

# Transduction and Meaning-Making Issues Within Multimodal Messages\*

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes transduction as an action of transposing information from one mode to another within the communication process and its implications in terms of meaning and coherence of a multimodal message. First, I discuss the multimodal method and its conjunction with some key concepts such as: sign, meaning, mode, transduction. Secondly, I approach transduction as an essential method of translating messages across the media variety, describing my interdisciplinary approach – that brings together semiotics and communications – and proposing a framework of explanation for transduction in the field of advertising. Drawing from a previous model (Culache 2015), I illustrate the way transduction takes place and identify its meaning-making issues while introducing the concept of 'dominant mode.'

**Keywords:** multimodality, transduction, social semiotics, meaning-making, dominant mode

## I. Introduction

The multiplicity of semiotic resources that we dispose of in order to ensure communication reflects in numerous semiotic opportunities to build signification across the various and ever-developing media landscape. Social semiotics has been concerned in the last decades with the diversity of interplays between sets of semiotic resources, also known as modes, and the way they manage to create meanings in different semiotic situations. The method of deploying at least two different sets of semiotic resources i.e. multimodality, is one of the pillars of the most recent social semiotic developments.

As Kress (2010) defines it, multimodality is omnipresent across messages, therefore the multimodal method can be identified as a valid ground for any communication act in the field of marketing, branding, advertising, education, arts, etc. When approaching these areas particularly, we notice not only their deployment of multimodality, but also their versatility, as multimodal messages get to be transposed in different media: textbooks become animations, novels become movies, commercials become print advertisements, ideas become brand logos. In this context, we can ask ourselves whether the new messages built on transposed modes are truly effective in conveying intended meanings.

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This aspect is of a great importance in many areas of interest, especially in advertising, as long as brands are supposed to deliver consistent and unitary meanings about themselves. I believe that these modal permutations (in a semiotic sense) engender a set of implications that are worth being studied. In this respect, the issues I intend to expose in the current paper might be found useful to clarify management decisions within the field of communication.

## **II. A Multimodal Way of Making Meaning**

A sign is a means for creating and conveying information that grounds any meaningful process of communication. In the literature, Saussure (1916) considered signs as dyadic entities consisting of a signifier and a signified, whereas Peirce (1931-1958) defined them in a triadic manner, as entities encapsulating a representamen (also known as the sign vehicle), an object and an interpreter.

Peirce's theory, one of the most common theories in semiotics, depicts signs in the form of a triangular set of relationships between its three components, whose interaction – also known as semiosis – engenders meaning (Sebeok 1994). Meanings can be both literal and figurative: literal meanings refer to cases when there is an explicit and conventional relationship between the sign and its object, whereas the figurative meanings refer to cases that require inferences, even though there is still a certain degree of conventionalism (Cobley 2001).

Apart from stocking information, signs also participate at the meaning-making process, by interacting with other semiotic resources within a semiotic system (cf. Saussure 1998). Thus, signs are usually used in combinations that form sets of semiotic resources or modes. The development of modes is strictly correlated to social, historical, and cultural practices that validate them (Bezemer and Jewitt 2010). Kress (2010), one of the most important pioneers in multimodality, mentioned colours, layout, soundtrack, writing, images, typography, 3D objects, music, gestures, and speech as examples of modes. As a second-degree set of semiotic resources, multimodal messages are artefacts containing at least two merged modes (Ravelli 2000, Kress 2010, López Rodríguez, Prieto Velasco, and Sánchez 2013). Implicitly, as López Rodríguez et al. (2013) pointed out, this repertoire of signs finds its use in the way that it permits the adaptation of signs to the needs of different users.

Multimodality is a way of making meaning by using sets of signs that interlace and complement each other in a way that engenders a particular meaning. They are not defined by redundancy, but by their way of interacting (Kress 2010). Lemke (1998) considered multimodality as a very useful method people can deploy in other to make sure they are understood, by avoiding any feeling of self-repeating.

The power of multimodality resides in the fact that multimodal messages are clusters of meanings which together form a macrosign able to convey a more

complex meaning than the very sum of its parts (Lim 2004). As multimodality turns simple signs into a powerful semiotic tool, in the next section, we shall notice that this framework has also some semiotic challenges that compete with its undoubtful force of making meaning.

