# Three diverse projects on multimodality – is it possible to bring CHAT together with the social semiotic approach?

Julia Gillen

Lancaster University

Paper presented at International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR)  Congress, Rome, 5-10 September 2011.

Stemming from a social semiotic base, applied linguists are paying increasing attention to multimodality. While recognising the impact of the social on access to and understanding of resources, the emphasis in this theoretical perspective is on the act of selection by the individual among semiotic resources made available. I propose that the application of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) can usefully contribute to developing our perspectives. Interaction as a dynamic process is at the centre of communication. All communication is inherently unstable, dependent upon intersubjective understandings of chains of communication, including the interpretations of the researcher. To explore some ramifications of an exploratory theoretical re-focussing I draw on empirical data from three projects. Working with very diverse starting points, data sources and aims, I show that putting human interaction at the centre of our approach to communication offers a distinctive contribution to the burgeoning multidisciplinary dialogue on multimodality.

Keywords: multimodality; cultural-historical activity theory; social semiotics;

## Multimodality

Growing attention to multimodality in the discipline of applied linguistics has fruitfully developed understandings of communication in many fields over the past few years, as exemplified for example by such influential overviews as Ventola, Charles & Kaltenbacher (2004), Baldry & Thibault (2006), Jewitt, (2009), Kress (2010). Recognising the significance of multiple modes in human meaning-making is common to many theorists who take on the challenge of grappling with a broad perspective on communication. Social semiotics is one such vantage point (Kress & Van Leeuven 1996, Ventola & Guijarro 2009a); key in such formulations are the notions of resources and semiotic systems. Ventola & Guijarro (2009b: 1) propose, "Discourses in our modern societies always make use of the various resources of semiotic systems" Kress (2010: 9-10) suggests that the most significant principle of human communication is:

… humans *make* signs in which form and meaning stand in a 'motivated' relation. These signs are made with very many different means, in very many different modes. They are the expressions of the *interest* of socially formed individuals who, with these signs, *realize* – give outward expression to –their meanings, using culturally available semiotic resources which have been shaped by the practices of members of social groups and their cultures. [emphasis as original]

While not proposing a disagreement with this, I would note that this formulation does give rise to three emphases I see as limitations in some circumstances. One is that while the 'signs' are viewed as culturally-derived, constructed artefacts (texts, resources and so on) at the moment of their employment they are conceptualised as somehow static in meaning at that point, some fixed thing chosen, a resource offered from within a system. Another emphasis I see as in some sense a limitation, is the stress here upon the individual human (as s/he makes a choice. It seems to me not accidental therefore that when Kress and related social semiotic theorists give examples to illustrate the meaning of modes, those they choose tend to appertain to the individual. The first examplar mode discussed after the passage quoted above is 'gesture' a property of the individual. Jewitt (2010: 1) introduces multimodality as follows:

The starting point for multimodality is to extend the social interpretation of language and its meanings to the whole range of representational and communicational modes or semiotic resources for making meaning that are employed in a culture – such as image, writing, gesture, gaze, speech, posture.

Many things are interesting to me about this list but one is the relative conceptual proximity of gesture, gaze and posture, all of which entered into (applied) linguistics research as 'extra-linguistic' features of the individual's communication, viewed as adding to our understanding of the individual speech act. (See the succinct discussion of pioneering work in this area provided by Scollon & Scollon, 2009: 172-173). I am not decrying interest in these spheres of human activity, of course, just suggesting they are all curiously similar in that they describe fine motor movements by a human being engaged in face to face communication. This is a common stress in discussions of multimodality; Matthiesen (2009: 11) for example suggests that "a prototypical example of multsemiotic systems would be people interacting in face-to-face conversation engaging different parts of the body (vocalization, facial expression, gesture, posture) to exchange meanings."

Finally, a further potential limitation lies in not maintaining as central acts of selection and interpretation by the researcher: "All comprehension is creation" (Stevenson, 1879/2008).

