Multimodality

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What is it?

In face-to-face interactions co-participants use verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal signs for expressing and interpreting meaning. This well-known combination has been studied for a long time independently, focusing on the assumption that paraverbal and nonverbal signs somehow modify, complete or even contradict what has been expressed by words. Exploring natural dialogues in social interaction, the multimodal approach does not attribute a predominant value to the verbal aspects, but looks at communication behavior as a whole. As a strictly empirical procedure, researchers make video recordings of interpersonal interaction and transcripts. On the basis of these notations, multimodal research tries to determine the order of how people combine e.g. their body orientations, facial expressions, eye contacts, gestures, their intonations, loudness or accentuations as well as their wordings into one expression (Gestalt). On the recipients' side the question is how they interpret these configurations of visible and audible means.

Who uses the concept?

Researchers using conversation analysis, ethnographic discourse analysis, functional pragmatics, and ethnography of communication among other approaches illustrate multimodal interactional developments within professional or mundane conversations. The disciplines concerned are not only communication, but sociology, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and social psychology.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

For empirical investigation in and conceptual modelling of intercultural dialogues, the holistic approach of multimodal research studies not the isolated verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal expressions that are conventionally different across languages, but their joint use. In order to meet the expectations and competencies of non-native speakers, this usage is characterized by a noticeable recipient design and corresponding selections and priorities of communication means.

What work remains?

Until recently, most investigations show that and how multimodal resources are used in interpersonal encounters. This research should be continued in order to determine situation-specific multimodal expressions and interpretations. At the same time, attention should be directed to the various interactive resources in intercultural encounters. In particular the question of selection and priority: which are "decisive contextualizers" for interpreting a message in a web of resources formatting actions?

Resources

Mondada, L. (2014). The local constitution of multimodal resources for social interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics, 65*, 137-156.

Mortensen, K. (2012). Conversation analysis and multimodality. In J. Wagner & K. Mortensen (Eds.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics* (pp. 1061-1068). Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.