### **III. Theorization and Problematization of Multimodal Translation**

Considering the extended media types available to send messages, social semioticians interested in multimodality have brought into discussion the case when multimodal messages get to be adapted to new types of message supports. In this case, senders are forced to adjust messages, i.e. to transpose their components from one modality to another. In the literature, this action is called 'translation' and it takes place both at an intrasemiotic and an intersemiotic level (O'Halloran 2005, Aguiar and Queiroz 2012, Aguiar and Queiroz 2013). As presented in the literature, the difference between the two resides in that intrasemiotic translation implies transposing data within the same type of modes, such as translating from one language to another, whereas intersemiotic translation regards the cases when translation is transmodal, i.e. it implies replacing a mode with a different one.

First discussions about this semiotic process belong to Jakobson (1959, 114), as his interest in linguistics generated some questions regarding 'intersemiotic transmutation,' i.e. interpreting signs by means of a different sign system. Even if intrasemiotic translation is a still viable subject for discussion, in my paper, I shall try to better understand the intersemiotic process of translation, also known as 'resemioticization' (Iedema 2003, 30), 'transduction' (Kress 2010, 43), or 'semantic reconstruals' (O'Halloran 2005, 165).

Drawing from the literature, resemioticization can take place within a message, in order to better express a meaning – in this case I shall name it 'complementary translation;' also, the same process can take place across two or more messages, by recreating a meaning in a different communicational context, in which case I shall name it 'replacement translation.'

When approaching transduction within the multimodal framework, we notice that transduction does not only concern the modes per se, but the entire 'semiotic hybrid' (Lemke 1998, 87), that is the message as a unitary entity, as multimodality implies that the multiplicity of semiotic sets of signs or modes are coordinated in a single meaningful semiosis whose output is a unitary meaning. In this respect, Thibault (2000) argues that multimodal analysis must not divide meaning according to codes or channels deployed, on the contrary, it should treat the message as an ensemble. Also, researchers are divided between those claiming that modes are able to replace each other (O'Halloran and Liu 2009), and those insisting that different meaning-making systems are incommensurable and cannot remake meaning in one-to-one correspondence (Lemke 1998, Chiew 2004, Aguiar and Queiroz 2012, Aguiar and Queiroz 2013).

In virtue of the Saussurean thesis stating that meanings do not reside within signs, but in the relationships between signs (Saussure 1916), I also hypothesize that replacement transduction automatically implies a semantic difference between the original and the duplicated set of signs, because the translation process is not able to translate elements' interplay. Thus, when replacing modes, we should consider that we do not only discuss the analogy of signs, but also the isotopy of the relationships built between signs.

Developing Aguiar and Queiroz's research (2012, 2013), in a previous paper, I proposed a model of comparative analysis that illustrates the complexity of interactions taking place within the multimodal framework. The model depicts the sign as a result of the interplay between different modes whose joint deployment creates a 'Merging Space,' i.e. a place of semantic expansion (Culache 2015). The model encompasses Peirce's triad consisting of the representamen, the object and the interpretant (Peirce, 1931-1958, C 5.484). Thus, the model shows that translation of multimodal messages implies not an individual transduction of elements, but the transduction of their integrated meaning. In this case, chances are that some modes remain in the model and some modes are replaced (translated), depending on the media possibilities of representation. For example, a video commercial and a radio commercial both have in common the sound, thus any music, soundtrack or speech may be kept in both messages, as the corresponding media (television and radio) permit it. On the other hand, the replacement modalities, together with the preserved ones from the original message, get integrated in a new cluster of meanings: the new message.

#### **IV. Replacement Translation and Meaning Ratio in Multisensoriality**

My goal to investigate transduction's implications in terms of meaning and coherence of a multimodal message is achievable if we engage in an analysis of the way different multimodal messages complete their task of loyally representing meanings. In this respect, I shall define a universe of speech, namely advertising, so that I can use a particular framework.

Advertising, as a form of brand communication, is a continuous process of delivering coherent and consistent meanings at every contact point between brands and stakeholders. According to their identity, brands have a common set of meanings to convey via every message they create. Many brands choose multi-channel communication, as a very effective way to reach their target, in line with their media preferences: watching television, browsing Youtube channels, going to the cinema (video commercials), listening to radio (radio commercials), reading magazines (print ads), web browsing (ad banners), online networking (social media ads), etc.

