CHAPTER 13

‘Flowers are Made of Colours’: Multimodality, Narrative, and a Move towards Writing in the Early Years

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1 Introduction

Researchers adopting social semiotic perspectives to analyse early years literacy practices (Barton, 2007) have investigated classroom and nursery settings (e.g. Pahl, 1999; Hopperstad, 2010; Sidiropoulou, Chapter 8 this volume) as well as home literacy practices (e.g. Mavers, 2007). Given the interest in how writing develops, especially in young children, it is surprising that a diachronic perspective (see Van Leeuwen, 2005) focused on meaning development, as well as the transformative mechanisms involved in meaning development, have been largely overlooked in the early years (G. Kress, personal communication, October 12th, 2012). This chapter is aimed at addressing this imbalance and sees a multi-layered diachronic framework of social semiotics / multimodality embedded within social perspectives of child development as the ideal vehicle in which to elucidate the transformative mechanisms involved in learning to mean.

This chapter is broadly organised into three sections: section one—theoretical framework; section two—methods, and section three—analysis and discussion. As social semiotics “is not ‘pure’ theory . . . and requires immersing oneself not just in semiotic concepts and methods as such but in some other field” (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 20)—this chapter in section one pairs, or embeds, social semiotics within social perspectives to child development. The embedding of a social semiotic, multimodal framework within social perspectives to childhood is necessary due to the highly affective, poetic (Jakobson, 1960) and improvised nature of a child’s production. Often when young children, like my daughter Valerie, are asked what they are drawing they will reply that they do not know yet (see Jolley, 2010; Cox, 2005).

Section two is the methods that were involved in this study and section three is comprised of analysis and discussion. In section three I trace an oral
narrative linked to birthdays, created by Valerie’s mother and retold by Valerie, first through oral narrative and later through text. Within this chapter I use the term text to mean “any semiotic entity which has a sense of (social) completeness” (Kress & Selander, 2012, p. 266), and qualify completeness as determined by the maker of the text, who in this case is Valerie. The particular texts that I analyse are birthday cards as they are a text type, or genre, that children repeatedly encounter in the home and are a text type that children are motivated to create. This was certainly the case with Valerie. The analysis of the texts is based on videos of Valerie making the texts as well as diary entries. I end this chapter with a critical summary of the themes discussed in this chapter and argue that there is likely much more agency on the part of young children in their meaning making than they are often given credit for.

2 Social Semiotics and Multimodality

A social semiotic multimodal approach to meaning making highlights individual agency in that it is the individual’s motivation and interest that guides her amongst socially and culturally available resources to make principled meaning making decisions. Meaning makers, within social contexts, continuously create and transform (Kress, 1997) communicative semiotic resources based on their interest, to shape material forms of representation (Kress, 2010). Kress states that “communication, by contrast, is to put the meanings to which [one] is giving material shape as a sign (as text) into an interrelation with others in [the] environment: to make [one’s] meanings known to [an] assumed audience” (2010, p. 51, italics in original). He stresses that both representation and communication are guided by interest in that representation represents the sign makers desire to aptly realize meaning and that communication represents a design interest in aptly conveying this prospective meaning to an other.

A social semiotic multimodal approach to meaning making views writing as one possible mode of communication amongst many possible modes, for example speech, image, music, gesture and does not place (or favour) one mode above others. This approach to meaning making posits that different modes have different affordances (Gibson, 1977) and that different modes are epistemologically and ontologically different,1 making ‘direct’ translation from

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1 For example, Kress (2010) states that we could speak or write about a cell having a nucleus but to draw it we would have to put it somewhere, the nucleus would have to be a certain size and so on (but possession would not be implied).