perspectives (Klemencic, 2015), it has always been a point of reference rather than key term in multiliteracies and multimodal research (Kress, 2010; Cimasko & Shin, 2017; Cope & Kalanzis, 2020; Lim & Nguyen, 2022).

An agent is a *'being with the capacity to act'* and *'agency denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity'*. Agency is understood as 'intentional action' or 'initiation' by the agent (Schlosser)

Agency in Kress' social semiotics is distinctly oriented to a social agenda, forming an underpinning aspect of the semiotic work of all meaning makers. Social semiotic theory considers agency as the engagement of meaning makers with the rhetorical aspects of their design and with the discourses of the various institutions that regulate their representations. Kress's theory is *'stressing the agency of socially formed individuals acting as sign-makers out of socially shaped interest with socially made resources in social interactions in communities'* (Kress, 2010:166)

 The theorization of agency here is drawing on Kress's multimodal social semiotic theory and Cope and Kalantzis' developments in multiliteracies theory

Theorizing agency (2)

This study is about making visible the materiality of agency in a multimodal text, since *'the interest and agency of the sign maker is evident in the shape of the sign'* (Kress, 2010:179)

Kress's theory also assigns importance to agency and to how it is distributed: *'The social semiotic frame highlights the distribution of agency between an arrangement of rhetor on the one side, making meaning, and of members of the audience as re-makers in the light of their own distinct positions, their design practices, across the other side. In other words in this model of communication, agency is distributed between the initial sign maker and the sign re-maker, always in the light of distributions of power in the specific environment'* (Bezemer and Kress, 2016: 25)

In Cope and Kalantzis work, agency is a function of meaning making, corresponding to the interpersonal metafunction of Halliday. Halliday's metafunctions, ideational, interpersonal, and textual have been termed reference, agency, and structure. This is a useful resource as it reinforces our understanding that agency is this interpersonal relationship between the meaning maker and the 'reader' as the representative of an institution that is actually realised in a multimodal text.

Cope B, Kalantzis M (2020) *Making Sense: Reference, Agency and Structure in a Grammar of Multimodal Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bezemer, J. and Kress, G. (2016). Multimodality, Learning and Communication: A social semiotic frame. Routledge

Diamantopoulou, S. (forthcoming) Children's engagement with the pedagogic discourse as a political and social achievement: Semiotic practices in children's visual representations. In Starc, S. and Komninos, N. (eds) *Case Studies in Multimodal Texts in Schools*. Language and Cultural Contacts in the heart of Europe Series. Peter Lang

Kress, G. (2010). Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication. Abingdon: Routledge

Different instantiations of agency across institutional settings and multimodal texts

Museum of London

(visitors' movement and gesture)

Tate Britain

(students' accounts of their visit)

Ancient Agora, Athens

(students' drawings)

Maths Classroom, UK

(students' speech and movement)

Museum visitors' agency: movement and gesture at the Museum of London

Diamantopoulou, S., Christidou, D. (2019). Museum encounters: A choreography of visitors' bodies in interaction. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 34 (4), doi:10.1080/09647775.2019.1585279

Diamantopoulou, S., Christidou, D. (2016). The Choreography of the Museum Experience: Visitors' Designs for Learning. *The International Journal of Arts Education, Volume 11, Issue 3, pp. 1-13*, doi:10.18848/2326-9944/CGP/v11i03

Agency in the multimodality of the museum experience

Museum of London exhibition ' London before London'/ Project: The Museum, the Exhibition and the Visitor: Meaning making in a new arena of learning and communication, Swedish Research Council

Embodying spaces:
museum scripts and rituals

Museum scripts dictate...
What to 'see'
How to 'look at'
How to 'talk about it'

Movement is inherent in the museum design and the practice of visiting.

Visitors adhere to the protocol or deviate from rules regulating movement, exercising agency

Visitors' agency in orchestrating a performance

- prompting engagement & holding the ground
- selecting objects
- introducing ways of engaging with them through the body
- framing aspects of artefacts & space
- setting the pace, the focus and rhythm

Visitors' agency in holding the ground for engagement

Movement and gestures as:

prompts and invitation for engagement

a means for framing the visitors' engagement

the lead modes in the orchestration

instantiations of an interplay of agencies

a sign of selections and framing of the visiting experience

Assigning prominence to movement and gesture as an instantiation of agency

- Visitors **align their bodies** close to those with whom they are "with" (& far away from those who are not)

- Hold the ground for their co-visitors' engagement.

