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Semiotic modes: What are they, how can we find them, and what good will it do us?

In discussions of multimodality the identity of the semiotic modes under study is often passed over. Some basic distinctions, such as text vs. image, spoken language vs. gesture, sound-track vs. image-track, etc. are commonly taken as starting points and both the theoretical discussion and accompanying analyses proceed from there. In this talk, I will argue that such an approach is problematic. It leaves a confused picture of just what is being analysed in any multimodal artefact and contributes to vagueness and arbitrariness in the results presented. Semiotic modes develop over time and so any static list of modes to investigate is by definition problematic. We need to build this into our methodologies for empirical multimodal investigation in order to remain receptive to what is actually occurring in the artefacts we analyse. The talk will start with an example-driven discussion of what needs to be seen as a 'semiotic mode' and a working definition. This will be briefly compared with some other attempts to refine the notion of semiotic mode and then applied in analysis to reveal commonalities across the semantics of distinct modes that are otherwise difficult to discuss. Examples will be taken from traditional print-based media, web-based materials, images and film. We will see that decomposing the contributions of distinct modes is also an important step towards being able to automate the processing of multimodal artefacts.