Leontiev (1978) places his emphases somewhat differently in his accounts of human behaviour; his aims, interests and indeed sociohistorical setting were of course different from Kress's in 2010 and in the following he seems to somewhat downplay the role of at least linguistic meaning-making:

The acts of signifying are in essence nothing but acts of isolating the theoretical side of objects… (Leontiev 1978: 18)

For Leontiev, meaning-making is centrally located in activity:

…cognition does not exist outside the life process that in its very nature is a material, practical process. The reflection of reality arises and develops in the process of the development of real ties of cognitive people with the human world surrounding them; it is defined by these ties and, in its turn, has an effect on their development. (Leontiev, 1978: 13)

Leontiev proposes that no isolated activity can be understood without an appreciation of the social ties and engagement with the environment at that moment. I am not suggesting that Kress, for example, would necessarily disagree with this but proposing that there is in the theoretical umbrella perspective we term CHAT a foregrounding of the social at the moment of (multimodal) communication as opposed to an emphasis on the social process as having constituted the resources in the past. I will now endeavour to trace some possible ways multimodality can be approached through discussing examples from my research in three different projects.

## A Day in the Life: an ecocultural investigation of childhood

In the 'Day in the Life's study we videoed the interactions of seven two-and-a-half year old girls with their environments, including caregivers and other people over the course of a day. The girls were each living in a different country and the research was undertaken by an international team. The videoing was at the core of our methodology, which incorporated prior interviews, later discussion of some extracts from the 'day' with the families, and much discussion of interpretations within the research team. The aim was not to compare the children in any sense, view them as somehow 'representative' of their locations or otherwise to instantiate any sense of psychological 'variables. It was rather to study culture as a dynamic process (Shweder 1984, Cole 1996). The anthropologist Eugene Hammel (1990: 457) proposed:

Culture is an evaluative conversation constructed by actors out of the raw materials afforded by tradition and ongoing experience. It is continually modified by them in processes of social interaction, and their behaviour is guided by anticipation of such cultural evaluation.

Informed by data collection and insights from other team members, Roger Hancock and I studied 'eating events', for example engaged in by Juanita in a small village in central Peru. We deployed the term 'eating event' to indicate our practice-based orientation, by analogy with Heath's (1983: 386) literacy event: 'any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or consumption of print plays a role', using 'eating' in place of print (Gillen and Hancock, 2010: 101). Eating has been remarkably neglected in cultural studies of childhood with few exceptions.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| \\lancs\homes\57\gillen\My Documents\DITL\handover\Day in the Life figures and tables\Chapter 5 - ebook\Chapter 5 (Figure 1 - colour).jpg | Figure 1  *An eating event in Peru. From left to right: Aunt Lina with bowl and spoon, Cousin Ana bringing Juanita's requested hat, and two-and-a-half year old Juanita.* |

Juanita engaged in eating events in a number of locations within the compound that was her extended family home and place of economic activity, especially a shop that fronted onto the street. In the still taken from our video illustrated she is shown being fed by her aunt Lina, while accompanied also by a cousin, Ana. This eating event lasted about nine minutes, shortly after midday. Lina feeds her spaghetti and papa huancaina (potatoes with sweet cheese sauce). Juanita eats a considerable amount, occasionally pausing and pointing at her still full mouth to actively take part in the regulation of her aunt’s next spoonful. However there is not a rushed feel to the event, for Juanita’s diversions are tolerated and even expanded upon. For example she calls for a nearby hat she glimpses –Ana fetches it for her to put on her head and aunt Lina repeats the word several times, seemingly gently correcting her pronunciation. Indeed there is a feeling of ‘scaffolding’ (Bruner 1975) to the language interactions, as Lina expands upon Juanita’s utterances and links them to her central agenda, feeding Juanita. Lina adjusts her body attentively in alignment to Juanita's sitting position, while Juanita makes considerable use of gesture in her communications, multimodal, not always necessarily with verbal elements, as characteristic of early childhood (Anning & Edwards 1999). The distal researchers were assisted to comprehend this event through reflections offered by the local researcher who emphasised the importance of nutrition in this sometimes cold, mountainous area to which some degree of prosperity had come only recently. It is possible that infant mortality continues to impact upon this family’s approach to feeding. As the researchers' video camera is trained upon them, Lina and Ana perform their cultural values in ensuring Juanita is well nourished while keeping her amused and responding to her initiations. So, as Juanita notices a bird, Lina incorporates interest in her observation with pursuit of her nurturing purposes: ‘What? birdie? Let’s see eat for the little bird - for Tweetie, tweetie. Ok, chew more, chew, chew. Eat, Juanita’. When Juanita feels she has eaten enough, a face-saving solution is negotiated for the remainder of the food that satisfies both parties: Juanita takes the remainder to her grandfather who is apparently going to continue feeding her: he wields the spoon energetically but never actually feeds Juanita. The process of gaining nutrition is clearly central to this interaction, as particularly promoted by the aunt. At the same time, Juanita effectively identifies and orchestrates additional interests while cooperating with her aunt's agenda.