- Frame artefacts and point to them, dictating where one should attend to and from what view point

- Monitor & acknowledge **mutual attention** through their gaze, posture, feet position, head orientation & acknowledgement tokens (i.e. 'yes' or nodding positively)

- Use **movement** to **exercise** their own agency or **endorse/reject** each other's in the shaping of the encounter.

Agency in endorsing or defying institutional 'scripts'

- Museum visitors move in the galleries creating 'choreographies' that unfold either in compliance with the museum 'script' (scripted choreographies), or in response to prompts from other visitors sharing the same space (improvised choreographies).

- Visitors oscillate between performing 'scripted choreographies' and 'improvised choreographies' through shifts in positioning and alignment, while being spectators of other visitors' choreographies.

- Both kinds of choreographies are continuously shaped in interaction with the 'scripted' museum stage and other visitors' 'scripted' and 'improvised choreographies'.

Students' agency in designing for learning: Art and Literacy in Tate Britain

On the trip my favlite put was. wen wy Went up to the utgalrey but it was disPoning that we wy Hati to go dan the Sters I like't it wen wy got to gon are pichs.

'When we went on the school trip I didant like it because when I got there my legs were herting. what I did like about it was the picters where great. I liked the picter with all the zigzags that made stick men. I was trying to find picters with amazing coulers the picters where beitiful. I was looking at the picters so much that I nearly forgot to do my work'.

Diamantopoulou, S. (2021). The multimodality of English as a school subject: Mapping meanings about literacy discourses on students' work in the case of a museum and a school project. In Baldry, A., Vasta, N. (Eds.), *Multiliteracy Advances and Challenges in Hypermedia Environments.* Udine, Italy: Udine University.
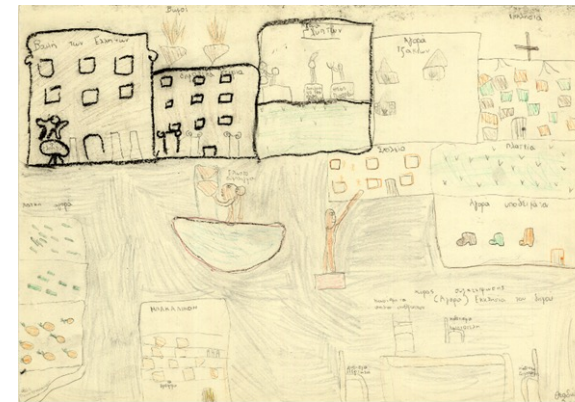
On the trip. My favorite put was wen wy went up to the utgalrey but it was disponing that wyhat. To go dan the sters I like't it wer wy got to gr are pichs

(Picture of children going up the winding staircase of Tate Britain.)
© Tate 2006

Diamantopoulou, S. (2007). Tate Britain's Ideas Factory Action Research Project Report: A Multimodal Approach to its Impact on Children's Literacy. London: Tate Britain.

Students' agency in designing for learning: writing and drawing at an archaeological site

Diamantopoulou, S. (forthcoming) Children's engagement with the pedagogic discourse as a political and social achievement: Semiotic practices in children's visual representations. In Starc, S. and Komninos, N. (eds) *Case Studies in Multimodal Texts in Schools*. Language and Cultural Contacts in the heart of Europe Series. Peter Lang

Diamantopoulou, S. (2008). Learning on archaeological sites: A multimodal social semiotic approach..*Hermes: Journal of Language and Communication Studies*. 41.81-105.,

