

## Interview with Theo van Leeuwen

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### *Abstract*

This issue of *LEA* features an interview with Professor Theo van Leeuwen, where – starting from the fundamental role of the Hallidayan socio-semiotic approach to language in the development of Multimodality – he illustrates the background of his theoretical work as social semiotician and critical discourse analyst. Theo van Leeuwen broadly deals with issues such as the new emerging field of Critical Multimodal Studies, the importance of the socio-cultural perspective in Multimodality and the potential encounter between Multimodality and Cognitivism, with special reference to the concept of “social cognition” and to Metaphor Theory. He concludes his conversation with a reflection on the function of Studies in the Humanities in a specialized and digitally mediated world.

Keywords: *Critical Multimodal Analysis, Cultural History, Human Studies, Metaphor Theory, Semiotic Software*

Theo van Leeuwen is a critical discourse analyst and social semiotician, who is widely known as a co-founder – together with Gunther Kress – of Multimodal Studies. He is Professor at the Centre for Human Interactivity, Department of Language and Communication, University of Southern Denmark (Odense) and Emeritus Professor in Media and Communication at the University of Technology (Sidney), where he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from 2005 to 2013. Previously, he held a Professorship at Cardiff University, at the University of Arts (London), at Macquarie University (Sydney) and lectured in many other Universities around the world. He has also worked as film/television producer, scriptwriter and director, both in his native Holland and in Australia.

He has written extensively on Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Semiotics and Multimodality. His most recent books include *Introducing Social Semiotics* (2005), *Global Media Discourse* (2007, co-authored with David Machin), *Discourse and Social Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analy-*



sis (2008), *The Language of New Media Design* (2009, with Radan Martinec) and *The Language of Colour* (2011). He is the co-founder and editor of *Social Semiotics* and *Visual Communication* and member of the editorial boards of other international peer-reviewed journals.

Van Leeuwen's perspective as discourse analyst and social semiotician features the merging of theoretical and practice-based approaches: it is a trans-disciplinary attitude – favoured and nurtured by his experience as filmmaker, scriptwriter and jazz musician – that enables him to extend the influence of Multimodality to fields like art, business and media studies.

This interview took place on August 20<sup>th</sup> 2014, at the University of Southern Denmark (Odense), in Theo van Leeuwen's largely windowed office. The bright light of the sunny morning enlightened a huge piano keyboard and a wooden bookcase containing a remarkable collection of recent scholarly publications and a number of construction toys – that are some of the semiotic artefacts that witness van Leeuwen's multiple research interests. I put my recorder on the table between the two of us and we started our conversation...<sup>1</sup>

*IM: Would you like to start talking about the influence of the Hallidayan approach to language on your theoretical background as well as on the development of Multimodality?*

TvL: Well, my first study was linguistics, even though at the time I was already interested in the idea of “Multimodality” and – even though we didn't have the word then – I was particularly interested in thinking about visual media as language, so that's why I started studying linguistics.

My first study in linguistics was predominantly Generative Grammar, but I did not see how I could apply it to what I wanted to do. The Hallidayan socio-semiotic approach was a breakthrough for a number of reasons.

The first reason is that Halliday made reference to a founding father and, for Halliday, that was not Peirce or Saussure, but Malinowski. Malinowski was an anthropologist, who wrote about language as something that people *do* in given situations and contexts and that is a radically different starting point from what I had been learning in my training.

The second part of it is that, if we want to understand language, we have to understand it in its immediate social context, where people *do* language and it is something that you can empirically study, rather than making hypothetical models of what is happening in the brain. And, secondly, you also have to put language in the wider cultural and historical context, because that alone can explain why language is as it is. The key explanation for how language has developed the way it has

<sup>1</sup> All the references cited in this interview within square brackets are by Ilaria Moschini.

lies in the cultural and historical context or – as Halliday calls it – the “context of culture” [1985; Halliday and Hasan 1989, 46f], which also comes from Malinowski.

And then, the third thing is that, really, rather than on language as such, Halliday focused on varieties of language, “genres” and “registers”. Language was no longer a unified thing, the same everywhere: the same language was different in different contexts and yes, you can construct “the” language as an overall resource, but that resource is used differently in different contexts. So, in effect, language is not the same in different contexts. We already knew about dialects, but now we started speaking of “sociolects” of various kinds and this, of course, was also very important because it meant that – for example – the idea of how you can talk about media language in the media as a distinct variety acquired proper theoretical backing.

The fourth reason was that, as a result of this, Halliday’s functional approach to language meant that some attempts at describing the visual as a “language” which, earlier, had failed, could start again. In France Christian Metz had studied film as language. But he tried to find filmic equivalents for the form classes of language such as words, phrases, clauses and so on, and that failed for the most part. These kinds of things don’t exist in film, but, based on Halliday, we could now start, not from the form classes, but from the functions of the linguistic system.