In order to identify the meaning implications within multimodal translation, first, I must remind you the main types of modalities that Kress (2010) mentioned and identify the representative sensory dimensions they touch:

**Table 1 - The sensory dimension of modalities**

<b>Modalities</b>	<b>Representative sensory dimension</b>
colours	visual
layout	visual
soundtrack	auditory
writing	visual
images	visual
typography	visual
3D objects	visual, tactile
music	auditory
gestures	visual, tactile
speech	auditory, visual

As the table depicts, the visual dimension is the most common between modes. This means that, in most cases, modes implying the visual sense will be involved in an intersemiotic translation, whether as transduced or replacement modalities. When transduced, a visual mode will be replaced by another visual mode or by a tactile or auditory mode.

By addressing the intersemiotic translation model I proposed (Culache 2015) as an adaptation of Aguiar and Queiroz's model (2012, 2013), we can notice that the model permits complex messages consisting of a merged space which encapsulates various modalities (multimodal message) blending in a unique message. In order to deliver a relevant result, I shall discuss intersemiotic translation across sensory dimensions. In subsidiary, I do take into consideration that the shift from a visual mode to another visual mode, such as from colours to writing, implies really interesting aspects in terms of signification. Nonetheless, I find it even more challenging to explore the meaning ratio between modes that address different senses.

I believe that multimodal messages, and especially multisensory messages, have a particular impact on the receiver, depending on the entity that we identify as the dominant mode (DM) in terms of sensory experience.

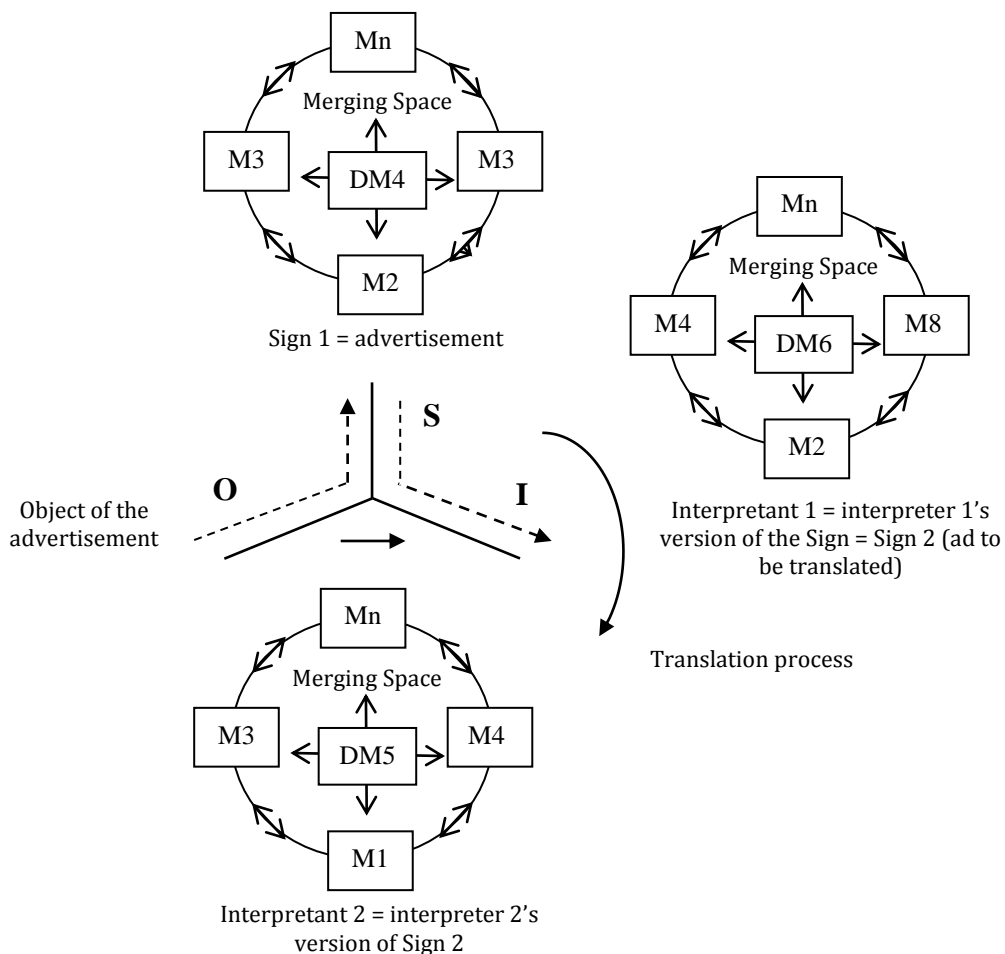


Figure 1 – Meaning transduction in multimodal advertisement

(adaptation from Culache 2015)

The dominant mode is strategically conceived so that to have a greater impact within the interpretation model. The selection of this type of modality takes into consideration the sensory dimension of the message, according to the medium of distribution it deploys. Thus, there are some media with a greater meaning potential when combined with a particular mode.