## Studying archaeology with teenagers in a virtual world in the Schome project

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| archaeology-session_001smallv.jpg | Figure 2  *A meeting about archaeology during the Schome Park Programme, using the Teen Second Life virtual world.* |

This is a 'snapshot' from a meeting about archaeology during the Schome Park project, which used the virtual world, Teen Second Life (TSL). This was the first European 'closed' TSL island ie restricted to teenagers and adults affiliated to the Schome project ([www.schome.ac.uk](http://www.schome.ac.uk)) which operated from March 2007 to October 2008. (See Gillen et al. 2009, Twining 2009 and Twining & Footring 2010 for overviews of the project.) I am still engaged in analysing my enormous dataset. This image, captured by me in February 2008 is not a screenshot, but rather a 'snapshot' produced by Second Life software, a reduced image of the avatars, removing all menus, tags and other linguistic material from the actual view of the screen as it was experienced. I was projected or represented 'inworld' through my avatar, Rowan, that appears with wings attached in the foreground of the image. I communicated with the other three avatars present, actually for the short period under discussion here with two who were active in the meeting at one point; the one wearing the top hat although present was not participating in these moments. We communicated through 'chat' i.e. interactive written discourse (IWD) that appeared on the top left of our screens but which, along with a considerable amount of other text, does not appear on the image above.

With the permission of the others, I kept an automatic log of the discussion. A tiny amount of it appears below. For the purposes of this paper I have added a number to each turn. To the right of each turn is recorded a timestamp, then before the colon is the name of the 'speaker' – automatically rendering Rowan, myself, as 'you' since this is my log. What appears to the right of the colon is what each person actually writes in a turn, i.e. before they choose to press the enter bar at which point with almost no delay the turn, appears on each participant's screen, to hang there for some seconds with any adjacent turn/s before scrolling upwards and becoming invisible.

1. [11:42] marsbar9 Schomer: I guess some remains could be "suspicious"]
2. [11:42] Vibia Schomer: Ah- yes I missed out the police! :)
3. [11:42] You: yes if a body is found in a peat bog it is impossible for the layperson at first glance to tell if it is very recent or very old
4. [11:42] You: I forget the name is it 'Utzi' the one in the Alps
5. [11:43] You: he is the oldest well preserved peat bog body but so well preserved that the police still were the first port of call
6. [11:43] Vibia Schomer: it is really hard for non specilaists to date bodies- did you see Time Team the other week on the island in scotland??
7. [11:43] You: yes Vibia excellent
8. [11:43] marsbar9 Schomer: I think I missed that one...
9. [11:43] Vibia Schomer: Oetzi was found in ountains i thought
10. [11:43] marsbar9 Schomer: I keep seeing bits of them
11. [11:43] You: Yes yes but in a peat bog in the mlountains
12. [11:44] marsbar9 Schomer: Did they date Utzi?
13. [11:44] Vibia Schomer: IN Time Team they found an amazingly well preserved body on there- if you saw it you would think it was more medieval or newer rather then preiron age
14. [11:44] Vibia Schomer: Otzi- hang on ill just check in my book

This is a very short extract from a discussion on issues related to dealing with human remains in archaeology, including preservation, burial practices, dating and ethics.

What is very apparent to me on reading this log is that no reference is made during this discussion to the setting or medium through which we are communicating. This is because by the time of this discussion we had all been participating in the project, including communicating in Second Life, for many months. The transcript shows that we are all accustomed to the way in which the software always layers turns according to the sequence in which 'enter' is pressed. Although our communications are extremely rapid, more fast-paced than writing usually is and conversational, thus in some ways similar to speech, unlike speech no overlap is possible. At turns 3, 4 and 5 I have pressed 'enter' without waiting for any response; Vibia's turn 6 is lengthy so it must have been initiated before at least one, probably all of turns 3, 4 and 5 were initiated. Making use of my insights as a participant in this project, including this event, I am sure that marsbar9's use of the pronoun 'them' in turn 10 would have been understood by the others as referring to episodes of Time Team (a television programme about archaeology) rather than, for example, bits of mountains or even bodies. In this environment, moment by moment interpretation of others' utterances, and the shapings of ones' own, legitimately takes in a broader sweep of discourse than speech that ordinarily is oriented very precisely in timing (including in terms of intentional overlap) with the immediately preceeding utterance, as Conversation Analysis (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974, Tannen 1989) has constantly revealed.

