MultiModality and Culture

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The world we live in and our research has become increasingly multimodal and culturally complex. Multimodality as an object of research and as a research methodology is a relatively new academic field, whereas culture has been a central concept for a long period. This entry provides a brief overview of the term ‘culture’ as it has been understood within the field of cultural and social anthropology by highlighting the parallel developments within linguistic and anthropological research during the past decades. Many researchers now see concepts as ‘culture’ and ‘language’, not as static entities, as fluid and dynamic, created and shaped through human action. These processes have been spurred by technological developments, offering both new modes of communication and new tools of analysis

[A] What is culture?

Academic disciplines have concepts which are essential to their theory and method, and as a consequence such terms become constitutive for the discipline. Culture is such a key concept, and it has been central particularly to the field of anthropology, much as linguistics has claimed ownership of ‘language’.

The term culture has been discussed for decades; not surprising as the object of study for anthropological research is cultural variation. The way culture has been understood has varied across time and research traditions. The etymological root is colere (Latin) – ‘cultivate’ (Hylland Eriksen 2010). Within cultural anthropology the term culture is used to refer to ‘knowledge about those aspects of humanity which are not natural, but which are related to that which are acquired” (Hylland Eriksen 2010, p.3). There is a tension between the universal and the particular: all human beings are similar in the sense that we have culture, but this is also what makes us differ from one another. The investigation of this double nature of culture has been central to anthropology ever since its inception and culture has been a key concept, both defining and dividing the field of anthropology. When it comes to the tension between the universal and the particular, there is a striking resemblance to discussions about
language within various disciplines of Linguistics: is language primarily an individual or social object?

Our concern here is how the understanding of culture may shed light on applied Linguistics in general and multimodality in particular. Linguists take for granted that culture is important, and the term is frequently used, but rarely defined. In spite of not defining culture, literature within Anthropology, Applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics frequently use and build analyses on this term. Therefore, a brief outline of how culture has been understood within Social and Cultural Anthropology is a useful starting point.

[A] Culture – a defining concept for Anthropology

During the 19th century several academic disciplines, influenced by Darwin’s theories, were characterized by a focus on evolution. The primary aim of Linguistics was to reconstruct former versions of languages in order to postulate a common source. During the same period Anthropology also underscored that human culture underwent qualitative change and evolutionism offered tools for analyzing and describing this change. Barnard and Spencer (1996) point out that this period was characterized by a focus on culture as an entity which evolved and could be possessed and acquired by societies to varying degrees. A different viewpoint was offered by the American anthropologist Boas who, inspired by Herder and the German tradition and by his fieldwork among Native Americans, used the plural form of culture: ‘cultures’. This can be seen as the inception of modern anthropology, situating culture in the tension between the individual and the particular referred.

Other similarities in the theoretical underpinnings of anthropology and linguistics can be identified, such as the striking similarity is the focus on underlying structure brought forward by Lévi-Strauss (1971) and Chomsky (1965), respectively. The idea is that the human drive to classify and create structure is driven by the underlying binary nature of the human mind and a search for universal patterns (Keesing 1974). Chomsky’s postulate that all children were born with the same abstract grammatical structure, had a profound impact not only on linguistics, but also on psychology and other disciplines. Language came to be seen as innate, biologically grounded and separate from other cognitive processes.

Academic fields often undergo similar theoretical paradigms. Today, both Linguistics and Anthropology have been shaped by post-structuralist theories, emphasizing pluralism and hybridity, human agents as co-constructors of language and culture and a shift of focus from the study of the Others to investigating relationships and transnational flows. The term culture still is frequently used, but contemporary introductory books to Anthropology typically discuss the history of the term, rather than providing definitions. However, when definitions
are given, they tend to highlight the interactional, inclusive, relativistic aspects of culture. Bodley (1997, p. 10) emphasizes culture as learned social behavior and offers the following definition: "Culture involves at least three components: what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce. Thus, mental processes, beliefs, knowledge, and values are parts of culture. The shared aspect of culture means that it is a social phenomenon; idiosyncratic behavior is not cultural. Culture is learned, not biologically inherited, and involves arbitrarily assigned, symbolic meanings". This definition emphasizes culture as something acquired and contextualized in line with the one provided by Hylland Eriksen: “a sensible concept of culture must depict culture both as an aspect of concrete, ongoing interaction and as the meaning-context for the very same interaction” (1991, p.127).