In English, for instance, modality is related to a specific class of auxiliary verbs, but – fundamental to it – we don’t start with these, we start from the function of modality as a resource for indicating as how true or credible or trustworthy you wish to frame what you are representing and so, you might say: “maybe it is the case”, “it will be the case”, “it must be the case” and so on. But that is only one of the ways in which you can do it. With language, you can either have a tight definition of the form, but then you may get different meanings for the same form; or you can have a tight definition of the meaning and then you get different ways in which that meaning can be realized.

Going back to Halliday, if I start from the meanings instead of from the form classes, if I compare things that happen in visual language not to the forms of language, but to the meanings of language, then I might have another way to go: I can start from his socio-semiotic theory that is based on the functional meanings of grammar and then look for the visual forms.

Thanks to the Hallidayan socio-semiotic approach to language, it becomes possible to do a more precise “grammar of the visual”, combining two things: on the one hand, his broad socio-semiotic framework and his approach to describing the systems for language, which departs essentially from the functions and meanings of grammatical categories, such as transitivity.

*IM: Since you have mentioned the “grammar of the visual”, would you like to tell me how your interest in visual language led to the development of *Multimodality* and to the publication of a ground-breaking book like *Reading Images* (1996)?*

TvL: Well, as I have said, my interest in the language of the visual started off as a personal interest, but, nevertheless, it was also the right time, because in the 1960s television really became immersed in social life; so visual communication became a much more important element in public communication than it had ever been before. Even though it is a development that had already started in the 1920s with display advertisements and, of course, with film. So, we lived in an era in which the visual was no longer only found in art galleries, it was something you could increasingly find in all aspects of public communication. This is the reason why it began to draw the attention of linguists and there were various stages of this.

The first stage was the Prague School of Semiotics – which has also influenced Halliday and which mostly focused on art. It arose in a period where artists – who (as usual) were a little bit ahead of academics – wanted to do art that included different kinds of media and many artists of the Avant-Garde movements of the early twentieth century were deeply involved in that.

The second phase was Paris School Structuralist Semiotics. I have already mentioned Christian Metz – who was in the circle of Roland Barthes – and, simultaneously, Umberto Eco and so on. That was the period when I began to look at those things and when popular media became very important, in particular, television. Other theories I have found particularly fertile are those of Rudolf Arnheim, the art theorist, according to whom we may not have verbs in images, but we do have processes: we can express actions and states in images, we just use different means to do so. For instance, we use vectors to express actions and we use movement in films and we use certain compositions or configurations to express different kinds of states, “relational” and “identifying” processes, in Halliday’s terms [1985].

The third moment started in the late 1980s, when we began to apply Social Semiotics to Multimodality and that was in fact the period when – from the mid-1980s on – the computer entered our lives in the big way.

Each of the three stages that we had in the twentieth century had linguists moving to consider other modes of communication (and sometimes philosophers as well), a move which deeply related to things happening in the world at the time. This is what the Humanities do – react, but also, sometimes, anticipate things that are happening in the world, think about it and put it into a broader perspective.

So, that was the context and, at that time, in the 1980s, I was not the only one who thought about these things. There were other people who were taking Halliday as an inspiration for looking at things beyond language. For example, Michael O’Toole [1994], who has a very deep knowledge of the Prague School and who had, as a scholar of Slavic Languages, translated many Russian Formalist and Prague School writings.

There were several people doing this and we were in the fortunate position that many of them were in Sydney or in Australia at that point of time.

We started a Circle to debate Social Semiotics and Multimodality. It was not very long lived (just three or four years), but very lively – the Newtown Semiotic Circle in Sydney. It also included some people who were not in Sydney, but whom we were constantly in communication with. That was really the beginning of the application of the Hallidayan theory to Multimodality and that is also where the word “Multimodality” came in – although it already existed, it had until then mostly been used in a limited area of psychology of perception that studied how different senses exert influence on each other.

Our program initially was for different people to look at different modes of communication and the ways in which different modes integrate in multimodal texts. That’s what Gunther Kress and I began with. We first called it the “integration code”, but this term we did not continue with. So, for us, from the very beginning, the integration of different modes was very important, even though in *Reading Images* it is not as foregrounded as we now think it should have been. Indeed, we realized only gradually that many of the principles in *Reading Images* such as “framing” and “composition” had much wider application than just to images and that they are semiotic principles that unite different modes.

*IM: Is this concept of the integration of codes going to be more foregrounded in the future editions of Reading Images (1996)?*

TvL: That is a big question for me because the question is whether *Reading Images* should stay more or less as it is or be expanded to incorporate everything we have developed since. I mean, I have already written extensively on different forms of integration in my book *Introducing Social Semiotics* [2005]. Is it useful to re-write *Reading Images* drastically or is it better to just write an introduction to explain what has happened since, and leave the book as it is?

