Multimodal Online Communication: Through the Lens of Practice Theory

Stefan Meier and Christian Pentzold

Chemnitz University of Technology

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Author Note

Stefan Meier is an assistant professor and Christian Pentzold is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Media Research, Chemnitz University of Technology.

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Correspondence should be directed to Dr Stefan Meier, Chemnitz University of Technology, Institute for Media Research/Institut für Medienforschung, Thüringer Weg 11, 09126 Chemnitz, Germany. Email: stefan.meier@phil.tu-chemnitz.de
Abstract

In this paper, we extend the study of online discourse to view multimodal online communication as the manifold practical enactments of communicative products.

This extension is important, we argue, because multimodality is a key feature of discourse on the social web. Yet, given its social nature and the role of users creating web content, it is not enough to focus on products of communication. Instead, communicators engage in various practical accomplishments so to construct meaning and to accomplish communicable messages. To elaborate our argument, we first introduce the notion of “multimodality” and a concept of style. To arrive at an understanding of multimodal online communication as the practical enactment of style, we third mobilize core tenets of a theory of social practices. We end by outlining methodical sensibilities for investigations into multimodal online communication and the interplay between media, signs, and social interaction.
Multimodal Online Communication: Through the Lens of Practice Theory

Online communication, like most types of communication, never was simply a text-based affair. Instead, it has become a commonplace to use the notion of “multimodality” to characterize all sorts of communication we find online, such as flash animated websites, video platforms like Youtube, or the numerous configurations of communication that mark social networking sites like Facebook. Because it is a universal and omnipresent aspect of communication, thinking about multimodality hardly qualifies as a novel topic in the study of discourse. Thus, LeVine and Scollon (2004) introduced their collection of works into this issue with the argument that “all discourse is multimodal” (p. 1). Discursive actions are, they posit, “always and inevitably constructed across multiple modes of communications” (p. 2). Online communication, then, can only be seen as one of the more recent types of such multimodal discursive practices in general.

Building on this assumption, we aim to investigate how multimodal online communication can be conceptualized and analyzed as the practical enactment of style. The main point of our argument is that in order to think about multimodal online communication, it is not enough to focus on products of communication like homepages, blog entries, uploaded videos, or IM messages. Instead, we hold that we also have to engage with the manifold practical procedures of enacting and accomplishing such communicative products. According to this argument, the multimodal documents we find on the web thus ground in a plethora of ways, messages are made communicable. Thus, communication always happens with the performance of style when style is understood as the choosing, forming, and combining of multimodal signs. In other words, we posit that the communicators engage in various practical accomplishments so to construct meaning and to enact communicable messages on the web. Such multimodal performance of online communication involves sites of apprenticeship and learning, be it a course in web design or the learning-by-doing on a
social networking platform. It also involves the handling of material assemblages like the bunch of networked hard- and software that affords online practices.

The paper is organized as follows: To elaborate our argument, we first briefly introduce the concept of “multimodality”. Second, in order to further the idea that multimodal communication is brought into being through the selection, combination, and expression of signs, we develop a notion of style. To arrive at a concept of multimodal online communication as the practical enactment of style, we third mobilize core tenets of a theory of social practices. We end by outlining some methodical sensibilities using the website of a student conference at Chemnitz University of Technology. In order to examine what constitutes multimodal online communication, we propose to follow an analytical avenue that, on the one hand, investigates the style of the multimodal product and, on the other hand, focuses on the doings and sayings of its practical accomplishment as well as on the necessary medial arrangements.

The social semiotic concept of multimodality

Basically, the social semiotic concept of multimodality is based on the assumption that the construction of meaning is not only realised through language. In this vein, Halliday (1975/2003), arguably the founder of social semiotics as an academic paradigm, maintains that language shares this function [that is, the function of constructing meaning] with other social semiotic systems: various forms of arts, ritual decor and dress, and the like. Cultural meanings are realized through a great variety of symbolic modes, of which semantics is one; the semantic system is the linguistic mode of meaning. There is no need to insist that it is the “primary” one: I do not know what would be regarded as verifying such an assertion. (p. 83)

In other words, making meaning usually involves multiple semiotic systems. With such an idea, Halliday inspired a variety of investigations into multimodal discourse. For
instance, using social semiotics as their more or less strong conceptual starting point, researchers like Arthur Chiew (2004), Carey Jewitt (2004), Kay O’Halloran (2004), Sigrid Norris (2004), and Rodney H. Jones (2005) have increasingly turned their attention to online communication.