As depicted in the model of semiotic transduction (Figure 1), the dominant mode does not deny the cooperation between modes in order to create meaning. Yet, we should take into consideration the possibility that this type of mode

affects the way the blending takes place between all modes and, implicitly, the final meaning that is being created in the merging space.

## **V. Discussing Transduction Issues and Meaning-Making**

When shifting from one dominant mode to another mode as a result of an intersemiotic translation, we perceive the risk of meaning alteration. Even though we manage to keep some of the modalities that compose the original message, we cannot keep the entire spectrum of relationships built within the message, between modes. *Ipsa facto*, the way the dominant mode interacts with the other modes that makes it more visible and dominant, will be lost in the interpretation process, when new interplays and new modalities come to replace the original ones, in order to form a new sign in the mind of the interpreter. Furthermore, the second sign is once again subject to a semiotic process, as it is translated by following the same pattern – new modalities, new relationships, new sign.

If we apply this set of processes to an advertising campaign, we can foresee various effects in terms of meaning coherence. An advertising campaign implies a unique powerful message that brand managers intend to communicate to their stakeholders: a promotion, a new product, new product improvements, brand attributes, etc. Every advertisement has to comply with the meanings to be sent, so that the communication, irrespective of the medium it deploys, to be coherent and consistent. Thus, it is of great importance to assess the way multimodal transduction impacts the meaning of various multimodal messages in an advertising campaign.

A commercial can have a more powerful impact via its soundtrack, which manages to address memories, feelings and ideas that are more inspiring than those addressed by other modes from the commercial. Print ads can deliver a greater experience by using writing as a mode, as it expresses meaningful and interesting ideas. By using these criteria, advertisers are able to create a message capable of conveying powerful meanings, in conformity with the highest potential of representation and impression.

The dominant mode can have an impact regarding the way an advertisement determines an interpretant, as a result of an interpretation process. The merged meaning of a multimodal ad becomes another set of merged meanings, i.e. the new sign or interpretant. When dominant modes are involved, message transduction becomes a problematic action, as it automatically implies the intersemiotic translation of the dominant mode's impact within the semiotic process. We also take into consideration the fact that different modes interact: colours, images, soundtrack, speech, etc., depending on the medium of distribution and its capability in terms of sensory affordances, and then the modes blend in a unitary meaning. In analogy with the gestalt theory, within the interpretation process, most of the consumers take a snapshot of the message as

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a complex of meanings, thereof the dominant mode becomes the most visible and impressive part.

When making a new version of the advertisement, the specialists try to translate meanings by using other modes, according to the new medium they use. When shifting from visual media to auditory media, for instance, the intersemiotic translation's effects are visible from an ideational perspective. If the dominant mode is a visual or tactile one, for instance, in the case of auditory media, there is an imminent switch of the dominant mode, from the visual or tactile to the auditory one. This change reflects on the part of the interpreter in a way that implies a different meaning and a different attitude towards the advertised product or brand.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The field of advertising is a proper context for explaining the multimodal framework and its meaning-making issues when intersemiotic translation is needed. Its relevance resides in the capability of illustrating various connections between modalities and their transposition across different sensory messages. In my view, multimodal messages engender a complex interaction of modes, thereof I identified a dominant mode, as the most visible and memorable meaningful part of a message. When multimodal messages are recreated within a replacement translation, and especially when translation implies different sensory mechanisms, resemioticization of multimodal messages is defined by a particular modal interaction in the Merging Space, where the dominant mode acts as a divergent entity, as long as different senses are not able to replace each other properly.

## **VIII. Limitations of the Study and Further Research Directions**

My study has a set of limitations. First, the research on the topic addressed here requires a more practical follow-up, by means of a case study. Second, the modified model I proposed implies a prior verification of the original model (Culache 2015), for validation.

Future research should continue the investigations in the field of multimodality and intersemiotic transduction, as many issues can rise in the process of semantic reconstrual. The subject is of great interest, as its application in many research areas, such as marketing and advertising, might prove useful for a better integrated communication strategy.

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