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An Analysis of Multimodal Interaction in a Webinar: Defining the Genre

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Abstract

From a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) perspective (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2003; O'Halloran, 2004; Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Jewitt, 2009; Querol-Julián and Fortanet-Gómez, 2012) each semiotic resource (i.e., speech, image, writing, movement, gaze, sound, layout, among others) contributes to the meaning-making process. Linguistic and non-linguistic information is integrated in multimodal texts, and especially so in digital genres (Shepherd & Watters 1999; Crowston & Kwasnik 2004; Askehave & Nielsen 2005; Villanueva et al. 2008), where complex relationships are conveyed by the use of multiple resources.

One of these new digital genres is the webinar or web seminar. Webinars help to disseminate knowledge, facilitate collaboration and communication, and enhance performance among students and instructors, employers and employees and specialist in dispersed locations (Wolf, 2006; Forrester, 2009; Bandy, 2010; Kokoc, Ozlu, Cimer & Karal, 2011). Its main characteristic is that it is online and it often consists of a number of lectures streamlined and/or recorded to be watched off-line, and there are several participants located in several places, who can contribute online or offline through different communication modes (written or spoken with or without video). In this sense, it is clear that webinars include a wide array of multimodal resources, both verbal and non-verbal. But how do they work together? To what extent are they integrated? Are users responsive to these multimodal resources and to what extent?

In order to answer these and other questions, we analyse in this paper a dataset of several sessions of a research webinar organized by the Group for Research on Academic and Professional English in 2015 on the topic of Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Our interest is to study all the multimodal components in the discussion sessions in this seminar and the different strategies used by participants for online and face-to-face interaction.

1 Introduction

The internationalization and globalization of the academic world and the emergence of new and more flexible communication and pedagogical tools based on the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), is forcing researchers and teachers to cope with new academic contexts and genres that entail new challenges for the profession (e.g. new digital genres, communicative needs, academic skills and pedagogical materials). Both the new academic contexts and genres, as well as the new pedagogical challenges derived from them, are transforming the academic reality and are affecting the way English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is actually analysed, taught and learnt (Campoy-Cubillo and Querol-Julián, 2015; Fortanet-Gómez, 2008; Jewitt, 2013; Morell, 2007; Querol-Julián and Ruiz-Madrid, 2010). Multimodality and multisemiotics (Jewitt, 2014; Kress, 2003, 2010; The New London Group, 2000; Villanueva et al. 2008) play a fundamental role in the nature of new digital academic genres (Askehave and Nielsen 2005; Crowston and Kwasnik 2004). EAP teaching needs to draw from the analyses of digital genres in order to define the new digital competences from a MDA (Multimodal Discourse Approach) perspective. When teaching, for instance, new academic spoken genres (i.e., vodcast, webinars, moocs, etc.), we should ask students to interpret not only verbal information, but also to be able to identify, analyze and interpret all nonverbal modes of information (i.e., links, gestures, intonation, visuals, images, music, etc).

