

# The multimodal cocktail in primary school classrooms – Verbal and non-verbal interaction in space

Christian Bendl [christian.bendl@univie.ac.at](mailto:christian.bendl@univie.ac.at) University of Vienna

Nadja Kerschhofer-Puhalo [nadja.kerschhofer@univie.ac.at](mailto:nadja.kerschhofer@univie.ac.at) University of Vienna

Werner Mayer [werner.mayer@univie.ac.at](mailto:werner.mayer@univie.ac.at) University of Vienna

The use of writing and written language is a central part of our social practices. In everyday life, the written word is increasingly associated with other perceptual modes such as colour, picture, sound or motion. This contribution presents experimental approaches to the relationship of spatial, visual and interactional processes (spoken and written) in primary school classrooms. It presents data from a project on children's literacy practices in school and everyday life with a special focus on multimedia and multilingual contexts. The collected data include oral and written material, photos, audio and video data compiled by children and researchers.

This presentation will focus on the relation of visual, spatial and interactional processes in the classroom. The classroom will be described as a multimodal cocktail of different verbal, visual and spatial signs and sign systems. The use and perception of signs and sign systems and the association of modes in a given social constellation is reduced to a certain degree by institutional practices introduced by the teacher. The emplacement of signs in space forms part of their meaning.

In a given space, the repertoire of relevant modes and sign systems is reduced by institutional practices, social constellations and interactional processes. In other words, spatial constellations are the result as well as the cause of different ways of meaning making and social behaviour. Meaning making of places is a process that is negotiated by actors (teachers, students), the space and the sign systems. In this process, not all participants are authorized to the same extent.

In the classroom, interaction order is strongly determined by the teacher and by typical spatial arrangements). Changes in spatial constellations (e.g. sitting at the desk vs. on the floor) induce changes in communicative behaviour. At the same time, the meaning of spaces and sub-spaces (e.g. desk, floor, blackboard) is changed by communicative acts and by multimodal discourse practices inducing processes of meaning-making of place.

Following studies on multimodality and social semiotics (Kress/van Leeuwen 1996; van Leeuwen 2005) and the emplacement of signs in space (Lefebvre 1974/1991; Scollon/Scollon 2003; Thurlow/Jaworski 2010; Blommaert 2013), this paper includes the methodological framework offered by Spitzmüller (2015) to describe metapragmatic positioning of actors regarding typical practices in specified places.

Considering this, the classroom as a place of verbal, visual and spatial meaning-making will be investigated in terms of the (1) analysis of space as a composition of sub-spaces or frames, (2) analysis of sign systems and modes used in (a) spaces and sub-spaces and (b) institutional places, (3) analysis of sign systems, modes and social practices that constitute places for institutional practices, (4) analysis of practices of meaning-making referring to actors and spatial actions, (5) analysis of the interaction of verbal, non-verbal and spatial modes.

The data presented will illustrate the importance of spatial constellations and the use of sign systems other than spoken language for a complete understanding of institutional practices in classroom communication.

## References

KRESS, Gunther/VAN LEEUWEN, Theo (1996), *Reading images. The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge.

BLOMMAERT, Jan (2013), *Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes. Chronicles of Complexity*, Bristol/Buffalo/Toronto: Multilingual Matters.

JAWORSKI, Adam/THURLOW, Crispin (2010), „Introducing Semiotic Landscapes“, in: Adam JAWORSKI and Crispin THURLOW (eds.), *Semiotic Landscapes. Language, Image, Space*, London/New York: Continuum, 1-40.

LEFEBVRE, Henri (1974/1991), *The Production of Space*, English translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

SCOLLON, Ron/SCOLLON, Suzie Wong (2003), *Discourses in Place. Language in the material world*, New York: Routledge.

SPITZMÜLLER, Jürgen (2015), „Graphic variation and graphic ideologies: a metapragmatic approach“, in: *Social Semiotics*, Vol. 25, Issue 2 (Special Issue), 126-141.

VAN LEEUWEN, Theo (2005), *Introducing social semiotics*, London: Routledge.