Student's agency in designing for learning: moving and speaking in the math classroom
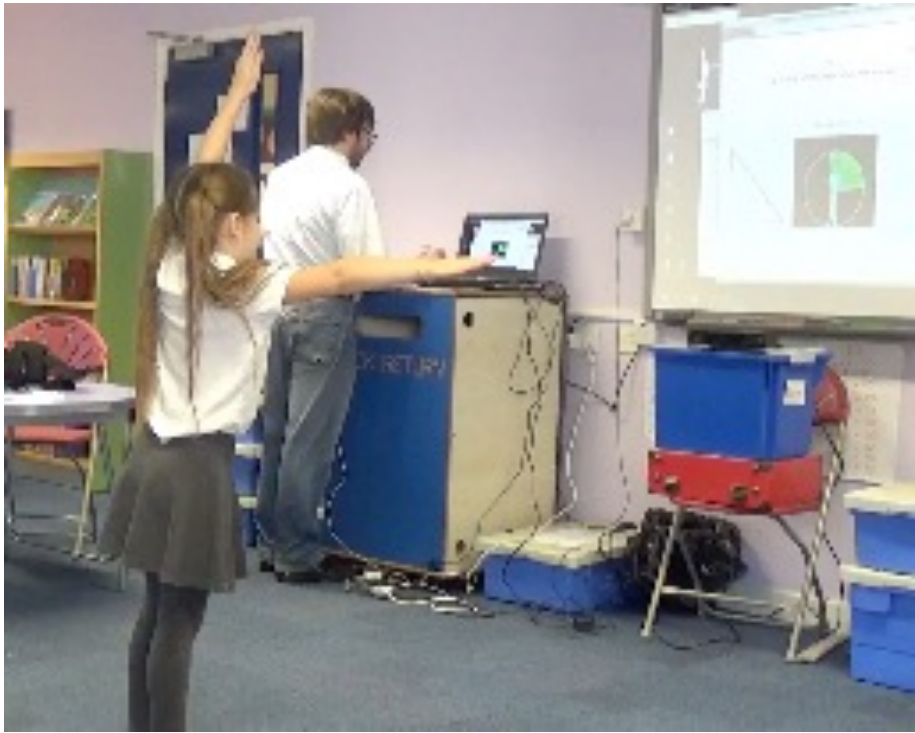
Agency as acting upon technology and the semiotic resources:

- 'it is like you are a sorceress and you are controlling the person'

- 'you have your own person... you are moving it ... it is like a puppet\

WE DRAW: EXPLOITING THE BEST SENSORY MODALITY FOR LEARNING ARITHMETIC AND GEOMETRY AT PRIMARY SCHOOL

https://wedraw.eu/.   PI: Sara Price

Agency in defining an angle

Student: ' ... and then you have to try to get the right amount'

Agency as an embodied action

Student: 'It is like going down that slope or .....that slope down'

Researcher: That's right... when you go down hill... yeah... it's like how steep is the hill.. what is the angle of the hill.

Student:....I know what we are doing cause for two years now I've going on... I 've been skiing. I went last year and ...[...] this year.
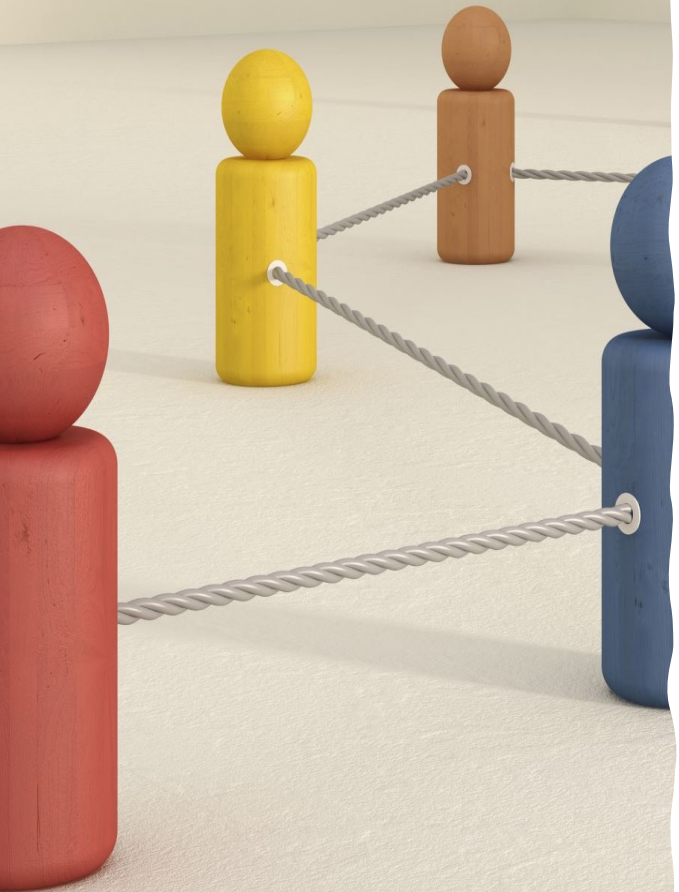
Agency in designing semiotic action (1)

