Below you find a pre-proof version of a book review, submitted to a journal. If you want to quote it, please contact me.. ChF, 1 June 2011.

Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication

Gunther Kress, Routledge, London, 2010, 212 pp. 45 b/w illustrations + 15 colour plates. ISBN 13: 978-0-415-32061-0 (pbk).

Together with Theo van Leeuwen, Gunther Kress was one of the first Anglo-saxon scholars – indebted to Roland Barthes – to show that the analysis of images need not, indeed should not, be synonymous with the analysis of *artistic* images. He can therefore be considered a founding father of the discipline that is nowadays often referred to as visual and multimodality studies (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001, 2006; see also Jewitt 2009).

In the book under review, Kress pursues his lifelong interest in the pedagogic dimensions of multimodality. Writing about multimodality requires defining "mode," but this is notoriously difficult (cf. Forceville 2006, Elleström 2010). Kress advocates a dynamic view: "*socially*, what counts as mode is a matter for a community and its social-representational needs. What a community decides to regard and use as mode *is* mode. ... *Formally*, what counts as mode is a matter of what a social-semiotic theory of mode requires a mode to be and to do" (p. 87, emphasis, here and in other quotations, in original). While this is a practical solution, it makes "mode" applicable to any dimension of mediated meaning-making. But it is clear from the lavishly illustrated book that the two central modes of interest in this monograph are pictures and language.

The book consists of ten chapters, but since there is overlap between chapters, I will refrain from discussing them one by one and address some general points instead. Kress rightly emphasizes that each mode can do some things well (what Gibson 1979 calls its

“affordances”) and others less so, or not at all – its “constraints” (p. 185). The visual mode can excellently present concrete details, for instance, but is bad at rendering abstract concepts – unless by means of strongly coded symbols. Usually, two or more modes join forces in “modal ensembles” (p. 28) to communicate information. Modes are bound to the specific medium via which they are made accessible. Different societies, or one society at different moments in time, therefore do not have the same technical resources for multimodal communication (p. 11). Apart from that, social and cultural norms co-determine in what mode(s) information is conveyed. And in an era in which new mass media succeed one another in an ever faster tempo, the combination of (technological) affordances, constraints, and socio-cultural norms shifts more rapidly than in earlier periods. As in all his work, Kress is particularly interested in how structures of (multimodal) communication are symptomatic of ideologies and the distribution of power relations in a community or society.

Kress pays much attention to the pragmatics of communication: a sign-maker issues a “prompt” (e.g., a gaze, a gesture, a spoken sentence, a touch) to an addressee or audience; the latter will then start interpreting the sign and respond to the prompt in accordance with their own interest (p. 35). This approach is commensurate with the Relevance Theory model (Sperber and Wilson 1995, Wilson and Sperber 2004, Forceville 1996: chapter 5, 2005, 2009), but this latter model has been developed with more precision and detail, and thus is a better candidate for Kress’ *desideratum* of a single theory “able to deal with all instances of communication” (p. 36).

I agree with Kress that the shift toward multimodality is accompanied by a tendency away from the linearity that the (monomodal) verbal mode by definition imposes. This brings with it a greater freedom for recipients, for instance in the order in which they access multimodal information on a printed or web page. But Kress’ insistence on the freedom of the interpreter sometimes appears to be an unfortunate side-effect of the types of prompt he

chooses to discuss. Thus I feel uncomfortable with Kress' habit of using children's and adolescents' drawings as material for analysis. He feels at liberty to interpret these drawings whereas it is not always clear what was the precise motivation for creating them. Often the drawings seem to be the result of tasks imposed in an educational context, i.e., "homework." But if so, it is crucial to know exactly how the task was formulated: "Make a picture of what you considered the most important/impressive/cute/information-rich part in the museum exhibiton" would be four different tasks. And if a drawing was made spontaneously, perhaps its self-expressive function was more important than its communicative one.

Kress' concern with the freedom of the interpreter, and his (as such: correct) claim that the pictorial mode by and large enables more universal access than the verbal one leads to at least one untenable claim: "Saussure's mistaken assumption that the relation of *signifier* and *signified* is an *arbitrary* one was, as is all theory, a product and realization of the social conditions of his time. ... In Social Semiotics *arbitrariness* is replaced by *motivation*, in all instances of sign-making, for any kind of sign" (p. 65, p. 67). Kress here appears to consider Saussurian arbitrariness as symptomatic of an ideology rather than as a plain fact. With some notable exceptions (such as onomatopoeia), one cannot derive the meaning of a word or sentence from its form unless one has *learned* the norms and conventions (grammar, vocabulary) of the language in which it occurs. This is precisely one of the essential differences between the verbal and the visual modality – and thus a reminder that a phrase such as "the grammar of visual design" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006) should not be taken literally.

