Gunther Kress’ Social Semiotics of the Visual – How did it Shape Multimodality Research? How did it Change Semiotics?

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The inheritors of Gunther Kress’ academic legacy agree that he had ‘an enormous influence (…) on global scholarship’ (BURN/POTTER 2019: 399) and that he ‘has played an absolutely foundational role in at least four fields – critical discourse studies, social semiotics, multimodality, and the applications of all these to (…) education’ (VAN LEEUWEN 2019: 654). Given his vast oeuvre, it is hard to adequately gauge Gunther Kress’ impact on current thinking in its totality and to pinpoint precisely the concepts that have triggered the impetus ‘to productively disturb settled ways of thinking’ (BURN/POTTER 2019: 399). In my contribution, I will explore Gunther’s social semiotic framework for such pivotal ideas that I consider to have been inspirational and successful in ‘achieving new understandings’ (BEZEMER/JEWITT/VAN LEEUWEN 2019: 9). The focus will be on concepts that allow me to critically appraise connections to and alterations from mainstream semiotics/linguistics in Gunther’s theorizing, and to demonstrate their usefulness and impact on my own current theory-building (STÖCKL 2019) and corpus-based work (STÖCKL 2020a/b).

First, the notion of sign types central to structural semiotics found its elegant re-development in the concepts of mode – modal reach/logic (cf. KRESS 2010, 2014). In particular, Gunther helped flesh out the potentials and limitations of various modes on a number of levels. My own work has been inspired by this and seeks to tease apart the systemic differences between language, image, music and noise as used in modern media genres (cf. STÖCKL 2016). Issues of mode also touch upon the idea of meaning potential, which adapts traditional semiotic thinking to a pragmatic mindset and avoids some of the structuralist pitfalls in relation to signs and communication. Gunther’s take on mode has been significantly shaped by his quite categorical allocation of speech and writing to separate modes (cf. KRESS 1997, 2003), a view often alienating linguists.

Second, by recognizing multimodal sign-making as a rhetorical process (KRESS 2010: 121, KRESS/JEWITT/OGBRON/TSATSARELIS 2001), Gunther made contextually motivated choices of different modal resources and their coherent inter-linking in the production of a multimodal ensemble the centre of analytical attention. This perspective brought to the fore such notions as inter-semiotic/multimodal cohesion and information linking, but also paved the way for an exploration of text-image relations (cf. BATEMAN 2014). The latter has become a major concern in my recent corpus studies of multimodal genres (STÖCKL 2020a, STÖCKL 2020b).

Third, close co-workers of Gunther’s (BEZEMER/JEWITT/VAN LEEUWEN 2019) have stressed his reliance on prototypical real-life samples representing a large variety of genres. They helped him devise levels and criteria for description and analysis. In the light of current multimodal corpus annotation work, it is interesting to ask how the transposition of functional grammar onto the visual (KRESS/VAN LEEUWEN 1996) is paying off and which new methods and angles are developing.
Fourth, Gunther took up the initial concern with mode equality in relation to meaning and shifted the perspective to meanings being re-made in or transposed to other modes, media and contexts of communication. These transpositions or recontextualizations are now echoed in trans-textual approaches to multimodality that trace how series of multimodal genre exemplars constitute discourses and build manifold intertextual relations (cf. KLUG 2020).

Fifth, being a critical discourse linguist at heart, Gunther Kress’ work also essentially proposes a multimodal rhetor with an individually or socially conditioned interest in sign-making whose semiotic work can, in this sense, also be seen as expressing elements of an ideology (cf. KRESS/HODGE 1979; HODGE/KRESS 1988; KRESS 2010). Such a view of communication endorses multimodal analysis primarily in the service of uncovering or reconstructing the motives and logic(s) of an underlying multimodal design and its maker(s). This may be to the detriment of neglecting other user-centred/recipient-based approaches (cf. BATEMAN/WILDFEUER/HIIPPALA 2017: 139–168).

References