- Agency is visible and evidenced through all modes and orchestrations in distinctly different ways across the multimodal texts produced by meaning makers.

- The multimodal texts bear signs not only of the resources that have been transformed for designing for learning or communication. They bear signs of the meaning makers' positioning in relation to the institutional discourses that prompt and shape their design (rhetoric).

- The way meaning makers design their semiotic work points to different instantiations of agency, indexing different readings of the institutional requirements, as they engage in an 'interpersonal dialogue with the institutions involved.

Agency in designing semiotic action (2)

The concept of agency brings our attention to how meaning makers signal:

❑ Their disposition to the institutional framing of a prompt

❑ their compliance or defiance of institutional dictates, making their semiotic work a political project

❑ their choice and effort (of lack of these) to operate within the realm of acceptable dispositions to knowledge

❑ their awareness of institutional permissions and of the limits in the selection and transformation of resources.

Texts are an instantiation of the interpersonal relationship between designers and institutions. Agency is the action that is assumed when this relationship is prompted through communication. It is the interpersonal relationship that is established between the meaning maker and the 'reader' representing the institution.

Diamantopoulou, S. (forthcoming). Student agency in the creating of multimodal texts in the Ancient Agora of Athens: A political project.. In Starc, S. and Komninos, N. (eds) *Case Studies in Multimodal Texts in Schools*. Language and Cultural Contacts in the heart of Europe Series. Peter Lang