Gunther and I discussed this and we agree that we definitely need to indicate what has happened since, but it doesn’t necessarily invalidate many of the things that we have said at the time. So, to rewrite it is probably not a good idea, but it is a difficult kind of decision. I am thinking about what happens to books that get constantly updated and you have to be careful not to lose the original spirit.

Personally it doesn’t bother me, for instance, if I read – say – John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and I look at the advertisements that he uses as examples: they are clearly dated, but the book is not dated. I think readers can look beyond that and do not need everything to be constantly updated so that we lose the history of what the book contributed at the time it was written. So I think we’ll have to look at elsewhere for further developments in the important aspect of how different modes are integrated.

*IM: Going back to the development of Multimodality and Social Semiotics, what is the role that – according to you – can be played by this kind of text analysis in the Humanities?*

TvL: The role follows from the very nature of the socio-semiotic approach: if you go back to Malinowski, the integration of the text and the context is the key. The context is not just some marginal thing that we can quickly “dispose of” and then go back to the text. The entire event of which the text is part is a social practice that should be studied as a whole. The Humanities have been involved in interpreting texts for thousands of years, but it is also very important for various reasons to see the role of texts in the social practice.

Interestingly, I discovered to my surprise that even theologians, who are of course always professionally involved in interpreting texts, have recognized that texts are actually “placed in life” – in German terms “*Sitz im Leben*” – and not de-contextualized from life. This is becoming very important now because, while in Europe (particularly in the last few centuries) we have thought of texts as able to communicate on their own, and keep their meaning in different contexts, we now see practices developing in which people interpret texts jointly and in which no text can appear on its own without being surrounded by some discussion.

On the Internet you can see how texts are always surrounded and complemented by context, other texts – explanations, elaborations, reactions or whatever. You can see it also in school learning materials where texts are surrounded by tasks students should do, questions they should answer and so on. Therefore, the phenomenon of text today makes it even more important to say: “Well, we will do text analysis, but we do not say that that can do the whole job of understanding what is going on”.

This also relates to interdisciplinarity because the question is “What can text analysis do?”. It cannot answer all the questions that are relevant to a given instance of communication. Yes, we can start with text analysis, but the job is not finished: we then need to go and look around the text. What do we need to look at? How do we do it? We can do it by finding out how the text is embedded in a practice, for instance through ethnographic research. We can look at what people do around or with the text. We can look whether the text is influenced by other texts, normative texts or traditions that exist in the culture.

Text analysis is what I have learned to do. It is a skill I can offer and teach, but – from the point of view of the socio-semiotic approach – I should use text analysis to generate questions, some of which may need to be answered by other means. Such a coming together of text analysis and cultural/social studies is fundamental if you really want to do good Social Semiotics. If I really want to understand what people do, I have to “resurrect” the text: I have to look at the situational context, the immediate social practice and the broader

normative discourses in society that surround it. This is very Hallidayan in spirit, I believe, except that many Hallidayan scholars haven't done it.

*IM: As you have just said, according to Halliday, language has to be studied both in its immediate social context as well as in a wider historical and cultural context – an idea he borrowed from Malinowski. Nevertheless, the role of the “context of culture” in the Hallidayan approach has been criticized as not being properly elaborated and used – I am referring to van Dijk (2008, 2014) for instance. Do you think it would be worthy to insist more on such idea in Multimodal Studies?*

TvL: Yes, very much, I agree. I mean, it is clear that Halliday took over that notion, but very few people either in Systemic Linguistics or in Multimodality actually do something with it. So I think this should be theoretically deepened, as is done particularly in Critical Discourse Analysis, which takes much inspiration from sociology and cultural studies. So, by all means, let us continue to do text analysis, but not without placing semiotic modes, resources and their uses in that broader context as well. At any rate, that is what I have increasingly tried to do in my own work, for instance, in my last book on the language of colour (2011) where the “context of culture” has become an important part of what I am writing about. I still focus on semiotic resources and what they look like today, but I also try to trace the histories of the semiotic modes I am talking about.

*IM: In the book you co-authored with David Machin (2007), you provide a Critical Analysis of global cultural industries through the study of semiotic artefacts like video games or women's magazines. I believe that such investigation is getting more and more relevant nowadays because, with social media, we feature an exponential clashing of cultural discourses without the mediation of traditional agencies. What is your opinion about that?*

TvL: That's a very good point and we need to be clear about the ways in which Multimodality can help us understand technology. One of the reasons why technology is important is because it has become a global semiotic resource. However, that doesn't necessarily mean that it is used in exactly the same way everywhere.