As Shweder (1984: 2) argues: 'no sociocultural environment exists or has identity independent of the way human beings seize meanings and resources from it, while every human being has her or his subjectivity and mental life altered through the process of seizing meanings and resources from some sociocultural environment and using them.'

The discursive practices of this particular sociocultural environment, encompassing of course the particular society involved and shared and separate histories, as for example illustrated above, support Shweder's point. During the meeting, indeed the whole project, I did not know the 'real-life' identities of the people with whom I was having the meeting, through the avatars as pictured, which were the representations I could see. Yet in our interactions persistent and developing sense of identities were created through the elements of the multimodal dialogues we engaged in. As Haraway (1997: 218) proposes, discourses are 'not just words: they are material-semiotic practices.' It was through engaging in purposeful activities with others, through avatars, by means of the affordances of the virtual world environment that an authentic informal learning experience could be co-constructed.

## The Edwardian postcard project

At first sight the Edwardian postcard might seem completely non-amenable to either of the interpretive approaches taken to study either two-and-a-half-year old girls through the finegrained investigation of video data from one day in their lives together with methods and tools aiming to improve the depth of our interpretations or to the study of texts produced during interactions mediated by a virtual world on the topic of archaeology. Edwardian picture postcards are multimodal texts, acquired by my colleague in the project Nigel Hall or myself. Seemingly, they would seem to offer only the possibilities of a textual approach, divorced from the original interaction in which they played a role. In this respect they are fascinating texts and offer the potential for consideration as interesting exemplars of a then new multimodality, widely accessible at the beginning of the twentieth century as a new communications technology (Gillen & Hall 2010b).

However, taking an approach founded in the (New) Literacy Studies/anthropology of writing understanding of writing , we seek to understand the ways in which writing, as an activity, relates to the event in which it originally took place, derives and takes meaning from the social practices in which it is embedded and how it relates to broader issues of power and social change (Barton & Papen 2010). We are also interested in the cards 'in place' (Scollon & Scollon 2003) ie how they related to their geographical context. Subsequently, although we are also interested in their changing contexts, ie how and why this particular card was part of patterned systems of circulation that have changed up until the present day and its arrival into our hands, this issue is beyond the scope of this paper but is discussed in Gillen & Hall (2010a). Enabled by the broad panoply of methods available to literacy studies and mobile methods (Leander & Sheehy 2004, Büscher & Urry 2009, Barton & Papen 2010), we have found that it has been possible to broaden our understandings of the cards as a communications practice in three respects, that I will introduce at least briefly with reference to Figure 3.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Nessie001.jpg | Figure 3  *Card sent in 1902 to Miss Carmichael in Lockerbie, Scotland.* |

Our approach to analysing the Edwardian postcard has developed over a considerable period of time – although I acknowledge a certain element of serendipity that lay below the surface as shall become apparent. Very briefly, here are three ways in which my understanding of the card one side of which is reproduced in Figure 3, has developed.