Also building on Halliday’s contribution, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2001) have had a major impact on the research of design and visual communication, too. Detailing Halliday’s argument that meaning making is multi-modal and multi-dimensional, they argued that the three social semiotic metafunctions, that is, the ideational function, the interpersonal function, and the textual function, are simultaneously present in every act of social communication. Summing up the three metafunctions, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) states that

the ideational function is the function of constructing representations of the world; the interpersonal function, the function of enacting (or helping to enact) communicative interactions characterized by specific social purposes and specific social realizations; and the textual function, the function of marshalling communicative acts to larger wholes, into the communicative events of texts that realize specific social practices such as conversations, lectures reports, etc. (p. 228)

Consequently, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) argue that a mode of communication is multifunctional in its uses in the culturally located making of signs. Taken together, we can thus follow van Leeuwen’s (2005) position that multimodality is the “combination of different semiotic modes – for example, language, and music – in a communicative artefact or event” (p. 281). Furthermore, by saying that multimodality involves both the communicative artefact and the communicative event, Kress and van Leeuwen also indicate that the notion of multimodality not only refers to multimodal products, but, equally important, to the processes of producing such multimodal products.
Overall, Kress and van Leeuwen’s general understanding of multimodality as combination of semiotic resources, events, and artefacts translates into two related assumptions as the conceptual premises of our argument: First, we pose that thinking and analyzing multimodality should focus on the processes of making meaning, not only on its outcomes and results. Second, we assume that meaning making processes are at first enactments of modalities of signs. As such they afford particular ways of making meaning in relation to medial-material arrangements.

A notion of style

To elaborate on the idea that signs are central to meaning making processes, we take the step from multimodality to a theory of style because employing the notion of style helps to connect the concept of multimodality to the idea that multimodal online communication, and, moreover, communication in general, inevitably involves choosing, forming, combining, and expressing signs. Hence, thinking about the fact that all communication needs to be done in a certain way, we argue that this way can be better understood when mobilizing the notion of style.

Style is a concept for describing multimodal actions. As a concept, it captures the way communicators interact and, as van Leeuwen (2005) stated, “the manner in which a semiotic artefact is produced, or a semiotic event performed” (p. 287). Style also marks individual and social identity and can, according to van Leeuwen, be distinguished in three different yet related perspectives, when he argues that

in the case of social style it indexes social categories such as provenance, class, profession, etc. In the case of lifestyle it indicates individual lifestyle identities and values which are, however, socially produced and shared with others, forming a new kind of social identity. (p. 287)

It is then not only useful for analysing ways of communicating through speech and writing, but it is also needed for explaining paraverbal and nonverbal interaction in different
cultural and medial contexts. For instance, Thibault (2006) refers to the “signifying body” and argues that cloths, styling, moves, and the habitus people acquire and perform are all to be interpreted as signs, too. In this light, even proto-linguistic signs are intended or unintended indicators of individual and social identity. They transport secondary information about individuals and collectives and they are instruments to manage relationships.

From such an understanding, analyses of style have, however, traditionally narrowed their view to the outcome of designing and writing. Yet if we acknowledge that style first of all means style-full performances, then an analysis of style could not pause at the examination of *structures of style*. Instead, it would necessarily have to involve an analysis of the ways, multimodality is brought into being; that is, an investigation of style would have to engage with *performances of style*. Put differently, following our core idea that multimodality should be explained be looking at the processes of making meaning, we have to attend to the practices as the style-full ways to enact and accomplish multimodality.

**Theories of social practices**

To further the idea that multimodal communication should be viewed as the performance of style, we hope to make productive theories of social practices. This field of social thought has recently gained momentum what inspired some to already announce a “practice turn” in social theory (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001). However, practice theories do not present a coherent paradigm but bring together a host of different yet related perspectives. Arguably, the field of practice theory is grounded in Wittgenstein’s late philosophy (1953/2009), Garfinkel’s work in ethnomethodology (1967), Charles Taylor’s insights into human agency (1989), Austin’s ideas on performing speech acts (1962), Goffman’s thoughts on interaction and social stages (1967, 1981), Foucault’s late texts on governmentality and sexuality (2011), Judith Butler’s investigations into the doing of gender (1993), Bourdieu’s research into fields and habitus (1998), as well as Giddens’ theory of structuration (1984).
Notwithstanding such a divers set of literatures, we especially focus on one contribution, namely, the work of social theorist Theodore Schatzki (1996, 2002), to outline the core tenets of this strand of social thought. In a basic definition, he defines social practices as the “unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (1996, p. 89). Hence, social practices are structured, space and time bound, continuous activities.

Following Schatzki (1996), social practices receive their structure through three factors: First, they are organized by tacit knowing how, what Ryle (1949) and Wittgenstein (1953/2003) called “understandings”. Second, they are organized by more or less explicit rules and propositional knowing that. Third, they are organized by what Schatzki (1996) named “teleo-affective structures” (p. 89). To him, these structures embrace ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions, and moods.