In order to teach the emerging genres, they need to be previously analysed and described. Every text is the product of the integration of several semiotic modes, and understanding how a specific text works is only possible when these resources are unpacked and interpreted. Each semiotic resource (i.e., speech, image, writing, movement, gaze, sound, layout, among others) contributes to the meaning-making process (Baldry and Thibault, 2006; Kress, 2003; Kress and Van Leuween, 2001; Jewitt, 2009; O'Halloran, 2004; Querol-Julián and Fortanet-Gómez, 2012). Linguistic and non-linguistic information is integrated in multimodal texts, and especially so in digital genres (Askehave and Nielsen 2005; Crowston and Kwasnik 2004; Villanueva et al. 2008), where complex relationships are conveyed by the use of multiple resources. As Warschauer and Grimes state, the society has gone “from the linking of the information to the linking of people” (2007: 2). The webinar or web seminar is a new digital genre. Though it started to be used in the early years of the 21st century, it is still difficult to find an established scientific definition of webinar. Korb registered the term “webinar” in 1998 as a trademark (Serial number 75478683, US Patent and Trademark Office) (Safko, 2012). The terms ‘Webinar’, ‘Web seminar’, ‘Virtual meeting’ and ‘Webconference’ are considered synonyms to refer to a seminar in a virtual format. Wang and Hsu (2008: 175) describe it as “a nearly face-to-face environment that increases participants’ social presence and facilitates multi-level interaction”. In general, the functions of a webinar are considered to be educational, informative or instructional, since webinars help to disseminate knowledge, facilitate collaboration and communication, and enhance performance among students and instructors, employers and employees and specialists in dispersed locations (Bandy, 2010; Forrester, 2009; Kokoc, Ozlu, Cimer and Karal, 2011; Wolf, 2006). The main characteristic of a webinar is that it is online and it often consists of a number of lectures streamlined and/or recorded to be watched off-line, and there are several participants located in different places, who can contribute online or offline through several communication modes (written or spoken with or without video). The analysis of webinars in virtual format is also interesting due to the new forms of social interaction and collaboration supported by today’s technology. The main developments of webinars have been in the fields of medicine and education. Webinars are a relatively new genre and as many other internet genres, it has not been systematized. As Hine (2012: 257) argues “much of what the Internet comes to be is shaped from the bottom up, by its users, as much as it is dictated from the top down by its inventors, its vendors and its regulators”. In this sense, it is clear that webinars include a wide array of multimodal resources, both verbal and non-verbal.

A MDA approach to the discourse of webinars might shed light on how users interact in such environments, how they deploy verbal and non-verbal resources to produce meaning, and more specifically, which linguistic strategies are called upon. In order to answer these and other questions, we analyse in this paper a research webinar organized by the Group for Research on Academic and Professional English (G.R.A.P.E., Universitat Jaume I) in 2015 on the topic of Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Our interest is to study the multimodal components of the webinar and the different modes and strategies used by the participants for online and face-to-face interaction.

1.1 The Research Webinar

A research webinar is defined as an online seminar, in which a number of lectures are streamlined and/or recorded to be watched off-line, and there are several participants located in several places, who can contribute online or offline through different communication modes (written or spoken with or without video). Its main functions are considered to be educational, informative or instructional, since webinars help to disseminate knowledge, facilitate collaboration and communication, and enhance performance among students and instructors, employers and employees and specialist in dispersed locations (Wolf, 2006; Forrester, 2009; Bandy, 2010; Kokoc, Ozlu, Cimer and Karal, 2011).

Webinars differ, thus, from seminars in three main aspects, i) they are multimodal, because they are made up of different semiotic resources; ii) they are non-linear, because they combine spatial and temporal patterns, and iii) they diverge from what used to be taken for granted regarding language and its conventional use. The analysis of the discourse involved in webinars requires a different approach. Along this line, there are several studies that have already focused on discourse 2.0 (Jewitt, 2009; Sindoni, 2013), whereas O'Halloran (2004) and Scollon and Levine (2004) introduce multimodal discourse analysis of interactive digital media.

In the case of webinars, the high degree of multimodal resources employed (visual support, video and written contributions) and the lack of restrictions in terms of time and space makes the potential of the communicative event more effective than in traditional seminars. In this sense, the speaker is not only addressing to an audience that is physically in the same room in the very same moment he/she is speaking. In a webinar, the speaker might be accompanied by a chair, the audience might be present in the same room or online and they might be watching the conference in that very moment in the room, in streaming or offline in a different time and location.

Also the Q&A moment should be analysed differently, since interaction among participants, that is, speaker-chair-audience- can also take place in different ways. The chair should address to the audience in the room, to the audience online and to the potential audience off-line and mediate among them. The audience might pose questions both orally (if they are present in the room) and in written form (if they are online or offline). The speaker should answer orally to oral or written questions from participants who are not present in the room and therefore no face-to-face interaction with them. Within this context, the function of the chair as a mediator plays a fundamental role, since mediation in this particular context is a means to engage participants who otherwise may not be able to participate in the interaction, and thus serves as a useful co-operation strategy to overcome temporal and spatial limitations inherent to webinars.