In the study of globalization, people tend to take extreme points of view: either it is all homogenization and cultural imperialism or it doesn't matter at all what a corporation like McDonald's does, everybody is picking it up, using it, understanding it in local ways. Never mind how many local traditions it may displace. That is an intellectual trap: you have to look at both the homogenizing and the differentiating tendencies. And then you can see that localization and homogenization go hand in hand, that they are actual-

ly part of the same thing. We have to understand that it is a strategy of the global culture to allow for that merging.

*IM: Well, this reminds me of what Lemke (2009) wrote about consumers' experience of trans-media products: an activity that involves participation and a new kind of epistemology where you get meaning and identities out of different pieces of texts, united by the same action. What do you think about this "new" role of the receiver in contemporary global media scenario?*

TvL: Well, that's right and it is not just a new understanding that semioticians have acquired. Many texts are now deliberately designed to be complemented by what you referred to and to allow some form of "personal owning" as they say it often in English. And it is happening in all kinds of contexts.

This is the reason why I am more and more interested in texts that come from the new corporate culture which on the one hand strongly constrain what you can do and how you can express yourself, by means of all kinds of templates, and in which you nevertheless have to invest yourself affectively. This is a fairly new "semiotic regime" in contemporary society and – of course – our theories have to be commensurate with that.

We have to ask: why is this so important now? What has brought it so much to the foreground in our society? How does it relate to the major cultural changes we are experiencing and to the rise of multimodality? Today, texts and semiotic artefacts should not only be understood, but also emotionally engaged with. In the past era of dry bureaucratic agencies we did not think that emotive engagement was so important in public life. While now, such form of engagement is encouraged, promoted in many normative texts of our wider culture and therefore it needs to become a big theme in semiotics.

*IM: Regarding the Critical Analysis of such cultural discourses, in one of your recent publications (2013), you envisioned the merging of CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) with Multimodality in a sort of new field of Applied Linguistics. Would you like to talk on the issue?*

TvL: I think that the things we do as scholars are always related to the things that happen in the world out there, but I have not always been aware of that.

To tell you an anecdote, one of my first research areas was the study of intonation in the speech of radio newsreaders and disc jockeys. At that time, I thought I was doing a descriptive study, but then I was surprised that the Speech Laboratory at the university where I was working, was interested in my study and used it in a program of speech synthesis they had running: they used it to automate announcements so that you do not need to record live speakers anymore, you can just program the intonation because

you know what kind of intonation it is. As a result the announcers that had helped me in my research were done out of a nice little side-line and a nice extra bit of money.

This was the first time I recognized how our work relates to what happens in the world and in Critical Discourse Analysis we take that relationship in the foreground. In this, Berger and Luckmann's [1966] concept of "legitimation" had been particularly important, because legitimation discourses support social practices, which either may already exist or may be proposed to come into the world or to be changed. And that is fundamental in a time where change is so all-pervasive and where everybody is constantly involved in change.

At the same time, there is also critique, "de-legitimation", which – exactly like "legitimation" – may either implicitly or explicitly support something that already exists, for instance valued traditions that are being challenged, or it may legitimate proposed alternatives to the way things currently are. So "critique" is part of change, critique and "change" are two sides of the same coin and this is not always understood. Some people see critique as negative, and wish to engage in "positive critical discourse analysis", but the two belong together. Critique is always practiced in the name of something positive, even though that is not always made explicit. Business guru Edward De Bono said in one of his books: "From time to time you need to put your reality hat on". But doing that is often difficult today; people are not happy to hear criticism even when that criticism is actually meant positively, as a contribution to making things better. There is, today, often a kind of "relentless positivism" that you have to constantly display in the global corporate culture, but that may in fact be risky.

Critical Discourse Analysis is a different voice in that we need not just to describe how things are, but also to talk about what legitimates or de-legitimizes the way things are. And I think in multimodality this is an interesting question: for example, many people have written about new media and how they should be used in schools, sometimes out of an enthusiasm for the introduction of these media, where as other people – such as for example Gunhild Kvåle, who spoke in that conference event where you were too<sup>2</sup> – are beginning to write some critical notes about these new media. I have myself also tried to do that in my study on PowerPoint, where I say that this program was originally designed to very succinctly pitch ideas to man-

<sup>2</sup> Van Leeuwen refers to the 5<sup>th</sup> International 360° Conference "Encompassing the Multimodality of Knowledge", organized by the Department of Business Communication of the School of Business and Social Sciences of the University of Aarhus, Denmark (May 8-10, 2014), where Gunhild Kvåle presented her paper entitled "Constructing Knowledge as Digital Stories" (<<http://bcom.au.dk/research/conferencesandlectures/encompassing-the-multimodality-of-knowledge/>>, 11/2014).

agement, but is now widely used in education, where many things are not so easily “translated” into bullet-pointed lists, but need other kinds of connections rather than “and/and/and” connections. Nevertheless, has PowerPoint ever decided to adapt its system to education? No, it is education that has to adapt to *it*. It would be important if such critical voices could get a seat at the designer’s table, to help improve the software.