Contemporary Anthropology’s discussions of culture clearly is situated in a post-structuralist context, which also is the case for the following definition from Applied Linguistics: “Culture is located then not in accumulated bodies of static knowledge, but in the daily interactions occurring between individuals in particular sociocultural contexts at particular moments of time”. (Hall 2008, p.50). To summarize: currently culture is understood, similar to the way language is perceived by many linguists, as a combination of stable and co-constructed, fluid and contextualized patterns of behavior; both as something humans have and something we do.

[A] Culture, language and multimodality

Anthropological research has always been concerned with multimodality, though the term ‘multimodal’ has not been used until recently. This concern has been manifested both by its object of study (social behavior, traditions, material culture, language etc.) and by choice of methods (participant observation, written field notes, photography, ethnographic film etc.). The history of Linguistics, however, differs. The object of study for Linguistics is language and before the advent of recording possibilities, linguists relied on written transcripts of spoken language. Linguistics discussed whether language is best understood as a socio-cultural object or a biological object. This, combined with smaller range of research tools than was the case for Anthropology, led to linguistic research in general being monomodal.

Though the emphasis was placed on spoken language linguists worked with written elicited forms or written transcripts. During the structuralist period and later from the Chomskyan revolution, culture was not allocated room in the investigation of language because language was seen as a self-contained system.

The 1970s brought about a profound change, both in the view of language as an object of study, but also in language as a source of data. Sociolinguistics turned to spoken language as a social object. Sociolinguists and applied linguists turned to contextualized analyses, and new recording technologies made it possible to analyze audio recordings of spoken language as well as transcripts of these recordings, facilitated by sophisticated transcription systems developed within Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis, research areas originating in
Sociology. In combination with these new technological means, focus shifted to the contextualised use of language, seeing language as shaped by societal and cultural factors. Though not necessarily using the term multimodality, a wide range of linguists began analyzing more than language in the traditional sense. Within variationist sociolinguistics, Eckert (1989) shifted the focus from dialect to style, analyzing not only phonological variation in youth language, but the interrelation between language and other semiotic resources as means for identity construction and group membership. Schiffrin (2006) also investigated the relationship between language and context, focusing on how language is part of (and contributes to) text and context. Interactional sociolinguistics has since Gumperz’ (1992) groundbreaking work had a focus on how meaning is contextually created and how we use different linguistic resources like choice of lexemes, intonation, stress and information structure to convey meaning, pointing to different frames of reference. Depending on our cultural baggage we use language in systematically different ways, but the relationship between language and culture is not static. Duranti and Goodwin (1992) draw our attention to the mutually reflexive relationship between talk and context, seeing language as a contextualized phenomenon, both shaping and being shaped by context. Likewise, Applied Linguistics underwent a similar process moving away from a mentalist view of language seen as a mentalist object to the 90s when “advances in cognitive linguistics, linguistic anthropology, and the growing importance given to culture in language education brought a renewed interest in the relation of language, thought, and culture in applied linguistics” (Kramsch 2004, p.235).

These intellectual developments from the 1970s and onwards challenged the notion of language as an autonomous entity, and fuelled by technological advances both in text production and as tools for data analysis, language came to be seen as a part of a larger social system. Thus, the links between language and culture which had been severed during preceding century were reunited. As a consequence, researchers turned to analyzing different modes of language and their cultural context.

[A] Technology and culture

Communication has always been multimodal as we never have relied on oral aspects of language only. Language, gesture, pose etc. have all contributed to the production and understanding of a message. Likewise, text production is shaped by its cultural. Medieval texts were ornamental, and the materiality of texts contributed to their meaning (Caie 2008). The advent of the printing press and later the typewriter standardized text production, and the written text came to be, at least implicitly, understood as language per se. Technologies always entail some degree of standardization, involving codification, abstraction and changing the conditions and scope for human agency. These technological developments intertwined with the notion of language as a monomodal abstract entity, underpinned
linguistic research to a large degree until the 1970s. The paradigm shift described in the previous section was facilitated by technological developments for data gathering and analysis. These processes have been furthered by recent technological developments as the production of all forms of written, spoken and visual texts has become more complex through the use of different modes; all types of texts are more widely disseminated due to technological means, and we have developed more sophisticated tools and theories for the analyses of multimodal data. Therefore, it is not surprising a wealth of multimodal research has emerged. For much of this research, culture is a central term, though as is the case for most writings within Linguistics and Anthropology, the term is frequently used, but not always defined. Often, other terms and concepts are used in tandem or interchangeably with culture, such as context, social practice, semiotic systems, as in the following definitions: “The semiotic landscape consists of objects and events which together constitute the phenomenon we call culture.” (O’Halloran 2009, p.98), or Jones (2005, p.143) rejection of essentialist notions of culture “preferring instead to speak of the nexus or intersection of practices (R. Scollon, 2001a) upon which people build individual and group identity.”

