Chapter 4
Multimodal Semiotics in China

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of information and communication, China’s digital technology was brought in line with international standards, and the studies of multimodal semiotics has emerged and developed quickly. This chapter has carried out an analysis of related papers published in Chinese core linguistic journals, as well as in linguistic-related journals indexed in Social Science Citation Index (henceforward SSCI). The results show that the research in multimodality has been on the increase. Present research contents are multidimensional but need to be broadened and deepened. Various theoretical perspectives have been explored but the increasing empirical research is still not sufficient; indigenous innovation research is inadequate, as most studies focus on the factors of foreign language teaching in college. This chapter intends to answer the following three questions: What is the basic profile of multimodal semiotics in China? What are the research foci of multimodal semiotics in China? And what are the successes and challenges of multimodal semiotics research in China?

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of information and communication, China’s digital technology was brought up to par with international standards, and as a result, studies of multimodal semiotics have prospered rapidly. There has been consensus among all disciplines that the new technology will bring a lot of potential for improving the effectiveness of language teaching as well as language learning. The new technology makes it easier to communicate information among its participants, as it also offers more opportunities for students and teachers to get access to information that would have been difficult or impossible to find in print-based sources. Thanks to the internet, today’s students not only have the opportunity to access information instantly, but also access internet without Wi-Fi on mobile phones. Consequently, students today are required to acquire the knowledge of accessing, evaluating and using information gained through the information and communication technology (Coiro, 2003). Meanwhile, the traditional notion of “text” and language teaching pedagogy has been frequently challenged by the emerging “multimodal text.” Language teachers and students are not surprised to find that this new type
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of text has brought about great changes in the way they create meaning. People go beyond the traditional means of representing meaning and appeal to combination of visual, auditory, gestural, and linguistic design elements (New London Group, 1996).

With an increasing role of technology in learning, growing interest of students in technology aided learning and the emerging multimodal text, teaching practitioners and researchers have an urgent need to gain an insight of the profile of multimodal semiotics in China, theoretical background, research focus, and future development. Only in this way can they better engage themselves in multimodal teaching and researching, maximizing the benefits while minimizing its defects, and possibly come up with solutions to the problems currently facing. On the other hand, the reflections and practice of multimodal teaching will promote the research of multimodal semiotics in China. However, at this point, there is no relevant report of this kind. This chapter attempts to bridge this gap by analyzing related papers written by Chinese scholars in core linguistic journals published in China as well as in the linguistics-related journals indexed in SSCI. It aims to answer the following three questions: What is the basic profile of multimodal semiotics in China? What are the research foci of multimodal semiotics in China? What are the successes and challenges of multimodal semiotics in China?

BACKGROUND

From the perspective of social semiotics, multimodal semiotics attempts to interpret meaning from the interaction of texts (including writing, images, sound, and space) within a given context. There is an increasing interest among academics, professionals, and students in the role of image, gesture, gaze, posture, and the use of space in representation and communication – in other words, multimodality. Scholars abroad study multimodality across a wide range of disciplines, e.g. anthropology, education, design, linguistics, media and culture studies, musicology, sociology (Jewitt, 2014). Multimodality studies in China started in the early 2000s. According to the search results from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the concept “Multimodal Discourse” was first brought up by Li Zhanzi in 2003. In her article, Social Semiotic Approach to Multimodal Discourse, Li introduced the social semiotic approach proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). This approach is based on Halliday’s systemic functional grammar and attempts to analyze multimodal discourse in terms of representational, interpersonal, and compositional meanings. It is an endeavor to understand language as social semiotics and at managing multimodal discourse in English teaching.

After Li’s pioneering work, several scholars have made contributions to this field of study. Gu Yueguo (2007) made a distinction between the concept of multimedia and that of multimodality. According to Gu, these two forms of learning integrated in a variety of ways: mono-medium mono-modal learning, di-media di-modal learning, multimedia mono-modal learning, and multimedia multimodal learning. He proposed and demonstrated an analytic model termed agent-based modeling language (AML) for analyzing the two forms of learning. Hu Zhuanglin and Dong Jia (2006) analyzed 23 PowerPoint (PPT) presentation slides collected from a PowerPoint presentation contest sponsored by Renmin University’s Australian Studies Centre. They recognized PPT presentations as a new genre. According to their analysis, natural language is still the chief mode of expressing meaning. They found that the value of PPT presentation lies in its use of images and sound effects which also construe the thematic meaning. A study by Zhu Yongsheng (2007) discusses four issues closely related to multimodal discourse analysis: 1) where multimodal discourse comes from; 2) how multimodal discourse is defined; 3) what the nature