Study of secondary sources has revealed to us the degree to which the Edwardian postcard might be termed a communications revolution (Gillen & Hall 2010a). Following the enthusiasm with which the introduction of the picture postcard into the UK in 1894, when a a very short message should be written in the margin of a picture and sent at little expense, in 1902 the Post Office made an astonishingly popular further innovation. With paper and new printing techniques allowing the production of cards at little cost, and plentiful manpower employed by the Post Office, they permitted that the whole of one side could be taken up by an image and half of the other with a message. With an increasing choice of images as printers spotted the opportunities, there was an immediate explosion in communication, as the newly virtually universally literate population grasped the opportunity for informal written messages, ungoverned by the relatively strict conventions (conveyed through schooling and manuals) of letter writing. We have used the Postmaster General's reports to calculate that 6 billion cards were sent in the era (ie 1902-1910), averaging more than 200 per person. If one discounts the very old, very young and substantial number in dire poverty, one can begin to appreciate the extraordinary scale of the postcard craze that was recognised at the time: "In ten years Europe will be buried beneath picture postcards“ (Glasgow Evening News, October 1903 ). Paying only a halfpenny for a stamp, as against one penny for a letter, and with plentiful deliveries especially in urban areas, people found themselves easily able to send attractive objects that could reach their addressee within the day. This opportunity for the rapid exchange of effectively near-synchronous, multimodal communications was arrested by the First World War and was not available again the UK until the contemporary digital revolution. And even now, most SMS or 'text messages' do not involve images and the same could probably be said of at least most early emails. In addition, it was seemingly the brevity, the constraints of the postcard that led to the design of more and more sub-genres by publishers, as well as by senders themselves (in the form of their own or commissioned photographs, drawings or annotations of bought images) and the combination of these with their written messages sometimes to very creative effect.

The card shown in Figure 3, posted in Lockerbie and received a few hours later, thereby illustrates the quick-fire multimodal communications technology enabled for the Edwardians and taken up by them with such gusto in what we would call today social networking. We have many such examples which show how arrangements between people could be rapidly made and remade, as circumstances or intentions changed during the day. Postcard sending and indeed collecting rapidly became a key part of Edwardian culture, illustrating Hutchins' (1995: 354) claim that "Culture is an adaptive process that accumulates the partial solutions to frequently encountered problems."

As an outcome of our research methods, a greater understanding of the illustrated postcard has further emerged. This card was purchased as illustrating both the (mostly) pre-Edwardian style of postcard, i.e. whereby messages were written in margins rather than taking up half of a whole side, and, through its message as evidence of the speed of the postal service. It was not included in our main collection which consists of 2,500 cards of the main Edwardian type, the criteria for the collecting of which includes more than a few words of writing on the message side. Categorisation of a small proportion of these cards utilising a spreadsheet, easily allows the resorting according to the information in specific columns. Thus the growing database can periodically be organised by surname of sender, resulting in the connecting of cards in the collection, as we finding we have several sent to a particular person. (This can be accounted for through the mobilities or circulation patterns through which the cards pass from dealers to buyers today (discussed in Gillen & Hall 2010a). Several cards were sent to a Miss Carmichael in Buxton. In our quest to find out more about the Edwardians' uses of postcards, including how prevalent in the stratas of society was their use and how vernacular writing practices and writing skills could be compared, we have begun to investigate some of our addressees at least through the census. The Miss Carmichael of Buxton is a case study, for by cross-referencing the cards we realised this and the Miss Carmichael who received the card in Lockerbie was the same person. Through pursuing information sources including the 1901 and 1911 censuses, other public records and with some assistance from the Buxton museum we have been able to establish the following account (Gillen and Hall, 2011).

Janet Carmichael was born in 1887 in Salford, the daughter of William Carmichael, a surgeon and his wife Rose. While Janet was a small child her father died, her mother returned to live with her mother and a servant, but by 1901 the pair of mother and daughter were living in Buxton. The mother declared in the census that she was a widow of independent means but was simultaneously, like her neighbour, making some kind of living out of renting out a spare room or rooms. Making contact with some of these tenants was one way that Janet made new friends with whom she later corresponded by postcard; another valuable one was her occasional stays in Scotland. I cannot yet prove but have many reasons to suspect that these stays were linked with either relations or friends of her father's family. Like all Edwardians, while away on holiday she did not only send cards but also received them. 'Nessie' – probably a joking nickname wrote to her from within the town of Lockerbie one day. In Buxton, Janet was valued as a young Sunday school teacher, correspondence with her charges was also precious to her and retained in an album, later to be broken up before we acquired some of its contents. Janet died, aged 23 in 1911. She had kept the Lockerbie card all her life and it is most probable that somebody retained the album as a whole for a considerable length of time later, possibly through their connection with her.

As already explained then, the card is an excellent exemplar of the multimodal vernacular literacy practices of the Edwardians: they would choose an image from a large selection available, (possibly annotating , amending, commissioning or even creating ab initio themselves) combine it with a cheap message and send it to somebody who they might know would receive it even a few hours later, even if away from their main residence; this practice necessarily ceased in the UK until the digital revolution many decades later. Our understanding of the card is enhanced through understanding the communications technology 'revolution' it is an example of, and can be even greater improved through further investigation, in this case investigating other resources to enable the construction of a mini biography of the person who first received it.