Kress' obsession with "freedom" (a symptom of having grown up in the sixties?) in my view also leads to an excessive inclination to link the intentions of a sign-maker to "relations of power" (p. 72). Of course Kress is right that much in culture, including communication, is shaped by those in charge, and humanities scholars should be alert to

unveil hidden patterns in communicational power politics. But his focus is one-sided. In many situations, power inequality – however defined – between sign-maker and interpreter simply is irrelevant, since both parties have a shared interest: that the interpreter understands, often precisely, what the sign-maker wanted to convey, whether using language, pictures, sounds, gestures, music, or any combination of these modes: "the cutlery is in the left-most drawer"; "the train to Brussels departs from platform 5 at 11.11"; "this is the way to the handicapped toilet"; "the doors of the metro close *now*" .... That is, the fact that in numerous situations (prospective) recipients' awareness of the meaning of a message is guided by their producer's clear-cut intentions and goals is usually not something to rebel against, but to be thankful for.

I have some other quibbles. If Kress cites sources outside of his own social-semiotic tradition, he tends to dismiss them too easily and quickly. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) metaphor theory has given rise to many studies emphasizing metaphor's cultural aspects (e.g., Gibbs and Steen 1999, Kövecses 2005). Claiming that "in its firm social basis ... Social Semiotics departs from the cognitivist approach of Lakoff and Johnson" (p. 55) is at the very least exaggerating the differences. McNeill (1992) is not done justice either: "In some approaches, gesture is taken to be part of a larger complex of meaning resources, together with speech .... Here too the issue of the entirely different materiality rules that out as a possibility in the approach here" (p. 86). But surely the fact that gestures and spoken language are completely different modes, with different materialities, in no way precludes studying their co-occurrence. Unfortunately, Kress is blind to the affordances of the cognitivist paradigm. With the support of Lakoff and Johnson's TIME IS SPACE metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: chapter 4), and McNeill's thorough, empirically supported work on gestures, it is for instance possible to answer Kress' question "can we indicate past time or future time in the mode of *gesture*?" (p. 107) with a clear "yes!" since in most cultures the future is *in front* of us, and the past *behind us*" – and this is perfectly expressible via gestures. Similarly,

adopting a cognitivist perspective means that Kress' negative answer to the question "does *layout* have means for indicating time?" (p. 107) needs to be qualified: in his own figure 5.6 (a version of the famous "stages of man" series), the timeline undoubtedly runs from left to right, that is from past to present to future, and surely this is a layout feature.

Despite these criticisms, there is also much in the book that I find useful and worth endorsing. Kress' warning that the "sensory, affective and aesthetic dimension is too often ignored and treated as ancillary" (p. 78) in studies of communication is a pertinent one. Another good point: signal-makers have to *select* a mode, or a combination of modes, to bring across their message with the greatest chance of success, and this inevitably has consequences for the meaning that will or can be elicited. I also concur heartily with Kress stressing that "*genre* mediates between the social and the semiotic" (p. 116).

The author is arguably at his best when he provides close readings of specific cases, such as a newsreader adopting a new way of ending a broadcast, both in terms of facial and linguistic modes, after he moved from a regional to a national TV station. I also enjoyed the comparison between the appearences of salt-and-pepper sachets used by different airline companies, between the differential designs of two secondary school classes exemplifying "English as popular culture" and "English as National Curriculum," and between the embodied features of the potato peeler Kress used at his granny's home and the modern variety he is now forced to use. Indeed the fine last chapter, co-authored with Elisabetta Adami, is the equivalent of the potato peeler study, now evaluating the embodied features of a series of mobile phones.

In short, on the critical side I have to say that *Multimodality* in my view cannot serve as the kind of textbook its title promises. It is simply not theoretically precise and structured enough for that. Moreover, it fails to accommodate insights from other scholarly paradigms, and it takes some odd assumptions for granted. But on the positive side I happily give credit

to Kress' qualities as observer and listener, which result in attractive and thought-provoking case studies. His book presents many perspectives that are of crucial interest to those concerned to help develop multimodality into a mature scholarly discipline.

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