People acquire their ability and competence to do certain things like baking, cooking, playing rugby, arguing, chatting, and so forth never completely through instructions and written manuals because to accomplish practices in an accountable and intelligible manner means to dispose of tacit as well as of propositional types of knowledge. In short, practices have to be learnt in practice. Although instructions and teaching are usually a part of acquiring agency, one of the core assumptions of practice theory is that people have to practice the various activities in a given cultural, historical, and social context in order to learn what it takes and what it means to act in a certain way. Moreover, learning to practice not only means to gain the capacity to actively and competently engage in certain doings and sayings. In addition, by acquiring this knowledgeability and by participating in practices we also get to know the ends, projects, beliefs, emotions, and moods connected to these practices.

Moreover, the enactment, or, in Garfinkel’s (1967) term, the accomplishment, of social practices not only rests on human bodies and their motions. Most of the social practices also involve and enmesh a host of material objects and artefacts. For instance, in
order to engage in computer-mediated communication, we rely on a bunch of interconnected hard- and software.

**Multimodal online communicative practices**

If we combine these insights from practice theory with the concept of multimodality and the notion of style, we arrive at a model of multimodal online communication that includes three major aspects: First, when we talk about online multimodal communication we refer to communicative practices that are performed in certain ways. Practices are thus always enacted in a certain style. In order to reflect the contribution of the theory of practice, we hold that style can be defined as (a) how communicators express messages by using multimodal signs, (b) how communicators choose, form, design, and combine signs (based on the social semiotic ideational, interpersonal, textual metafunctions), (c) how communicators express or perform themselves intentionally or unintentionally (in accord with individual, social, and life styles), and (d) how communicators manage relationships (based on unifying and distinguishing signals).

Building on that, the model of multimodal online communicative practices must secondly involve the dimension of signs as the different modes of semiotic resources which are chosen, formed, combined, and expressed in multi-modal ways to make messages communicable. Communicative practices are realized through the activation of combinations of signs. In this sense, signs are styled artefacts which are realised and materialised through and with different sorts of media (Figure 1).

Third, focusing on the media, we argue that the enactment of multimodal online communicative practices involves a heterogeneous assemblage of different interconnected soft- and hardware. Assemblages afford, that is, they enable and constraint certain style-full ways of doing and saying (Hutchby, 2001). In and through assemblages, practices are enacted by activating different modes of communication and this enactment happens with the production of certain materialized combinations of signs. The intelligible use of modes of
communication therefore not only happens in some cultural context but, what is equally important, in a certain medial context. Signs are realized in and through media, that is, modes of communication come to into being with regard to the affordances of particular media. Moreover, media assemblages allow for the remediation of modes of communication. Hence, meaning making processes not only rest on language codes but on the range of situational available configurations of semiotic systems (Figure 2).

Any website could be an example for multi-model documents. In a sense, the multimodal material online is both the outcome of multimodal communicative practices, and can, in turn, also be an input when it stipulates new acts of communication. Communicative products are thus formed and transformed with respect to the medial circumstances of their production and reception alike.

**Outlook: Some methodical sensibilities**

Taken together, we argue that multimodal online communicative practices are enacted in a certain style. Their accomplishment involves competent agents, sign resources, and medial-material assemblages.

If we accept such a notion of multimodality online, we have to answer, how such a concept could possibly translate into research designs. Hence, although the description of multimodal documents is an important step of all investigations into multimodal discourse, we argue that a coherent analysis cannot halt there as multimodal documents are the results of style-full practices, but not the practices themselves. Following our idea that multimodality should be examined by looking at the process of meaning making, we are in need of attending to the practices, their assemblages, and organizing factors, too. Questions, that could then be asked, are, for instance: What are the practices of online multimodal communication? What are the cultural and material contexts of the realization, production, and distribution of particular modes of communication? How do people make use of media assemblages when producing online content?
In order to answer such questions empirically, the prime way would be to combine the analysis of multimodal communicative artefacts with an investigation into the events of their enactment. In close alliance to what Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon (2004) have labelled “nexus analysis”, this examination of multimodal online communicative practices would therefore need attend to different sites.

To elaborate the corresponding research scenario in more detail, we take, for a start, the website of a student conference at Chemnitz University of Technology (Figure 3). This website was created for graduate students from graduate students to invite them to submit an abstract. This online document was chosen because it is a typical example of a multimodal communicative product grounding in practices of web design. It was crafted by students employing the open source content management system Typo 3.

