

The CALA 2020 Proceedings Paper 10 - 1

*Semiotics and Semiology, Paper 1*

**Reading Shopfront Signs: A Multimodal (Social)  
Semiotic Approach to Text Analysis**

Arif Chowdhury

*University of Creative Technology Chittagong, Bangladesh*

# Reading Shopfront Signs: A Multimodal (Social) Semiotic Approach to Text Analysis

Arif Chowdhury<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*University of Creative Technology Chittagong, Bangladesh*

---

## Abstract

Shopfront signs in the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic city of London seem to serve as a vehicle for maintaining unity in an era of linguistic diversity. Various ethno-linguistic diasporas represent themselves through a unique multi lingual display of multimodal shopfronts signs culminating in the English language.

This paper focuses on language as a social semiotic (Haliday 1978), as a multimodal semiotic resource (Jewitt 2005) and as a manipulative-representative text within multilingual society. The study assumes an ethnographic approach to the Bengali dominated streets of Whitechapel and Brick Lane in London, on shop signs. The study aims to determine how multilingual and multimodal ‘texts,’ embedded in shop signs, could assist in processing meanings (Kress 2004). The study draws on a corpus of images and texts on shop signs which were randomly selected and categorised in various ways.

Taking a multimodal (social) semiotic approach to text analysis of shop signs, this paper attempts to analyze the Bangla and English shop signs and ideologies directed at these signs and their semiotic resources.

**Keywords:** Shopfront signs, multimodal analysis, social semiotics, semiotic resources

---

## Introduction

Shopfront signs in multilingual, multiethnic London are created to attract appropriate audiences by applying multimodal use of language. These signs introduce customers to the stores, not least through multimodal representations. To analyze these signs as multimodal texts requires a multimodal social semiotic approach. My particular focus is to view language as a multimodal text and to examine how the needs of speech and language communities are fulfilled in creating group identity and (re)shaping our ideologies as shopfront readers or sign makers (Kress 2010). Semiotic resources of modes depend on how people use them to make meaning and how they are used in social functions (Jewitt 2005). Pointing out how meaning is embedded in media, Kress proposes that “meanings are always disseminated through particular media: the medium of the book; or the medium of the CD-ROM, involving still and moving images, writing, cartoon-like characters in comic strips, music and so on” (Kress 2004: 184). Collins and Slembrouck (2004) suggest that what passers-by make of signs, how they are read, is a question rarely addressed, but readings will vary by purposes of reading, prior experiences with such signs, and knowledge of languages.

## Framework

Social Semiotics as an approach to multimodal analysis was proposed by Hodge and Kress (1988), developed from Halliday's work on Language as Social Semiotic. Hodge and Kress combined semiotic resources, particularly resources of language as multimodal text, by combining images and modes in the daily communicative affairs of language communities. Halliday (1978), discussed the complex communicativeness of language, and proposed that the semiotic resources of language can be viewed as resources for meaning making in various socially mediated communicative purposes. The multimodal lenses attached to social semiotics decipher meaning in context, where meaning is bounded with modes and signs. According to Kress (2010), multimodality is essentially about understanding how different kinds of modes do different kinds of semiotic work – how each mode holds a distinct potential for meaning. Kress and Mavers (2005: 172) point out that: “The perspective of multimodality shares the assumption that all modes – and not just those of speech and writing – have specific parts to play in the making of meaning.”

A social semiotic approach, therefore, views all modes as potential meaning-making structures on which a platform of representation and communication is made by taking social and cultural systems for that purpose (Kress 2003). Furthermore, meaning is made individually, (re)shaped through culture and social interaction which emphasizes the situated perspectives of communication and meaning in a context. Bezemer and Kress (2008) view that a social semiotic approach to text places multimodality at the centre of attention. Additionally, Van Leeuwen (2005) states that ‘semiotic resources’ include semiotic modes such as language, gesture, images and music along with food, dress and everyday objects, which, according to Van Leeuwen, carry cultural value and significance. In terms of modes, Jewitt (2008) affirms that those are constantly transformed by their users in response to the communicative needs of communities, institutions, and societies - new modes are created, and existing modes are transformed. According to Kress (2010), meaning exists only as it is materialised in one or more modes. Social Semiotics include the concepts of sign, semiotic resource, mode, affordance and orchestration in multimodal analysis and explanation.

Social semiotics assumes that resources are socially shaped to become, over time, meaning making resources which articulate the (social, individual/affective) meanings demanded by the requirements of different communities. These organised sets of semiotic resources for meaning making are referred to as modes (Bezemer and Jewitt 2018). This approach deals with multimodal semiotic resources (Jewitt 2005) which can be useful for reading the multifaceted manipulative-representative texts this paper addresses.

## Ethnographic (Linguistic) Fieldwork and Data Collection

Blommaert (2007) suggests that researchers can look for data rooted in video and audio recordings of interactions, field notes, interview transcripts, policy documents, letters or photographs to investigate how social intricacies unfold in social interactions. I employed ethnographic methods to collect data in Bengali populated streets of Whitechapel and Brick Lane in London, to read shopfront signs. As a native Bengali, my intention was to determine ways in which we make sense of language in socio-cultural contexts, and how multilingual and multimodal ‘texts’ embedded in shop signs could play a role in processing meaning (Kress 2004). I photographed shop signs as data, which were consciously selected and categorised based on my reaction to particular shop signs.