Future directions

In a prospective gaze towards the future of multimodality, I am relating my interest in agency to five areas I see as the future directions in the field of multimodality in relation to education
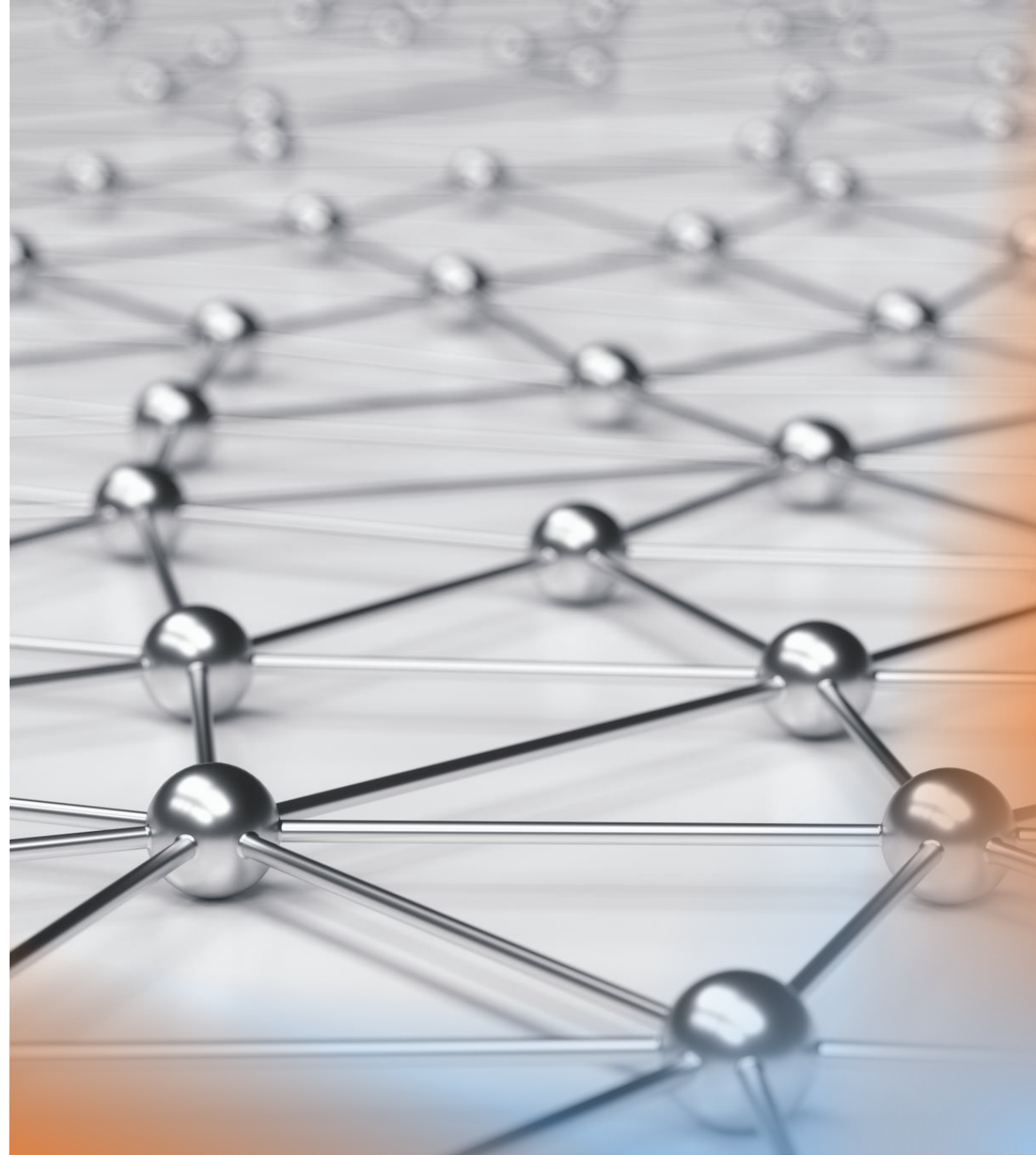
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

(i) the convergence across strands of multimodality, the breaking the 'silos' of scholarly work and the identification of common ground, articulated as a collective intention of the multimodal community

Multimodality Talks series

Bremen-Groningen Online workshops on multimodality

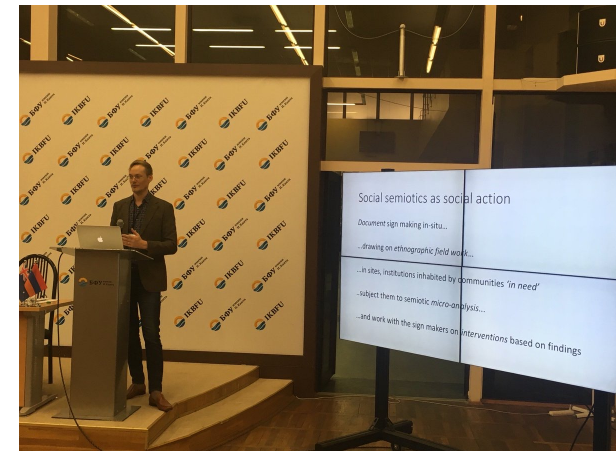PanMeMic: Interaction and Communication in the pandemic and beyond

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

(ii) the use of multimodality as a tool in the service of society,

"Our responsibility is to intervene and act in the social world rather than only interpret it'

Jeff Bezemer's keynote in 2018 conference "Social Science as Social Semiotics conference' Kaliningrad