[A] Multimodality, interaction and identity

Jewitt (2009) outlines three intersecting approaches within multimodality: social semiotic multimodality (associated with Kress, van Leuven, Halliday), multimodal discourse analysis (O’Halloran, O’Tool) and multimodal interactional analysis (Scollon and Scollon, Norris, Jones). For all three strands culture is important, though its role not necessarily made explicit. The researches mentioned cannot be assigned to one strand only, but somewhat simplified one might say that research within the two first approaches focus on the semiotic means and the discourse system as a set of organizatorial principles guiding our social meaning-making, whereas the main concern of the latter approach is the contextualized and culturally embedded nature of human action.

As our tools for data gathering and analysis get more and more sophisticated, combined with the turn to qualitative and ethnographic studies, it is not surprising that applied linguistics has become more concerned both with multimodality and culture. Multimodal interactional analysis is an illustrative example of this. One of the key theoretical developments within this field is Mediated Discourse Analysis or MDA (Scollon and Scollon, 2002, 2004). Scollon and Scollon (2002:1) describe MDA as a form of sociocultural analysis, focussing on social action. Within MDA all actions are understood to be mediated by cultural tools (or mediational means). Cultural tools are semiotic tools ranging from language to material objects. Social action is seen as any action performed by a social actor through the use of cultural tools. Within this approach language in a traditional sense has no primacy above other cultural tools. Scollon and Scollon (2004) show how the use of computer technology in Alaska changed social practices. Originally, this technology was designated to the administrative culture of education, but they proved to be well suited for creating new learning environments for students who were not comfortable with the panopticon classroom.
interaction order (the teacher-centred class where the teacher controls the interaction). Students who had no voice in the classroom setting because the interactional patterns were so different from the cultural codes of their everyday lives, used technology as a means for academic discussions on their own terms. Hornberger (2006) describes similar processes of alienation in school settings, telling the story of a Quechua girl who hardly ever spoke at school, but who when Hornberger visited her in her home, talked non-stop, telling stories in Quechua, showing Hornberger objects in her home while performing other actions such as looking after her younger brother. Hornberger (without using the term) carried out a multimodal analysis of this girl’s actions in different cultural contexts, where language and interactional patterns differed. The girl’s languages and practices can be understood as cultural tools for interaction and identity construction, and degree of access to these tools enables or limits her actions. Cope and Kalantzis (2000, p.204) echo Hornberger’s observation when they write: “Individuals have at their disposal a complex range of representational resources, never simply of one culture but of the many cultures in their lived experience”. The authors are part of the New London Group (with among others Norman Fairclough, James Gee and Gunther Kress) who coined the term multiliteracies to address the increasing salience of linguistics and cultural diversity and the increasingly multimodal nature of communication.

The interrelationship between cultural tools, social action and agency is also analysed by researchers working within the MDA framework. Norris (2004) presents a framework of multimodal interactional analysis based on the study of how two women employed different communicative modes for identity construction, such as pose, gesture, intonation, material objects etc., stressing that communication always is multimodal and pointing out that the social meaning of particular modes are derived from cultures and subcultures. Jones (2009) investigates how computer-mediated technology displays the body as a cultural tool (through texts, visualities and interaction) on chat sites. The online space is reflexive as the participants can view themselves and assess what kind of identity they portray. Thus, the technology itself becomes a cultural tool. The use of semiotic and material cultural tools for identity construction is also addressed by Lane (2009), showing that when language shift occurs, there are still other means than language available for the construction and negotiation of identities. A common denominator for all these researchers is the focus on how human interaction is carried out through different cultural tools, hence their use of multimodal approaches.

[A]Conclusions

Multimodal analysis both as a research field and a methodological approach is a result of the processes resulting in single central objects of analysis such as culture and language losing primacy and simultaneously multimodal analysis contributes to these processes. Both culture and language are multifaceted, intricate and variable, and multimodal and interdisciplinary approaches are essential for addressing such complex issues. This gets brought to the fore due
to the global flow of information, resources, people, languages and visualities, but it is worth keeping in mind that multimodal research in itself is a cultural product, born out of and shaped by technological developments.

Cross-references

SEE ALSO: Analysis of Mediated Interaction, Anthropological Linguistics, Bilingual Literacy, Context in the Analysis of Discourse and Interaction, Culture, Language, Culture, and Context, Multiliteracies in Education, Technology and Culture

References


Suggested readings


Gee, J. 2003. What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy. New York. Palgrave Macmillan-


