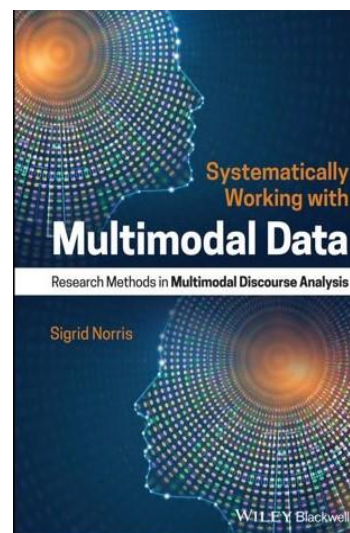Sigrid Norris

Systematically Working with Multimodal Data

Research Methods in Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Hoboken, NJ, John Wiley & Sons, 2019, pp. 301

Review by Elena Mattei

Keywords: *multimodal discourse analysis, multimodal (inter)action analysis, video data, systematicity, reliability*

Multimodal discourse analysis is a field of research that has been expanding over recent decades and its central role is advocated by many disciplines, such as applied linguistics, education, business and other applied social sciences. The reason lies in the fact that "it is […] difficult to find cases of communication and action that do not involve multimodality" (Bateman 2017, 7). Nowadays multimodality, in fact, is pervasive in both society and communication, and the mechanisms of its meaning-making resources deserve to be systematically categorized and analyzed. With precisely this aim, many approaches have been developed, such as Kress and Van Leeuwen's social semiotic study on static imagery (1996), Jewitt's delineation of multimodal literacy (2002), O' Halloran's systemic functional approach (1999) and Bateman' s critical analysis of image-text correlations (2014).

In this volume, Norris' theoretical framework of Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis, already introduced in his previous works, represents a useful, coherent resource to draw upon when conducting systematic multimodal discourse analysis of video data. The analytical framework of Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis shaped by Norris implements socio-anthropological discourse analysis approaches holistically (from Scollon's Mediated Discourse Analysis in particular), sociocultural psychology and notions from Eastern and Western philosophy (269), thereby providing both a multidisciplinary, convincing perspective and a readily applicable tool

for multimodal studies. To some extent, this framework adheres to Bateman's view of multimodality as an empirical discipline needing stronger foundations (2017).

The theoretical premises discussed enable Norris to prove the irrefutable co-existence of living beings with their actions and environments. Additionally, this allows for the shaping of his innovative view of communication, i.e. the conception of lower-level and higher-level *mediated* actions as units of analysis of the tools embedded in the social environment, such as language, body parts (gesture), objects, discourses. His work, compared to other approaches, does not heavily rely on the concept of mode, but nevertheless manages to analyze meaning-creation both in an individual and 'discourse and practice' perspective, therefore managing to demonstrate how mediated actions both shape and are shaped by the individual and by social contexts (201-204; 260). Examples of modes, as similarly referred to by previous multimodal analysis perspectives, are layout—i.e. the shots, the angles, the positions chosen for objects, people—, proxemics, posture, gesture, object handling, language. However, what is different and remarkable in Norris' approach is the reduced emphasis placed on these modes: in his in Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis, they merely represent a codification system used *in addition* to (inter)actions and as a tool for *mutual understanding* among researchers in multimodality.

In this volume, the author outlines a well-structured step-by-step guide that aims to help researchers from different fields and at different levels engage with the multimodal analysis of video data in a systematic, reliable way. The work consists of eight chapters, each one discussing one step in the research path from the delineation of the theoretical and philosophical framework to the drafting of a research project and the implementation of methodologies and data-driven analyses. The book ends with practical instructions (chapter 8) for both teachers and students on how to use the different sections. The volume is dedicated to different audiences, which is why some sections of chapters 3, 4, 5 provide real examples of video data collection, profiling and selection designed for both university students, PhD candidates and scholars.

The first chapter briefly introduces the main structure of the book and "offers a glimpse" (19) of current and past literature in multimodal discourse research. It also lays down the research framework that underpins Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis; for this reason, this initial section can be useful for scholars who are interested in this specific approach but are dealing with it for the first time.

Chapter 2 outlines in great detail the theoretical and philosophical assumptions that underlie a multimodal (inter)action investigation. Norris introduces the notions of human perception and embodiment in the world and their primary role in enabling action and interaction—for it is

impossible to act without communicating something (29)—, and then goes into a more detailed analysis of the investigation itself. In particular, he focuses on the primary distinction between higher-level and lower-level mediated actions. While the first unit represents "a *mode's smallest pragmatic meaning unit*" (41)—e.g. an utterance in spoken language or a postural shift in posture—, the second one is "the *coming together of a multitude of chains of lower-level mediated actions*" (43), like a sequence of utterances in a conversation. This distinction is valuable in order to investigate, in multimodal discourse analysis, how similar higher-level mediated actions are differently shaped by individuals through different lower-level mediated action chains and under—or against—the influence of specific discourses and practices (49). This clear theorization of communication, if agreed upon, can pave the way for a systematic, reality-consistent and scientifically reliable performance of multimodal analysis. The focus on *actions* in fact, rather than on presumable meaning interpretation, shows what is really happening and each researcher can apply this analysis knowing that *everyone*, by virtue of perception and embodiment, can concretely and objectively track people's actions.

