BAAL Language and New Media SIG Workshop

Multimodality in Social Media and Digital Environments

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The third of the annual BAAL Language and New Media SIG events was held on 15 April 2016 at Queen Mary University of London. The workshop attracted interest from researchers at various stages of their careers - from PhD students to established scholars. The workshop attracted 41 participants from the UK and abroad (USA, Canada, Spain, Italy, Switzerland). The day included two plenary talks and four presentation sessions on the themes of *performing, learning, transforming, adapting*. During coffee breaks and lunch, participants got a chance to continue conversations inspired by presentations, network and share experiences.

In the first plenary, Myrrh Domingo (Lecturer in Contemporary Literacies & Academic Head of Learning and Teaching Department of Culture, Communication and Media at UCL Institute of Education) focused on the representational and productive capacities of technologies and how they allow for the distribution and dissemination of meanings made within multimodal ensembles. She problematized the question of tools researchers need to understand inscribed communication in digital environments drawing from a multimodal social semiotic and ethnographic perspective. The talk touched upon a current phenomenon in which young people exploit the affordances of multiple digital platforms as well as objects and their own bodies in meaning creation. We were reminded that in-depth understanding of digital practices, such as creating blog posts and YouTube videos, is possible only thanks to adopting a rigorous ethnographic research perspective which sheds light on the process of meaning-making, rather than only the final product. Participants were also presented with an innovative multimodal transcription system used in Dr Domingo's research.

The theme of networked meaning-making through multimodal means was echoed in the second plenary. Prof Rodney Jones (Professor of Sociolinguistics, Head of Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics at Reading University) explored how images posted on Facebook, Snapchat and Tinder are rendered meaningful for their users, taking into account the different affordances of these platforms. He showed that meaning in practices of 'networked imaging' depends on *indexicality* and is created through the *emplacement* of images in relation to spaces in the material world. Emplacement in the case of taking pictures of food, a practice which is very popular in Hong Kong, is achieved through positioning of artefacts to be photographed, camera angle, framing, and the presence of bodies in the frame, constructing *embodied experience of food*.

The main aim of the workshop was to bring together researchers working on multimodal aspects of social media and digital environments from different perspectives and with varied interests. Papers presented in the first session (Performing) focused on performing identities and adopting roles in

digital communication in texting (Caroline Tagg and Esther Asprey), Instant Messaging in the workplace (Erika Darics) and citizen journalism (Ruth Page). The second session (Learning) included papers on incidental vocabulary learning through reading blog posts and watching YouTube videos (Henriette Arndt), tutor experiences of multimodal assessment in digital environments (James Lamb) and multimodal aspects of self-directed online learning of Chinese (Jenifer Ho). Presenters in the third session (Transforming) spoke about the transformative power of multimodal resources: gesture in second-language dialogues mediated by mobile technologies (Helen Lee), space in video chat (Dorottya Cserző) and graphicons in Facebook comment threads (Ashley Dainas and Susan Herring). The final session of the day (Adapting) took a methodological focus, asking questions about the way in which existing methodologies can be adapted to best suit the analysis of multimodal communication in social media and digital environments. The aspects raised included challenges involved in the process of transcription of multimodal data (Melinda Dooly and Francesca Helm), digital remediation from a social semiotic perspective (Elisabetta Adami) and adapting Mediated Discourse Analysis to computer-mediated discourse (Huey Fen Cheong).

Lively discussion followed each of the presentations, filled coffee and lunch breaks and continued during a post-event drinks and dinner, which was attended by many of the participants. Several remarked that the workshop was a successful networking event, which is likely to benefit their research and teaching at their respective institutions in the UK, Europe and the USA. The key take-away from the day was that research on multimodal aspects of social media and digital environments, still in its relative infancy, can benefit from bringing together a range of perspectives and that – as numerous presentations pointed out – it should not be limited to the analysis of the digital product itself, but also focus on understanding the offline process of production as well as the relationship between the digital content produced and shared with spaces and bodies which are involved in multimodal meaning-making. The challenge appears to be the gap between the different research traditions represented at the workshop and the SIG event was meant to help to take steps to bridge this gap. The workshop was actively tweeted using the #lnmsig2016 hashtag and a selection of tweets from the day is available at https://storify.com/AgnieszkaLyons/baal-language-and-new-media-sig. To keep up-to-date about future events and to share relevant information with the growing BAAL Language and New Media SIG community, visit our Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/languageandnewmedia.