## Data Analysis



Picture - 1

This particular shop sign at Brick Lane creates an illusion of Hindi or Bangla as the English letters are connected with a horizontal line known as *Matraline* or *Matra* (Bangla), a general feature in Indic languages. Similarly, the shop number is stylized with the *Matra*. Here, this stylization creates a typological fusion of English and Bangla languages so as to attract the visitors. The title 'Spice brick lane' exemplifies minimal use of semiotic resources with potential meanings. Words and numbers written in orange against a black background form a metaphor of curry in flambé on a black saucepan. As spices are common cooking ingredients in curry in most south Asian recipes, the title 'Spice' holds most meaning, where the other part of the title 'brick lane' gives a sense that spice and brick lane are inseparable. The success of this 'text' is dependent on its *coherence* of semiotic resources, such as the combination of the orange and black colours, the positioning of and the stylization of the text.

The use of multimodal texts simulate particular imagery and hence attitude in a multilingual context. As such, the calculative use of semiotic resources draws attention to particular shops and their signs.



Image 2: Arabian Nites

This sign presents how languages can be manipulated to create an atmosphere of a unique and exotic treasure house. The word 'Arabian' symbolizes Arabic calligraphy. A white font with black background emulates a moonlit night, thus creating a sense of integrated meaning related to exotic night stories and distinct Arabian commodities. The word 'nights' is spelt as 'Nites' so as to convey a contemporary oral *mode*. The recognition of meaning potentiality of semiotic resources used in this shopfront signs is located in the understanding of cultural identity and social *affordances* of 'Arabian Nights.' This distinctive shop appeals to a particular group of people who shop, while others simply admire the name, and while others may feel alienated.



Image - 3

This minimal shop sign in Figure 3 well conveys its intention, 'Curries & Fried Chicken.' Yet the heading "Chilliz – 2" creates an illusion with the colour red with which we envisage the red-hot chillies. The plural spelling of chillies, ending in 'z,' gives a vibe of spoken English. The image of two chillies, replacing the double 'l' again creates a surreal image of chillies. This form signals an Indian affinity for potent recipes. The word Halal written in Arabic on the right hand side of the shop sign carries meaning in Arabic for multilingual Muslim population.



Image - 4

This restaurant at the entrance of the Brick lane is mysteriously metaphoric. The name 'Clifton,' concurrently written in Bangla, Arabic/ Urdu, English and Hindi languages, grafted out of white solid cement, may represent shop sign writing conventions across Britain. It communicates oldness and *provenance* at the same time. This sign reveals multilingual London and the presence of Bangla, English, Urdu and Hindi speaking people in Brick lane. The sub heading 'the best of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh' suggests a post-colonial juxtaposition of "Britishness" by aligning with the name 'Clifton.'

## Discussion

Throughout the analysis, I attempted to determine how cultural knowledge and awareness of semiotic resources may assist to contextualize shop front signs. Some of the images under data analysis summon an issue of meaning potentiality. Specifically, meaning making in a particular multimodal text depends on its stylization, on the affordances of its readers, and on its modal coherence.

## References

- Bezemer, Jeff, and Gunther Kress. 2008 "Writing in multimodal texts: A social semiotic account of designs for learning." *Written communication* 25, no. 2 : 166-195.
- Bezemer, Jeff, and Carey Jewitt. 2018 "Multimodality: A guide for linguists." *Research methods in linguistics* : 281-304.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2007 "On scope and depth in linguistic ethnography." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11, no. 5 : 682-688.
- Collins, James, and Stef Slembrouck. 2007 "Reading shop windows in globalized neighborhoods: Multilingual literacy practices and indexicality." *Journal of Literacy Research* 39, no. 3 : 335-356.
- Halliday, Michael Alexander Kirkwood. 1978 *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. Hodder Arnold,.
- Hodge, Robert, and Gunther Kress. 1988 *Social Semiotics*. Cambridge: Polity Press,.
- Jewitt, Carey. 2005 "Classrooms and the design of pedagogic discourse: A multimodal approach." *Culture and Psychology* 11, no. 3 : 309-320.
- Jewitt, Carey. 2008 "Multimodality and literacy in school classrooms." *Review of research in education* 32, no. 1 : 241-267.
- Kress, Gunther R. 2003 *Literacy in the new media age*. Psychology Press,.
- Kress, Gunther. 2004 "Reading images: Multimodality, representation and new media." *Information Design Journal* 12, no. 2 : 110-119.
- Kress, Gunther R. 2010 *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Taylor and Francis,.
- Kress, Gunther, and Diane Meyers. 2005 "Social semiotics and multimodal texts." *Research methods in the social science* : 172-193.
- Van Leeuwen, Theo. 2005 *Introducing social semiotics*. Psychology Press,.