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Response: Finding the Multi-in the Mode

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The paper outlines two major premises that I tend to share: (1) all discourse has the potential and thus (2) all multimodal discourse has the potential to generate an inference. From this premise, the authors suggest that configurations of discourse and images in “seemingly non-argumentative genres” provide a powerful platform for ordinary argumentation. For these authors, it is how the configurations of discourse and multimodal discourse can yield argumentative positions that demands more rigorous study. They suggest news articles in the mainstream press become the sites of “micro-argumentation,” where headlines, images, and articles context come together to create arguments. Although newspapers may claim to be objective, the organization of multimodal discourse advances a standpoint. The authors offer Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT) as an analytic tool to diagram multimodal argumentation to “unveil the opaque argumentative dynamics of multimodal configurations, realized by the interrelation of headlines and press photographs,” in ordinary discourse. They explain their methodology as they look at the inferences “embedded in the title, the photo as well as the content of the article itself”(p.3). Each element contributes the contextual and inferential cues that provide the basis for AMT: a shared set of principles for relevant cultural setting and another axis on shared material reality. The benefit of this method over others, the authors argue, is the precision it affords critics.

Yet, for all the analytical precision in this essay, a clear definition of multimodal discourse remains undertheorized. The origins of the paradigm came from an interactionist perspective that sought to understand how ordinary people consider other factors besides linguistic concerns in an argumentative interaction. An ordinary person, for example, might pick up the paper and scan the pictures as well as read the text to formulate an opinion. If multimodal argumentation encompasses the ways ordinary people “are invited to act (make decisions, express our views, require further information, or pass that information on to others)” by the force of more than one semiotic system (Tseronis and Forceville, p. 1), then the study of multimodal argumentation provides a tool that goes beyond the verbal to explore the many different ways by which people come to their senses. Specifically, we must explore if AMT is able to actually get beyond just linguistic modes of reason to explore the other semiotic potential, other ways of sensing.

The authors give us examples of multimodal argumentation from two newspapers covering immigration to Europe. In the analysis, the authors employ examines “the interplay of the headline and the press photo that accompanies it” (p. 6). The result reduces the headlines and images to a series of binaries that reinforce one another. Consider, for example, the authors’ analysis of the first headline and photograph from *Il Giornale*. Their initial analysis of the headline attends to a series of linguistic nuances such as word choice, grammatical choices, and semantic structure. Similarly, their analysis of the image considers a variety of nuanced factors, including clothing style, the direction the migrants are facing, and activity or passivity, to determine if the migrants fall in the axis of assimilated or not. In both the image and the headline, the authors cite Theo van Luween and his work in critical discourse analysis to elaborate a consistent grammar that places the immigrants along a binary scheme: active/passive, assimilated/rejected, Us/Them. Indeed, the headline and the image are read as a series of binary

oppositions that are coded into their Y axis to produce the diagram. The authors use these oppositions to support the conclusion that the headline and photo come together to make the claim “if refugees—‘others’—are consciously and massively arriving to Italy, then this action should be stopped and therefore, the migratory phenomena should be prevented”(p. 8).

While the claims produce different arguments, both analyses follow a similar logic that assume the picture and headline constitute agency through a linear logic of binary oppositions. The authors draw their theoretical orientation heavily from Lueween’s 2008 *Discourse and Practice*, in he develops a linguistic/rhetorical system for representing agency in English. In his example, van Lueween also draws from headlines and photographs to make his point. He explains there can be a common linguistic code between the headlines and photographs:

Language can represent social action impersonally, as in the headline: Allied Air Activity over Battlefield Intensifies. But so can pictures—think of the difference between on the one hand, “personalized” pictures of bombardments, say in feature film sequences showing, in close up, the faces of the crew as the drop bombs on the faces of villagers down below as they’re about to be bombed, and, on the other hand, diagrams of the same event, for instance, maps with large arrows pointing at the targets and schematic drawings representing explosions. (pp. 24-25)

In other words, van Lueween posits that there is a commonality that can be made between using terminology of the impersonal term “Allied Forces” in a headline and the impersonal perspective “staring at a map” in a photo. Both presuppose a particular kind of grammatical structure that locates an agent in a sentence and likens it to word selection, which both presuppose that we’ve rendered both the headline and the photo into a sentence and engaged in the process of reading. At its core, such a framework assumes that a name on a piece of paper and a human face in an image will evoke the same sort of affect upon a spectator.