So criticism is a positive thing, but where can it happen these days? That is the question: where can it be effective and what kind of values should it refer to in order to make its arguments? Should they be values that are sharable or shared with the people engaged in the practices we criticize?

As regards the merging of the two fields, of Critical Discourse Analysis and Multimodality, we have to start paying attention to the influence in the public sphere of multimodal communication and some people have indeed done that, like Ruth Wodak who – in recent times – has written about television series and comic strips [2011, 2014]. Thus, Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis is starting to happen and it’s finding a public and that is a good thing.

*IM: Well, you mentioned criticism, but - more in detail – regarding the stance of Critical Discourse Analysts, what is your opinion about judgment?*

TvL: I think the first important thing to say here is that, if judgment comes before analysis, that is not right because the whole point about doing Critical Discourse Analysis is to ground it – as I have just said – in an agreement about values, but we also and especially want to ground critical views in agreement about the language that has been used or the other modes.

If, for instance, I say to you that here is a newspaper article about an industrial problem and when it quotes the Unions, it says they “claim” while, when it quotes industrialists, it says they “say” or “state”, if we find that that is a pattern, I think we can agree that, when you call an utterance a “claim”, you give it less credibility than when you say “to state” or “to assert”, for example, hence that there is bias in the reporting through the use of saying verbs. I think we have to agree about that, even though we may not agree about the industrial issues in question. So, we have to ground the judgment into the common understandings of language we have, as having grown up with the same language.

But yes, you should not shrink judgment, that’s the crux of it. The crux is that, as good discourse analysts should know that the viewpoint is actually almost always there, not just in Critical Discourse Analysis, and it is better for it to be explicit rather than to be implicit. But what also needs to be explicit is the values on which the judgment rests, and that is not always the case. A lot of Critical Discourse Analysis is essentially based on the Enlightenment values, which are under threat in the world now. The debate this

should engender, perhaps, doesn't occur enough, for good and understandable reasons, because there is urgent work to be done, for instance in relation to social inequalities and so on. Nevertheless, for Critical Discourse Analysis to ultimately work, you have to be able to see where these values come from: what their history is, if they are really shared and if they can really be effective in talking to people who hold a completely different set of values. So, I think the ethical grounds of the judgment are not always explicit enough.

*IM: You referred to your study of PowerPoint and, actually, many of your recent publications (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2011; Djonov and van Leeuwen 2012; van Leeuwen and Djonov 2013; Zhao, Djonov and van Leeuwen 2014) are dedicated to the issue of semiotic technology. Would you like to tell me more about such critical multimodal exploration of software?*

TvL: Well, what the designers of software actually do is to design semiotic resources and that includes many multimodal resources. So, for example, in studying PowerPoint you could see how colour is designed, what it is considered to be able to do and how precise the rules are that are built into the technology. You have to ask: is it possible to do something different from what the software designers have built in as the preferred or most easy option? And, if it is possible to do that, is it easy to do? Or is it quite hard? Do we have to make a lot of effort to achieve something?

I believe that the semiotic software is comparable to a language: it is not just a tool. Like language, it has developed the way it has to cater to certain needs and facilitate certain practices. Like language, it makes some things easy to say, and some things not so easy. So, if a particular software has been developed to tell stories about your holidays, to position you as a happy holiday maker, can you use it to tell other kinds of stories?

All these kinds of questions can and should be asked about semiotic software and that is why, I think, it is important to study it, not just from a point of view of its technical nature and the difference between using a computer, digital technologies and other technologies, but from the point of view of what makes it easy for you to do in using particular multimodal semiotic resources and in combining these resources. Of course semiotic software differs from language in one important respect, it does not change, it does not evolve in the same way as language. It is changed unilaterally every few years by a newly released version, which causes a lot of people to have to abruptly change habits that previously would gradually change.

All those kinds of things are important and, therefore, to study semiotic software, you have, on the one hand, to analyse it in the way we have learnt to analyse language; I mean we have to analyse it for what type of resources it provides for ideational and interpersonal and textual meaning-making and then, of course, we also have to analyse it for what people actually do with

it and how they use that resource differently in different contexts, just as we would do with language. So, in a way, we then treat it not as fundamentally different from other semiotic resources. And you should of course also look at the cultural context to see how and why the software has developed, what social needs are being in the foreground for it.

PowerPoint, for instance, was developed by people in the Bell laboratory to pitch an idea to the boss to get money for the project they wanted to do and, subsequently, it has retained some of that character and that is part of what it has often been criticized for. But, in the first place of course, we need just to inventorize what it is that technological resources make available, what they facilitate and what they constrain. This often leads to discussions, with people saying “You say that this or that can’t be done, but it can”. Sometimes it can, but the thing is: there is still a lot of homogeneity in how people actually use the software, even though there are no hard and fast rules and even though you can often switch off the rules, if you know how to.