One site of the analysis would be to look at the style of the relevant (im)material multimodal online products. For example, in our case, this means to examine the conference website (Figure 3). A second site would involve a participatory study of situations where relevant practices are learnt, taught, and brought into being. In our example, this involves the participation and observation in a university course teaching the open source-content management system Typo3 and group interviews with the members of the course (Figure 4). In a third site, we would be looking at the material assemblages, in our case, mainly at the Typo3 implementation, the available templates, and semiotic resources, as well as the guidebooks and tutorials that teach how to use Typo3.

For a start, we take a screenshot from the conference website (Figure 3). The picture we see in this screenshot is in itself a multimodal product meant to visualize the conference theme. The title of the conference in the top-left corner of the picture translates into something like “rehearsing, beautifying, and celebrating.” It is written in a large red font, arguably in order to attract attention. The sub-headline of the title specifies the theme and reads “dimensions of medial staging.” The typography is white; it is smaller and thinner as
the letters of the headline. As such it communicates the more matter-of-factly tone of academic prose. It is placed close to the title and the two lines share the same black background. Hence, the two verbal elements visually belong together as there is not only a semantic coherence but, moreover, we also find a visual relationship in face of the other elements in the picture. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) call this stylistic device “framing” where the meaning of the verbal claim is a combination of the different modes of language, graphology, typography, color, and layout.

Going beyond such an analysis, we could also interpret the design of the picture. In correspondence to the linguistic elements, it has its own way of transporting meaning and the verbal and the visual meanings are set in multimodal dialectic interaction. Thus, in order to express the difference between some supposed “real reality” and a false “media reality,” the designers of the picture have taken a young man and have put him in two different local and medial contexts. Furthermore, they mobilized two different stereotypical styles and poses to create two different social identities. In fact, the man in the background is sitting on the floor and is drinking beer; he shows what could be called a “lazy worker attitude.” The computer-mediated man we see on the computer screen in the foreground is dressed in a black suit; he is drinking red wine and shows what could be called an “upper class attitude.” Hence, the meaning of the verbal claim “rehearsing, beautifying, and celebrating” in combination with “dimensions of medial staging” received a visual interpretation. More precisely, “beautifying” has been translated along stereotypical lines into the juxtaposition of business dress and the pleasure of drinking wine to casual or working dress and the consumption of beer. Putting the second image on a computer screen and placing the screen into the scene, the picture suggests that the media do not present authentic and realistic identities. Irrespective of such a naïve message, the visual montage thus aims to show metonymically an example of the dimensions of medial performance. There is an interaction between the
different modes; they comment, interpret, explain, and modify their meanings by virtue of their particular codes and designs.

Overall, following these initial lines, an analysis of style first would show what semiotic resources are used to make certain contents and symbolic messages communicable. Second, it would investigate, how these contents and messages are presented through the use of rhetoric means, word choice, textual structures, and typography as well as through the perspective, detail, and color of pictures, and through the design, shape, and form of other style elements. Third, it would also examine how these elements are brought into a coherent relation through the use of layout and semantic chains.

Complementing the analysis of the style product, another site of the study concentrates on the corresponding practices and their material and immaterial arrangements. In our case, this involves a web design course in Typo 3 taught at Chemnitz University of Technology (Figure 4). In that course, Typo 3 as a software was introduced, the students learnt its main functions, they got to know how to handle its interface, and they were asked to produce some web material with Typo 3. The conference website is one of the results of this course. In Figure 4, we see a picture taken during the collective construction of this particular document. It shows an instructor explaining the implementation of design concepts by choosing from the default settings of the content management system. As Typo 3 offers only a limited set of designable options that inform, organize, and restrict the production and therefore, the multimodal design of the website, the students were also pointed to software plug-ins as well as to a range of other tools. For instance, to create to picture we find on the website, the students also made use of Photoshop, a graphics editing program.

Furthermore, through participant observation and interviews, the interplay between practical activities, guiding decisions, and the formation of the multimodal product were explored. While the analysis of the screenshot and the picture reconstructed a comparably coherent set of meanings, the participant observation during the actual production of the
multimodal online communication showed that most of the students’ work actually consisted of trial-and-error progress rather than planned behavior. In sum, the picture and the complete website as the multimodal communicative product only came into being through multiple laborious attempts to design.
References


Figure 1. Multimodal online communication as the practical enactment of style mobilizing semiotic resources.
Figure 2. Multimodal online communication as the practical enactment of style mobilizing semiotic resources and the affordances of media assemblages.
Figure 3. Screenshot from the website of a student conference at Chemnitz University of Technology. Taken from: http://www.medientage-chemnitz.de/
Figure 4: Photograph taken during a course in web design, Chemnitz University of Technology.