ICOM-11 DESIGNING FUTURES: Key questions

- How do we understand the impact of our work in the world today and the social futures we are envisaging to design?
- How is multimodality relevant to contemporary societies globally?
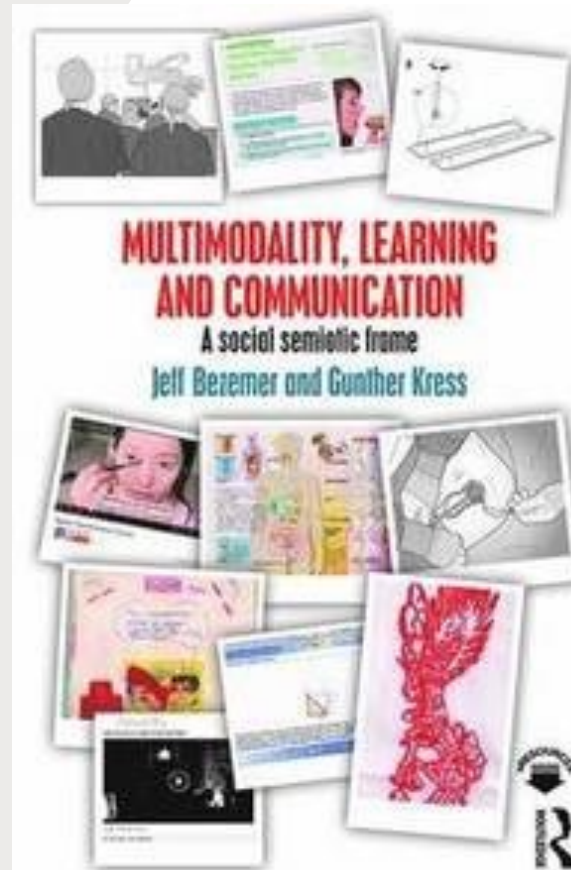- How can our work inform interaction, communication, policy making and practice?

