

News, Announcements

Conference Report

Multimodality – Towards a New Discipline

THIRD BREMEN CONFERENCE ON MULTIMODALITY

Faculty of Linguistics and Literary Science
Bremen University, Germany
September 20-22, 2017

This conference was the third in a series of interdisciplinary and international symposiums focusing on recent developments and advances in multimodal research and related disciplines. While **BreMM14** was dedicated to closing the gaps between various multimodality-ready disciplines, and **BreMM15** concerned itself with theoretical and methodological exploration, the Third Bremen Conference, **BreMM17**, aimed to bring together a broad variety of viewpoints on multimodal communication – and, possibly, to pave the way for establishing multimodality as a multifaceted and at the same time self-sufficient and more clearly contoured discipline.

The idea of multimodality – both as a range of phenomena to be investigated and as a field of inquiry – was discussed by the three keynote speakers in the following order: **Kay O'Halloran** (Curtin University, Australia) with her talk *Multimodality: The Move to Big Data Analysis* exploring the possibilities of automated recognition of multimodal meanings in large data sets to cope with the sheer volume of data being generated today; **David Machin** (Örebro University, Sweden) with his talk *Multimodality as a Critical Research Approach* employing the study of multimodality to reveal how social practices become ideologically constructed or re-contextualized in ways that favor particular interests and forms of social relations; and **Ellen Fricke** (TU Chemnitz, Germany) with her talk *Language, Gestures and Images: Multimodality between Code Manifestation and Code Integration* showing how combining two lines of multimodality research – gesture-speech

relations in spoken language and language-image relations in written language – might open up promising new perspectives and research questions covering both these fields of investigation.

Another highlight of the conference was the panel discussion featuring the keynote speakers joined by **John A. Bateman** (Bremen University, Germany) and **Hartmut Stöckl** (University of Salzburg, Austria). Following the title of the conference – *Multimodality: Towards a New Discipline* – the discussion revolved around the converging tendencies across diverse disciplinary starting points, emerging in what could be called a ‘consensus view’ of multimodality which accentuates the necessity of examining the interplay of multiple modes and their use by communicators in specific contexts of production and reception. It was, however, agreed that despite the considerable insight and experience gained within and across a wide array of disciplines, questions connected with modes, modalities and their interaction are still answered in vague, programmatic or even impressionistic fashions. This obstacle in the path towards *a new discipline* is further accompanied by deficient empirical foundations caused by a lack of clarity in the central theoretical constructs employed and weaknesses in the available methodologies for analysis (cf. Stöckl, 2014). In order to arrive at more precise foundations, John Bateman and his colleagues suggest a revision of the Peircean semiotic framework that could, in the light of contemporary developments, guide our understanding of multimodality and do justice to its basic constructs; furthermore, it could also offer a stronger and more robust metatheoretical framework for addressing wider aspects of multimodality (cf. Bateman, Wildfeuer, Hiippala, 2017).

All in all, the conference provided a fertile ground for critical and stimulating insights into the state-of-the-art in multimodality from diverse fields, including the study of media, comics, cinema, video games, virtual reality, narrative, ethnography, as well as kinesics and haptic communication. This diversity has also yielded fresh perspectives on my own research results presented under the title *Towards a Multimodal Analysis of Memetic Communities on Facebook*, as part of a current SGS grant project. Indeed, the conference hosted more than 70 scholars of different backgrounds from all over the world, and thus it offered a space for formal as well as informal exchange and discussion of various ideas through different prisms in the nexus of multimodality, setting a course for further fruitful collaboration.

Bibliography

- Stöckl, H. (2014). *Semiotic paradigms and multimodality*. In: Carey Jewitt (ed.): *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis* (pp. 274–286). London: Routledge.
- Bateman, J., Hiippala, T., & Wildfeuer, J. (2017). *Multimodality: Foundations, Research and Analysis – A Problem-Oriented Introduction*. Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.



Panelists, from the left: Kay O'Halloran, Hartmut Stöckl, John Bateman, David Machin and Ellen Fricke.

Ondřej Procházka
University of Ostrava