All this needs to be studied also from the point of view of how it creates a kind of compliance and, if so, how it creates behavioural patterns in a very different way than linguistics and other resources traditionally have. Traditionally, we have learnt “correct” uses of language from a young age, from school teachers, copy editors and so on. However, now rules of this kind are – at least to some degree – built into the very tool we are using and to study that, to make people aware of that, is like going against the grain of “anything is possible”, “it is just the tool that can just do anything, what you want is not the case”.

So we need to do that with all these media. Power Point is one thing, but if you think about Facebook, for example, you know that Facebook – to some degree – restructures and re-designs relationships and it also designs how the personal and the public are interacting in the same space<sup>3</sup>. So, again, it is very important to look at it from those kinds of point of view.

*IM: In such broad context of the development of semiotic software, what is your opinion about normative agencies and normative practices?*

TvL: Well, this is a very good question because my impression is that, very often, these ideas are not necessarily systematically thought through by software designers.

<sup>3</sup> Here Professor van Leeuwen refers to the paper on the recontextualization of US institutional language on Facebook I presented during the previously mentioned 5<sup>th</sup> International 360° Conference (<<http://bcom.au.dk/research/conferencesandlectures/encompassing-the-multimodality-of-knowledge/>>, 11/2014).

I'll tell you an anecdote: some years ago I went to Milan to give a course on semiotics to designers in an office where they designed toys. At that time, the company had decided that what they were actually producing were not toys, but learning objects. For example, they had made a toy to learn about stories, which had the shape of a plastic blob with a few slots and a little speaker and they had a pile of cards that one could put in these slots. If you put in one slot the picture of a boy, in another slot the picture of a dog and, in the third slot, the picture of a ball, then the result was that - out of the little speaker - there came a story about a dog and a boy and a ball. The toy was not so successful, so I asked those designers: "How did you think about the story? Did you talk to any children's book writer?" "No" - they said. "Did you get any people in who studied narrative?" "No" - they said again.

I think that, with those toy designers as well as with software designers, we need to understand where their inspiration comes from, what informs their work. This is an important question because, obviously, designers are influenced by normative discourses in society, but not in a very direct way. So, for example, children's book publishers have rules about how many and what kind of words you can use for which age. When it is for six- or seven-year-old children, they would tell the writer not to use words of three syllables or not to use too many words in a sentence. That sort of input does not seem to be so strong with some of these design processes. They often do the research afterwards, "user research", but design it first on the basis of their creative insight and then test it.

They don't do the research before, even though some people recommend, by looking at existing practices, at the aims of the to-be-designed object, at the options that exist in the culture. Good designers should do this, good designers should go out first to see how things are done, but many don't.

*IM: The same appears to happen with software engineers too, since many of them perceive themselves as merely technicians.*

TvL: Yes, that is the other problem: software designers make cultural objects, but they appear to use only explicit technical knowledge, not cultural knowledge. Yet, they are designing things that are used by people and that are of deep cultural influence. So, for example, at the university where I used to work, they had a course on game design in the Faculty of Engineering in which they did not learn anything about narrative. They just made games and thus you get particular conceptions of games that are based on narrative principles that are actually very old fashioned, centered on a commonsense version of the standard Hollywood three-act script and the idea of creating characters and so on.

So, I agree, there is something to be investigated and discussed here. It is not the people's fault, it is how society has organized this, you cannot blame them, and it seems that what is happening now in game production is that it

is going back to a kind of Hollywood system with the very tightly organized division of labor that used to exist in large animation studios.

*IM: Do you mean a Taylorization of labour?*

TvL: Yes, exactly, a Taylorization of labour. So, therefore, there should be more explicit discourses about the structure of the cultural industry of software and games, because there is no longer a bunch of guys sitting together and cooking something up as a creative team. Now, there has to be some account of the whole process.

*IM: Going back to the issue of the analysis of semiotic technology, what is your opinion about the study of semiotic software as a cognitive socio-cultural platform?*

TvL: Following up from what we have just said, there is another interesting aspect of the cultural context of the development of software and of the development of interfaces in particular that, right from the start (and quite separate from metaphor theory), metaphor has played a very big role in it. In the literature that exists on the interface design, this role was based on the assumption that metaphors are kind of “naturally understood”, but they aren’t always at all. So, a depth of analysis was sometimes lacking, because interface designers believed that metaphors (and pictorial metaphors in particular) were a sort of universal form of communication. So, I think that you can see it as a chance to understand how metaphor has been developed quite consciously as a resource to communicate at a global level, through software.