## Conclusion

It has not been my intention in this paper to suggest that the social semiotic perspective on multimodality is in any sense 'wrong', nor to offer a CHAT perspective as necessarily dichotomously different to all views of the social semiotic. There are incommensurable differences between the highly structured social semiotic view of multimodality, with its typology of multisemiotic systems: the 'physical' as first-order; the biological second-order and so on up to language as fourth-order system which can 'carry or even create meaning' (Matthiesen, 2009: 11-13). However, as I shall show, there are strong signs of confluence with what I perceive as more fluid, socially-based emerging strands of social semiotic work to which I would hope to contribute with my studies. A shift of emphasis may be useful at least to certain kinds of investigations into multimodality, away from systems and towards the insights of cultural psychology. Drawing on work by Shweder and Bruner, Cole (1996: 103) writes:

… [our] vision of cultural psychology also emphasizes the premise that human experience and action are shaped by our intentional states. It locates the emergence and functioning of psychological processes within the social-symbolically mediated everyday encounters of people in the lived events of their everyday lives.

While recognising a perhaps inevitable common foundation to these projects, owing to the cultural-historical background and theoretical assumptions I bring to them, that ensures a certain degree of what might be termed either coherence or circularity in my arguments, I would seek to suggest that these three briefly discussed instances provide some illustration of the usefulness of applying such a cultural psychology perspective to multimodality. I have utilised the notion of discourse as material-semiotic practice, emphasising the formation of texts in the course of activities, that happen in specific spatio-temporal circumstances, produced and interpreted in the dynamic processes we can call culture.

Lina, Ana and Juanita all worked together at the necessary business of ensuring adequate nutrition for a young child, while also collaborating at pursuing Juanita's more playful agenda. Multimodality in that research context demanded attention to embodiment, movement, and a dialogue that embraced and entwined very different agendas. In the virtual world, the people who knew each other through avatars with appearances and names divorced from their actual world identities have learnt to almost take for granted the particular constraints and affordances of their very particular communication channel as they get on with referring to background knowledge gained from all kinds of media as they discuss archaeology and human remains. My approach to what I term 'virtual literacy ethnography' (Gillen 2009) is geared to investigate meaning-making as enabled by the perceived affordances of the different communicative domains of the project, taking into account then both the semiotic potentialities and the creativity employed by the participants in their uses. All projects depend upon the assumption that interpretation of texts is never a finalisable process yet certainly to be enhanced through investigation of the larger activity, the intentional practices, in which it is a part. The text of the postcard from 'Nessie' with its assumption that it will arrive on the day that it is sent, becomes comprehensible and indeed familiar to those who have participated in the 'digital revolution' when one learns of the postal service and communications revolution of the Edwardians. Categorising the cards and organising a dataset so that one can find linked texts offers up new opportunities for extending understandings of the communicative practices of specific individuals as well as the cultural practices of the time. In this case, multimodality entails an interest in the images and the texts, as they are put together (work barely begun in this project) but also an understanding of the accessibility and availability of potential resources to the users of the cards then, and to those seeking to research their use as a cultural practice today.

At the same time, I would suggest that focussing upon multimodality can raise some questions for CHAT theory, specifically relating to the analytical separability of 'tools'. Keating (2005: 530) raises a question as to whether, in considering a virtual world, it is possible to divorce the notion of 'tool' from that of the 'environment' in the context of a virtual world, to my mind a vivid reworking of the famous issues regarding the limits of the body, and perception raised by Bateson (1972). If one places the subject's perception as centrally significant, it becomes very hard to accept tool as analytically separate, either from environment or the CHAT concept of object. Latour's (2005: 143) observation "tools are never 'mere' tools ready to be applied: they always modify the goals you had in mind" is in different ways borne out through all three studies as illustrated above. They align more successfully with the notion of discourses, as material-semiotic practices. Jocuns (2009) draws our attention to the significance of participation structures as semiotic resource, in his study of interactions around the traditional pedagogy of Balinese Gamelan music, to bring together the insights of activity theory, mediated discourse analysis and distributed cognition.