While this might make sense for all headlines, this makes less sense for all other sensations, as they do not fit neatly into grammatical categories. I am reminded of Michael Gilbert’s (1994) injunction that, “We must try as best we can to separate the normative from the descriptive, and remember at all times that argumentation theorists are largely drawn from a highly rational professional group that values linear reasoning above all other modes of persuasive communication” (p. 2). When the image becomes rationalized, other sensual elements like color, composition, and movement become gaudy clothing that needs to be discarded. The desire to standardize and justify the reading of the multimodal arguments comes at the cost of the subjective feelings of the body. The mind-body dualism manifests itself again, hamstringing the potential for theoretical construction. When the body is positioned as an error to be overcome, we miss the unique ways that different sensations impact the body as an invitation for inference in ordinary argumentation, say, how words and images have unique and quantifiable impacts upon how the body senses. Elisabeth Bruner and Kevin Deluca (2016) summarize some of the differences as,

Numerous scientific studies have shown, images communicate differently than words. Among other things, they are processed faster than words (images can be processed in a mere 13 milliseconds) (Potter, Wyble, Hagmann, & McCourt, 2014), elicit stronger responses in the brain (Kensinger & Schacter, 2006), are able to be remembered better than words (Grady, McIntosh, Rajah, & Craik, 1998), and are processed holistically rather than linearly. (p.283)

Part of defining multimodal argumentation involves recognizing the “multi” part of multimodal and acknowledging that we need to shift our understanding and adoption of analytic

vocabulary that does not methodologically overdetermine the object of inquiry. I would encourage us to adopt an approach that considers multimodal arguments as “events.” Such an approach recognizes that multimodal arguments exist in time, exert force, and are always in movement. But, these complex events invite different degrees of inferences from which people act, make decisions, express perspectives, and make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. That is to say, in any multimodal argument, there may be many different ratios of sensation underwriting a perception of another’s standpoint. Even images involve the entire body, the way a picture might make a gut churn or skin crawl. While this might be more analytically frustrating, I think adopting a methodology that acknowledges multimodal argumentation as events will yield more robust accounts of sensual arguments. I recognize, too, the irony of lambasting the text while penning this response. But, just because we must write our research, does not mean we must assume our objects must follow the organizational logic of text. To illustrate what I mean, I want to return to the object of study and explore further what it might mean to expand some of the other elements in the multimodal argument.

In the *Il Giornale* example, when pictures and headlines are constituted as the same modality, linguistic code, we might miss other unique features. For instance, above the headline there was an ad from *InsideOver*, a branch of the newspaper aiming to cultivate a more cosmopolitan audience and the ad could be considered an ethos appeal. In the example the authors captured is banner ad for a story “Evil: Inside Auschwitz” over a close-up image of a memorial, reminding spectators of the horror of the concentration camps. The ombre gray hues provides stark contrast to the bright, white font. The extreme contrast draws Auschwitz further into relief. If someone clicked the link, they would find a photo documentary series that features images inside the concentrations camps (even provides an option to be translated into English!). This ad is displayed prominently above the headline that the authors analyzed, yet the authors give it little attention. For the average spectator, the mention of Auschwitz triggers public memory concerning the horrors of concentration camps. Although the *InsideOver Auschwitz* banner ad might not directly relate to the images, it provides a cultural context of empathy. For this reader in particular, the embodied past of the Holocaust blunts the impact of some of the word choices in the headline and even changes the meaning of the images included in the article. But, beyond being a mosaic of image and text, the banner ad is also an example of a hypertext, which is a different modality than the text because it has the capacity to move a reader from one website to another. The decision to move or stay exerts force on the cognitive load of a reader by imposing a choice upon them. According to Diana DeFano and Jo-Anne LeFevre’s (2007) metastudy of the effects of hypertexts on reading, the inclusion of hypertexts has measurable effects on reading comprehension, inferences, activating prior knowledge, and synthesizing ideas. In short, the hypertext distracts the reader, changing the amount of attention the reader distributes. Specifically, this particular hypertext raises the question of how much alarm an image of immigrants might stir. Perhaps this banner ad is tailored to the author’s own search history, which raises even more questions about the nature of shared context of hyper specific metadata. Indeed, when I searched for the ad, I got an entirely different banner ad than the authors found.

Of course, these are lofty questions and I do not expect them to answer now. But I want to return to my initial provocation: what constitutes multimodal argumentation? Often, it feels that question gets lost in scholarship and we return back to logocentric argumentation. We must not be tempted to just organize all argumentation under the logic of the text; as I have argued elsewhere, this temptation smuggles in a number of biases that hamper our capacity to invent

new theories that confront our emerging digital environment. Instead, we must provide space for alternative modes of reasoning and their capacity to affect us. Instead, I posit we must view multimodal argumentation as an event, with velocity, force, and intensity.

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