These kinds of ideas are not entirely new: a famous case was, for instance, the idea in the early days of film in the Soviet Union that the visual would overcome linguistic difficulties and therefore be the best propaganda medium. Similarly, in software, there is this idea that visual communication and metaphors are going to be able to communicate across many differences, which they don’t necessarily do. Therefore, the whole business of designing icons is deeply concerned about the problems of how icons might be understood or not, or whether they can be easily understood. At the same time, we need to see that the two systems of cultural connotations and experiential metaphors lie side by side and it is possible to theorize starting from metaphor theory and then shift into the other, all in due course.

That is what I have been arguing - for example - in relation to voice quality, in relation to the timbre of the voice in singing and acting, I have said that amplification allowed the emergence of iconic singing voices such as those of Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong, Bob Dylan, Billy Holiday and so on, and that the meaning of the voices they created came from the actual parameters of articulation, such as whether the voice is tense or not, whether it is high or low, etc. So, meaning came out of direct experiential

metaphors. But then came the time when these became recognizable types of voices, the voices of Lauren Bacall or Marilyn Monroe, for instance, and once they acquired a connotative relation to the kind of persona these people were or to the kind of roles they played or songs they sang, they became a resource for other singers or actors to use on that basis, as Michel Chion, who writes about the voice in films, has also said in his writings about how actors speak in films today.

There is a close relationship between the way our technologies work and the way society, or parts thereof, work, and the need for new modes of communication often emerges well before they become entrenched in our technologies. For instance, in our Power Point analysis [Djonov and van Leeuwen 2014], we found an article in a business journal from 1959 which promoted bullet points long before the development of PowerPoint software: in those days you couldn't do them with the typewriter, you had to hand-draw them, but still they were already promoted. They were called "corky points", because the name of the man who wrote the article was Corky and he had introduced it in his company as a good way to write succinct proposals.

*IM: Regarding metaphors, during your plenary speech at the 360° Conference in Aarhus<sup>4</sup>, you referred to the necessity of overcoming the "false paradox" of the opposition between Cognitivism and Empiricism. Would you like to give me more details on the issue?*

TvL: I have never labelled myself as doing cognitivist work, but yes, I am now interested in entering this discussion. To sketch the background of this, while the linguistics I was trained in – generative linguistics – was to a large degree a cognitive project, this was entirely rejected in the Hallidayan tradition. But often not explicitly, often just with dismissive comments: you can't look inside people's brains, you can only study texts. Well, but texts are at least in part the result of things we know and things we know how to do. So I have always found such rejections a little bit too easy, but at the same time I thought that there was a point to it, because a lot of cognitivist work is essentially model building rather than empirical work. There's a big difference between model building and empirical work: model building too often ends up projecting our technologies into a theory of how our brain works and that is not my favourite approach.

However, I do agree with Teun van Dijk's approach to "social cognition" [2008] according to which it is futile not to seek to take into account

<sup>4</sup> The plenary speech was entitled "Recontextualization, Cognition and Modality" (<<http://bcom.au.dk/research/conferencesandlectures/encompassing-the-multimodality-of-knowledge/>>, 11/2014).

that the normative discourses in the world work because they become part of our mental furniture. And the question is: how do we work with that in a meaningful Critical Analysis?

I have recently read with great interest some accounts of “extended” or “distributed” cognition, which basically conceives of cognition as something you *do*. They speak of “cognizing” rather than “cognition”. If you do that, you can see that cognizing happens between the brain and the environment. Let me take an easy example, calculation: you can do it in your head, you can do it with the tools of your body, count on your fingers, or you can do it with a calculator – or some combination of all these. But, one way or another, what is happening is actually at least in part visible. You can actually empirically study what people do and you don’t have to resort to model building. So, I’ve found that – perhaps – there are some ways in which the traditional split between the two “camps” can be undone. Some of the newer paradigms seem to open interesting opportunities to actually do that.

As regards Metaphor Theory, I have been influenced by Metaphor Theory in my own sort of way. I have used it to study contemporary global culture where the material aspect of the signifier is often based on metaphors. Metaphor Theory is not actually explicitly multimodal, it explicitly talks about concepts rather than material things. And yet, it talks about metaphors coming from very concrete material things, such as the body and the interaction with objects and interaction with people. That’s very clear in Lakoff and Johnson [1980].

Some of our meaning-making is based on bodily experience and that’s why humans across the world do have much in common. We all walk up right, we all speak with the same vocal apparatus. And there are metaphors that come from that, and also from our way of interacting, which of course is not the same everywhere. The debate about “universality” *versus* “cultural specificity” used to be very central in linguistics, very polarized, but here they very beautifully shade into each other. Some things in semiotics are universal and have to do with very basic human experiences, other things have to do with more culturally specific experiences.

Does it make sense?