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

(iii) the quest for interdisciplinarity and the development of new methods and tools for a changing communication landscape
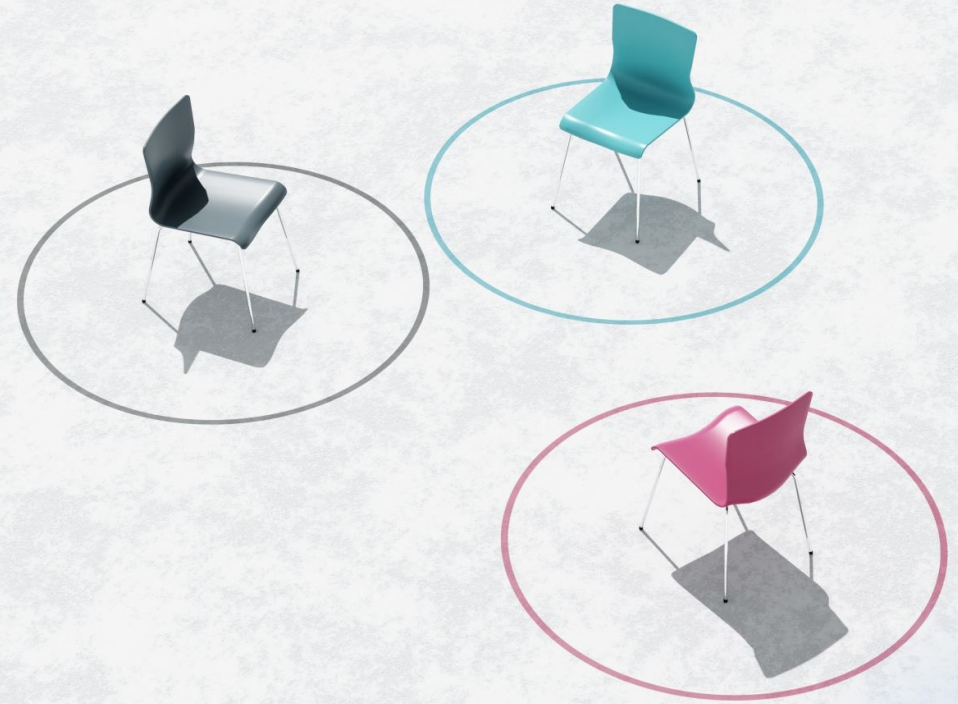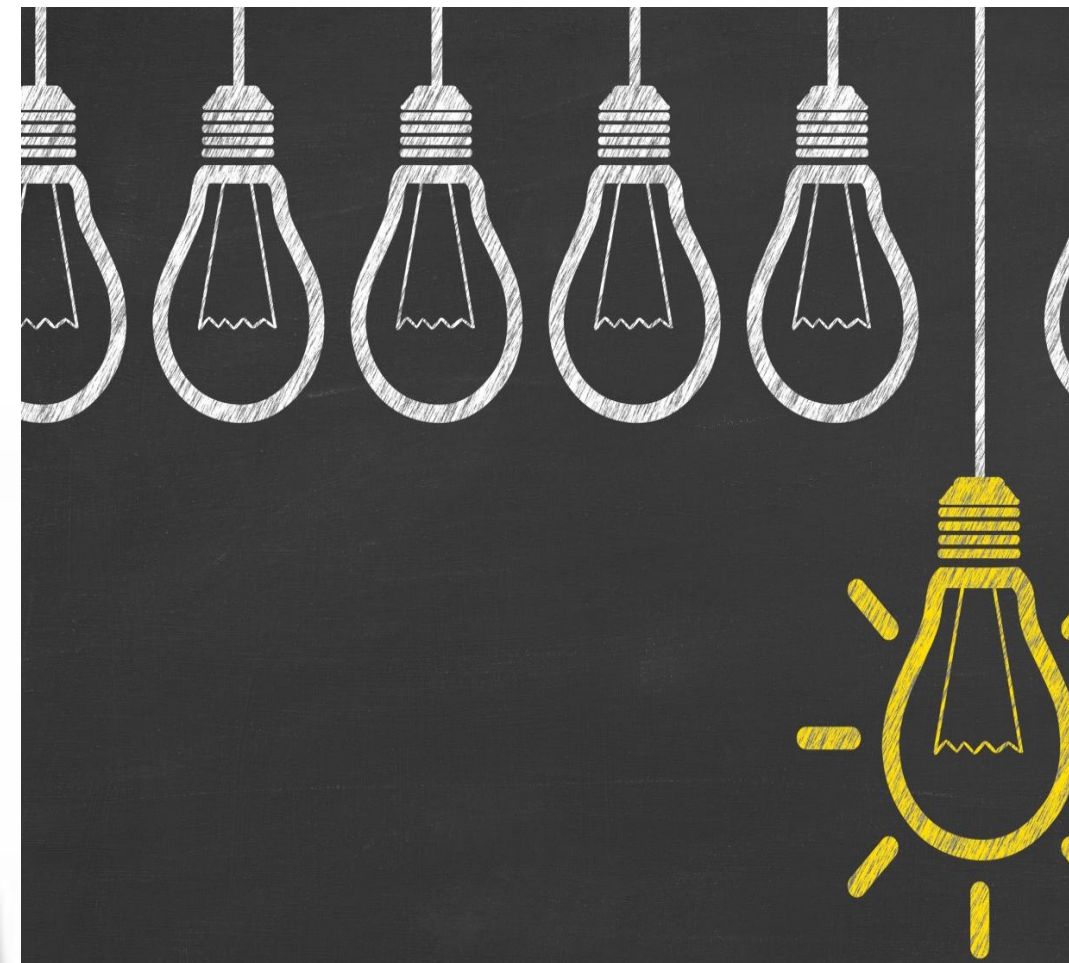
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

(iv) the gradual endorsement of a social semiotic theory of learning by the field of education

Skulstad, A.,Ørevik, S., Diamantopoulou, S. (forthcoming). Multimodal Literacy in EAL education. In Querol-Julián, M. and Fortanet-Gómez, I.(eds). *Designing Learning with Digital Technologies: Perspectives from Multimodality in Education.*

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

(v) a recent epistemological and ontological shift, integrating new understandings of the body and the senses, as well as AI

In-Touch Project by Carey Jewitt

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FUTURE DIRECTIONS

(i) the convergence across strands of multimodality and the breaking the 'silos' of scholarly work, articulated as a collective intention of the multimodal community,

(ii) the use of multimodality as a means in the service of society,

(ii) the quest for interdisciplinarity and the development of new methods and tools for a changing communication landscape,

(iv) the gradual endorsement of a social semiotic theory of learning by the field of education and

(v) a recent epistemological and ontological shift, integrating new understandings of the body and the senses, as well as AI.

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Schlosser, M."Agency", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*