According to Hynninen (2011), mediation has three main functions: i) it facilitates understanding among participants. By providing alternative ways of expressing the same thing, intermediaries help participants to take part in the discussion; ii) it organises discourse, and it is a way for the chair (in the case of webinars) to manage interaction and control the timing, and iii) it also has a socialising function in that it can include evaluation of participants' contributions. Exploring the mediator role in the case of webinars seems to be a must in our digitalised world, in which webinars are increasing their presence in the academic field. Yet, the multiplicity of semiotic resources and the multiplicity of communicative situations require a more complex analysis on how the chair plays the mediator role in such a context. How does the chair organise the interaction in the Q&A in the discussion sessions (DSs) of the webinar?

What strategies (repair strategies, different intonation when speaking for another) does he/she use in the mediation process? Does the chair resort to different semiotic resources when using these strategies to reinforce her/his mediation role in such a multimodal context?

In the following sections, we will try to answer the following research questions:

- a) Which semiotic modes and multimodal resources (verbal and non-verbal) can be found in a webinar?
- b) How do they work together?
- c) To what extent are they integrated?
- d) Are users responsive to these multimodal resources and to what extent?

2 Method

In order to fulfill the objective of the research, we analysed a research webinar organized by the Group for Research on Academic and Professional English (GRAPE) from May to October, 2015 on the topic of Multimodal Discourse Analysis. It consisted of

1. an online forum,
2. four sessions, each formed by an online lecture and a discussion session, and
3. a conclusion of the webinar.

The audience consisted of 20 invited researchers in the field from universities all over the world, which had been selected by the organizers and invited to participate. Six of these participants were present in the venue of the webinar, except for one lecture, which was streamlined from another university. Participants were provided with a password to enter, and all the webinar information. The objective was, as indicated by López and Gallifa (2008: 475), to build “a process of collective construction of knowledge from the interaction of group members”.

In our analysis we will present the several parts of the webinar under analysis and will try to answer the research questions for each of them.

3 Analysis of the Webinar

3.1 The Forum

This part was in writing. It consisted of an Introduction by the Chair welcoming the participants and three thematic forums:

FORUM A: Multimodal research and digital media

FORUM B: Approaches to multimodal research

FORUM C: Applications of multimodal research to foreign language teaching

Participants were recommended to read two articles and then start the discussion on the basis of two questions. There was a chair for each forum which dynamised the participation. This participation was limited in time. Here is the example of the presentation of Forum A:

Dear colleagues,

We are Edgar Bernad and Noelia Ruiz, as moderators of Forum A, we are pleased to welcome you to the [International Seminar on Multimodal Discourse Analysis](#) .

As Forum A moderators we are pleased to welcome you to **Forum A. Multimodal Research and Digital Media**.

Discussion in this forum is prompted by two publications:

A1) Jewitt, C. (2013) [Multimodal methods for researching digital technologies](#). In Price, S., Jewitt, C. & Brown, B (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Digital Technology Research*. London: Sage. (pre-print version)

A2) Bezemer, J. & G. Kress (2014) [Young people, Facebook and Pedagogy: Recognizing contemporary forms of multimodal text making](#). In M. Kontopodis, C. Varvantakis, M. Dafermos & C. Wulf (eds.) *Youth, Tube, Media: Qualitative insights and international perspectives*. Berlin: Waxmann. (Pre-print version)

Our first questions to open the discussion are the following:

1. Which can be the research questions in multimodal research in digital media?
- 2 Can multimodal text making analysis be systematized? Should it be?

Note that the forum will be opened from this very moment until Wednesday May 27th at midnight (Spain Time – UCT +2).

We look forward to reading your posts!

Edgar Bernad and Noelia Ruiz, Universitat Jaume I (GRAPE)

Figure 1: Presentation of Forum A

As can be observed, the moderators use a number of semiotic modes in their text: written words, including special characteristics such as italics or bold fonts and hyperlinks to online texts that allow non-linear reading (Villanueva et al., 2008). During the time allotted, participants had to write their contributions in the online forums, in an asynchronous interaction through the written mode:

The first two questions in this forum are related to whether SL/FL teaching practices should follow a multimodal approach. If multimodal input is included then we are assuming that the different modes (gestures, intonation, face expression, etc.) are an important part of communication skills, and should therefore be taught . So the important question here is “**how do you teach these modes?**”

Do you integrate non-verbal comments in your syllabus? How do you so? If you haven't , which aspects would you like to include?