*IM: Yes, it does. I think it is a matter of finding a way to create a bridge between Cognitivism and Empiricism, to have an interdisciplinary perspective...*

TvL: Yes, that is certainly one of my driving motivations because it comes very close to interdisciplinarity. Let me talk about the problem in Multimodality. In the study of Multimodality we need to approach things from several angles. In fact we need a kind of multi-disciplinary cycle that starts with broad theoretical insights, a theoretical agenda and then moves to analyse texts, artefacts or whatever, then places them in context, which may require ethnographic approaches, and then returns to theory again: that is the cycle.

This means that different skills, different knowledges have to be called upon and we can work on that together. Why should some people just analyse certain aspects of dialogue? Why not bring these scholars together with others who come at it from another angle? So that is certainly one of my motivations to say: we have to create bridges and not fall into the intellectual trap of actually – implicitly or explicitly – creating polarizations and then talk about only one side the equation, when – in fact – things are related to each other.

My father was a theologian and the training that he received was interesting because theologians had to learn three things to be good text interpreters: theory (they called it dogmatics, but you could say that all theories are dogmatic!), languages (one had to know Hebrew and Greek) and history. So it comes very close to what we are saying and it is not the only example: everywhere people have created triumvirates, constellations of the knowledges to be good scholars who can see the whole picture.

Specialism is risky, particularly if you don't ever allow your certainties to be threatened by the next-door neighbour on the corridor who looks at the same phenomena in a different way. That does not mean you shouldn't look after your own discipline as well, because, if you don't, disciplines will disappear, and then we cannot be interdisciplinary anymore. Disciplines continuously need to be sharpened, improved, worked on, but you need to be aware that they are just skills, not self-sufficient worlds, not ideologies. They are skills you can contribute to interdisciplinary enterprises and you also need to carefully nurture and nourish them, without closing yourself off from doing things with other people who come from other disciplines.

*IM: Along with thinking about Multimodality in relation to other paradigms, what other things do you have in your agenda? I mean, what projects are you currently working on?*

TvL: Well, every time you move to a new environment you shift emphasis a bit and I've always liked to do some fun projects, I am working with a colleague on a project on "lighting" and "light" and I want to look more at interpretation and listening as a semiotic activity, at listening signs, which is something that has not been done much, despite a growing interest in listening.

So I published a little paper [van Leeuwen 2014] which is about listening and which studies "listening shots" in films, and what they contribute to the development of interactions, and I also studied accompaniment in jazz by piano and by snare drum as a form of listening.

*IM: What is a snare drum?*

TvL: The snare drum is used in jazz to place accents in support of the soloist, irregular responses comments, or reactions to what the soloist does,

sometimes anticipating, sometimes reacting to it and so on. It is a form of listening, which is acknowledged by musicians, as you can see when you actually look at their accounts.

*IM: Does it come from the African tradition of participation? I am referring to the Ring Shout, for instance.*

TvL: Yes, you can see that if you look at how blues performances used to be, or how – for example – Abdullah Ibrahim talks about African music: there's no difference between listeners and musicians, they all create the music together.

We have created, in theory, a huge difference between the producer and the consumer, the sender and the receiver – we now of course undo that and so theoretically this already exists; we talk about the “prosumer”, it is happening out there in the world, “listening” is reconfigured as something more active, but semiotic theory still has to catch up with that.

*IM: To conclude this interview, what do you wish as a potential future development for Multimodal Studies?*

TvL: That's a very hard question because I don't want to play a “crystal ball” game! All I can say is that I now want to think hard about the theoretical underpinnings of Multimodality and in particular about the importance of cultural contexts and history. We should be careful not to go too far in being inspired by natural science in the Humanities.

The other thing I hope is to be able to have a critical, but positive role, and there will be more interplay between people working in the field of Multimodality and the designers and engineers who shape the semiotic landscape today. The particular training into these professions, at the moment, often doesn't allow that kind of interplay, so it is of a key importance for universities to combine technological training and design courses. Otherwise we end up with technical experts creating our semiotic resources without the necessary semiotic insight, or designers who lack the technical expertise that is now needed to create semiotic resources so that they can only use what has already been created for them.

I also hope that we will not be seduced by an approach which will sideline the Humanities in favour of the natural sciences, and there are signs that this is happening now. That is a huge worry and one we need to urgently address.

*IM: In your opinion, which role can be played by the schools of the Humanities in this scenario?*

TvL: Humanities scholars need to make strong arguments for the value of their work and the value of the education they have to offer.

There are many pragmatic ways in which this can be done: in Australia, for instance, we showed how many people in leading positions in business, in government and so on had actually studied things like literature, and were willing to say how valuable that had been to them.

More generally, it is not the role of the Humanities to compete with natural science. As scholars, we have to sit together and reconsider what our mission is, what we contribute to the world and to education, and to guard against the temptations of over-specialisation. That's what – as Humanists – we must try to do.

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