Chapter 3 shows methods of determining a research topic and developing it into research questions, thus teaching how to collect video data which, according to the author, is a requirement for multimodal discourse analysis (63). In chapter 4, Norris goes on to provide instructions on two aspects of the research process: firstly, the systematic interpretation and delineation of data and, secondly, the rephrasing of research questions into a more general question, consequently "allowing us to work in a data driven way" (126).

Chapter 5 teaches students and researchers how to select the data for detailed examination. This can be done, as the author underlines, by first delineating higher-level mediated actions and subsequently by exploring the inherent disposition and development of lower-level mediated actions, including their role in reinforcing or changing the discourses involved. After rephrasing the general question into a more specific data driven research question, the researcher is able to identify, time stamp, describe and explain all the higher-level mediated actions.

Chapter 6 is specifically devoted to familiarizing the readers with multimodal transcription conventions, which are essential for *reliable* video data transcription and *replicable* micro analysis (199), as well as providing an introduction to his notion of mode. Modes, as previously mentioned, are conventions used to group lower-level mediated actions and express the means, the ways through which a mediated action is performed. They are a "system of mediated action" (201) that is learnt by practising action, which, accordingly, also includes non-action. Hence, performing analysis of *actions* is the only way to take into consideration every minimal,

essential unit of events in our lives. Modes can be interpreted in many ways by different people; actions, instead, will always be the same.

Finally, chapter 7 provides micro and macro analytical tools designed to put data piece analyses into a wider perspective, both from the social and discourse point of view. It therefore helps to conclude a multimodal analysis concretely by outlining a set of options that can be chosen according to the interest and the research questions. The modal density tool, to mention a micro analytical approach, enables both the identification of the modes involved in chains of lower-level mediated actions of a higher-level mediated action—such as a conversation where spoken language and the handling of a cellphone and a cup of tea are involved, in addition to gesture, gaze, etc.—and the degree of attention devoted to each action. This is attainable by focusing on the amount of time and modes dedicated to a specific chain of lower-level mediated actions. With the implementation of the macro analysis tool, finally, one gains understanding of "how concrete mediated actions are socially, culturally and institutionally produced" (258)—*mediated*—and in particular how individuals' chains of micro actions shape and change the same contextual environments with which they are imbued.

In conclusion, this volume offers both students who are new to the field of multimodal discourse analysis and experienced scholars a systematic methodological framework and a reliable analytical set of tools for the investigation of video data. The focus of this book on micro/macro analysis and on chains of actions as variable, common 'means' which can be perceivable and understandable by everyone in an unambiguous manner, allows for the concrete discovery of truthful, *not interpretable* findings. Furthermore, compared to other multimodal discourse approaches, which tend to limit their focus to the distribution of modes, the distinction in clear blocks of actions and sub-series of actions and the sensitivity to the degree of attention and intention of the '(inter)actants' make it possible to examine designed general purposes and the measures taken to achieve those purposes. The advantage of working within this framework lies in its ability to direct, in an informed and systematic way, the 'lens' of the researcher towards the formulation of concrete and detailed explanations of the occurring actions, which, as was mentioned earlier, cannot be *misinterpreted* and therefore represent an objective 'dissection' of reality. Therefore, this work provides a real up-to-date understanding of human communication and social context, which is a viable option for all the disciplines that engage with multimodality to varying degrees. Multimodality is attractive because of its pervasiveness but it features, at the same time, an intrinsic, semiotic complexity which is often difficult to deal with. Corpus-based quantitative methodologies, additionally, may in the future work hand in hand with this approach and this could lead to the detection of recurrent and trustworthy

patterns. A possible criticism of the book, however, is that the view of multimodal analysis portrayed here may leave little space for static multimodal communication, such as imagery, and for videos lacking human presence, both of which are often employed in advertising and other fields of study that pervade the Web and our lives as well and which, therefore, also deserve to be analyzed and categorized in their own right.

Elena Mattei *is a PhD candidate in Digital Humanities and English Language at the University of Verona. Her research interests focus on the collection and analysis of tourism multimodal corpora on Social Media, with particular attention to both Visual Design and Systemic Functional Linguistics theories.*

Works cited

Bateman, John A. *Text and Image: A Critical Introduction to the Visual/Verbal Divide*. NY: Routledge, 2014.

Bateman, John A., Janina Wildfeuer and Tuomo Hiippala. *Multimodality: Foundations, Research and Analysis – A Problem-Oriented Introduction.* Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017.

Jewitt, Carey. "The Move from Page to Screen: The Multimodal Reshaping of School English." *Visual Communication* 2.1 (2002): 171-196.

Kress, Gunther and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 1996.

O' Halloran, Kay L. "Towards a Systemic Functional Analysis of Multisemiotic Mathematics Texts." *Semiotica* 124.1-2 (1999): 1-29.