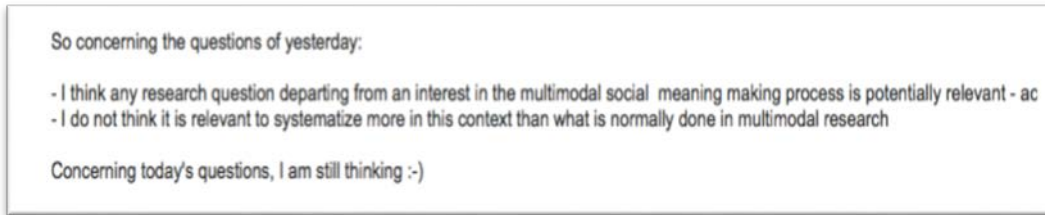


Figure 2: Examples of participants' contributions

These contributions also tended to use a number of resources such as underlining, parentheses, quotations, several colours in the fonts, inverted comas, emoticons, etc. These modes helped to the dynamism of the written mode and also to make the interaction more vivid, resembling as possible an oral interaction, which is how most researchers are used to discuss about research topics.

a. Lecture Sessions

These sessions took place at two different periods. The first one was held on the 25-28th of May and consisted of two lectures, which were streamlined to all participants, one from Universitat Jaume I (therefore a small part of the audience were physically present), and a second one from the university of origin of the lecturer. During the lecture, the usual modes of spoken discourse could be found: words, paralinguage, gestures, and also written language in the slides shown: Due to the restrictions of the recording speakers had a fixed posture either sitting or standing, but not moving.

In the second part of the sessions a discussion was started. Participants had been invited to send questions in writing through a chat. The questions were then read aloud by the chair so that they could be answered by the speaker. The semiotic resources in this part were on the one hand the chat, as in the forums, an asynchronous written mode, the reading by the chair, in which she added comments and her interpretation in paralinguage, as well as gestures. Table 1 summarizes the modes used by the chair:

Modes	Moderator	Speaker
Linguistic	-use of irony. -reading text written in the chat.	-repetition. -fillers. -rephrasing.
Paralinguistic	-different intonation when she reads aloud from chat than when she speaks.	-pauses. -use of intonation to remark key terms.
Kinesics	- nods as a pragmatic strategy to show agreement with the speakers' asnwers to online audience. -explicit gaze to the speaker as a pragmatic strategy to replace the <i>non-presence</i> of the virtual audience.	-explicit gaze to the moderator when remarking key concepts in his speaking.

Table 1: Modes in the discussion session

b. Conclusion of the Webinar

The final part of the seminar was the Conclusion in which the Chair used again the modes of spoken discourse: words, paralanguage and gestures.



I am going to proceed
now to the conclusions of
(P(...)) this
INTERNATIONAL (P)
SEMINAR (P) on
MULTIMODAL (P)
DISCOURSE (P)
ANALYSIS

...this is the closing (P) of
(P) the (P) event
(nod)
(nod) (nod)
+ smile
+ intensive gaze to the
audience

Figure 3: Example of MDA of the closing section

4 Discussion and Conclusions

As described above, a Webinar can be a complex speech event in terms of the multimodal resources used. Answering the research questions in this paper, a wide range of modes can be found: written text to be read and produced in an asynchronous manner, and spoken discourse, which in this case is streamlined and therefore transmitted synchronously to all the participants. In the written text, a number of resources have been found such as several colours and types of fonts, hyperlinks, emoticons and punctuation marks. In the spoken discourse, language, paralanguage and kinesics are combined, and also interact with the written mode in the discussions sessions chat. All these semiotic modes seem to be harmoniously integrated in what Norris (2004) coined as 'multimodal ensemble', that is, the sign maker puts together a number of semiotic modes in order to create meaning in a certain context. It is only for a certain community of knowledge that this multimodal ensemble has full meaning, and their reaction and recognition of this meaning is expressed by means of interaction.

This paper has tried to describe a relatively new genre, which has not yet received enough attention from discourse analysts, partly due to the variability of its realizations. Further research will be needed to systematize the genre, though something can be advanced about one generic trait: its multimodal and virtual nature.

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