It seems to me that in his most recent writings Kress himself is articulating a view of multimodality that I read as consonant with the above:

In communication, members of a community participate in the renewing, the remaking and the transformation of their social environment from the perspective of *meaning*. In the process 'the social' – as entities and forms, as processes and practices – is constantly articulated in (material) semiotic form: the social is re-*calibrated*, re-*registered* with semiotic/cultural resources. (Kress 2010: 34, emphasis as original)

In supporting a focus on interaction as a starting point, holding all processes of meaning-making and interpretation as dynamic, there would seem to be possibilities for the further enrichment of the study of multimodalities.

References

Baldry, Paul & Thibault, Anthony (2006). *Multimodal transcription and text analysis*. London: Equinox.

Bateson, Gregory (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Bruner, Jerome (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Büscher, Monika & Urry, John (2009). Mobile methods and the empirical. *European Journal of Scoial Theory* 12 (1) 99-116.

Cole, Michael (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Gillen, Julia (forthcoming). Archaeology in a virtual world: Schome Park. In Rodney Jones (ed.) *Discourse and creativity*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Gillen, Julia & Hall, Nigel (2011) "Hope to see you this evening – Love, Nessie"

The Edwardian Picture Postcard as a revolutionary communications phenomenon.

Paper presented at *Picture this: postcards and letters beyond text*. University of Sussex, March 24-26, 2011.

Gillen, Julia & Cameron, Catherine Ann (eds.), (2010). *An international perspective on early childhood research: A Day in the Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gillen, Julia & Hall, Nigel (2010a). Any mermaids? Tracing early postcard mobilities. In John Urry, Monika Buscher & Katian Witchger (eds.), *Mobile Methods*. London: Routledge.

Gillen, Julia & Hall, Nigel (2010b). Edwardian postcards and ordinary writing. In  David Barton & Uta Papen (eds.), *The Anthropology of writing*.  Continuum.

Haraway, Donna (1997) *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.Femaleman©\_Meets\_Oncomouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*. New York: Routledge.

Jewitt, Carey (ed.) (2009). *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis*. London: Routledge.

Jocuns, Andrew (2009). Participation structures as a meditational means: Learning Balinese Gamelan in the United States through intent participation, mediated discourse, and distributed cognition. *Mind, Culture & Activity* 16 48-63.

Keating, Elizabeth (2005). Homo prostheticus: Problematizingthe notions of activity and compute-mediated interaction*. Discourse Studies 7(4–5): 527–545.*

Kress, Gunther (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. London: Routledge.

Kress, Gunther & Van Leeuwen, Theo (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge.

Latour, Bruno (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford University Press.

Leander Kevin & Sheehy, Margaret (eds.), (2004). *Spatializing literacy research and practice*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Matthiessen, Christian (2009). Multisemiosis and context-based register typology: Registerial variation in the complementarity of semiotic systems. In Eija Ventola and Arsenio Guijarro (eds) *The world told and the world shown: multisemiotic issues*. (pp 11-38) London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Scollon, Ronald & Scollon, Suzanne (2009). Multimodality and Language: a retrospective and prospective view. In Carey Jewitt (ed.) *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis*. pp. 170-180). London: Routledge.

Shweder, Richard(1984). Preview: a colloquoy of culture theorists. In Richard Shweder & Robert LeVine (eds.), *Culture theory: essays on mind, self, and emotion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Stevenson, Robert Louis ([1879 ]2008). *The story of a lie*. edited by D.J. Taylor. Hesperus Press.

Tannen, Deborah (1989). *Talking voices: Repetition, dialogue, and imagery in conversational discourse.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ventola, Eija, Charles, Cassily & Kaltenbacher, Martin (eds). (2004). *Perspectives on multimodality*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Ventola, Eija. & Guijarro, Arsenio (2009a). *The world told and the world shown: Multisemiotic issues*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ventola, Eija & Guijarro, Arsenio (2009b). Introduction. The world told and the world shown: multisemiotic issues. In Eija Ventola and Arsenio Guijarro (eds.), *The world told and the world shown: Multisemiotic issues*. (pp 1-8) London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dr Julia Gillen

Literacy Research Centre

Department of Linguistics and English Language

Lancaster University, LA1 4YT

UK

Email: j.gillen@lancaster.ac.uk