CHANNELS, MODALITIES, AND SEMIOTIC MODES AND SYSTEMS: MULTI- AND POLY-

Alan Cienki

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
a.cienki@vu.nl

Research on how multiple forms and systems of human communication are used has been gaining greater institutional presence in academia over the past two decades. In 2006, University College London founded a Centre for Multimodal Research, and in 2009 Auckland University of Technology instituted their Multimodal Research Centre. The University of Southern Denmark has had a Centre for Multimodal Communication since 2013, as has Moscow State Linguistic University in their Multimodal Communication and Cognition Lab, known as **PoliMod** in Russian (short for **Kognitivnaja laboratorija polimodal'noj kommunikacii**). In 2019, the University of Oxford established their International Multimodal Communication Centre, whereas in 2022, the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, Netherlands, founded a Multimodal Language Department. In 2022, though, the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences chose the term **multichannel** when naming their Laboratory for Multichannel Communication (**Laboratorija mul'tikanal'noj kommunikacii**). The fact that a number of terms, and differing combinations of them, have been used in scholarly work to name what intuitively seems to be a common topic of research is something that has not gone unnoticed (e.g., Bateman 2017; Ирисханова 2022; Кибрик 2010). In what ways are the different terms referring to the same or different categories?

According to Kibrik, Fedorova (2020: 1), the first application of the term **multimodality** to the study of language use can be traced to Taylor (1989). Since then, it has become the most widespread in the academic literature of all the terms discussed below: e.g. a search in early 2023 in English in Google Scholar turned up over 24,000 results for the term 'multimodal communication' in comparison with less than 5,000 for 'multichannel communication' and just over 100 for 'polysemiotic communication'. Early research concerning multimodality in communication goes back to works by scholars such as Kress (2002, 2010) and Jewitt (2002), focussing primarily on textual/pictorial multimodaily in print-based communication, as contrasted with work on multimodal interaction (Norris 2004) or multimodal

discourse analysis (O'Halloran 2004). The research in gesture studies by scholars such as Kendon (e.g. 1980, 2004) and McNeill (e.g. 1985, 1992) boosted the study of multimodality in relation to dynamic, face-to-face communication primarily anchored in spoken language use (as discussed, for example, in Cienki 2016, 2017).

The nouns collocated with the adjective 'multimodal' give rise to additional questions. Whereas most researchers have typically referred to 'multimodal communication', some recently have turned to speaking of 'multimodal language' (e.g. Vigliocco et al. 2014). While the former phrase is less controversial (the idea that human communication makes use of multiple modalities or modes), the latter expression can give rise to some questions. Written language, for example, is unimodal. Some would also say that spoken language is unimodal in terms of its production (sonic) and perception (aural)—although there is also a specialized area of research on visual perception of orally produced language (see Irwin, DiBlasi 2017 for an overview). Signed languages could also be argued to be unimodal—produced in a spatial medium of bodily forms and movements and perceived in the visual modality. However, the fact that deaf and blind people can comprehend sign language by holding a signer's hands in a particular way already shows the bimodal affordance of sign language use (its ability to be perceived visually or tactilely). The larger point, though, with the collocation 'multimodal language' is to step back and take in a larger picture of linguistic systems as having the potential to be produced in and perceived with different modalities, sometimes via more than one simultaneously (as in the case of audio and visual perception of spoken language).

The Laboratory established at the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Linguistics has opted for the term 'multichannel' to characterize their area of interest. Rather than perceptual modalities or means of production per se, channels are qualified (according to Kibrik, Fedorova 2020: 1) as encompassing "not only verbal material, but also additional means such as intonation, gestures, facial expressions, and eye gaze". The channels thus combine specific modalities of production and perception, either vocal/auditory or kinetic/visual—such that the verbal and prosodic channels fall under the vocal modality, and the other channels under the kinetic one. This distinction highlights the fact that most analyses of talk as **multimodal** could more accurately characterize it as being **bimodal** (Кибрик 2018: 72).

A separate issue here concerns the etymological choices of the terminology. Considering the roots of the words, we see that **channel**, **mode**, and **modality** all derive from Latin. However, the possible mixing and matching these roots with a prefix of Latin origin (**multi-**) or of Greek origin (**poly-**) provides options for naming what is at issue. In the case of the PoliMod Lab, the name derived from other considerations than etymological ones. PoliMod is a transliteration in Latin letters

of the Russian name, which is a clipped form of the phrase **polimodal'naja kommunikacija**. On the one hand, this was a purposeful choice as a brand name, being distinctive not only because the term **polymodal** is uncommon in Russian and English, but also because PoliMod breaks with the customary spelling of the prefix in English as *poly-*. On the other hand, the name was chosen as a way to avoid any potentially confusing associations with the Russian word *mul'tik* ('cartoon'), given that **multimodal'naja kommunikacija** was not an extremely common term in Russian at the time that the lab was established in 2013.

Another way this topic of naming the field of study has been approached has been through particular lenses from semiotics. If we start with semiotic modes (Kress, van Leeuwen 2001), Kress (2009: 54) characterizes them as "a socially shaped and culturally given resource[s] for making meaning. **Image**, **writing**, **layout**, **music**, **gesture**, **speech**, **moving image**, **soundtrack** are examples of modes used in representation and communication" (emphasis in original). Bateman (2017) offers an additional specification building on Hjelmslev's (1961 [1943]) distinction between expression and content planes. Bateman (2017: 167) notes, "Medium is then the 'material' basis for carrying modes, while modes are more abstract, semiotic and independent of media."

If we take the path of analyzing communication in terms of the semiotic modes involved (or codes, as per Lotman (Лотман 1969), for example), separately from the perceptual modalities used to perceive any given instance of their use, this allows for consideration of polysemioticity separately from multimodality (as per Stampoulidis et al. 2019). On this account, for example, a sculpture could be said to be unisemiotic but potentially multimodal, in that it could not only be seen, but also felt tactilely. However, an artwork painted on a canvas consisting of words and images would be monomodal (perceived visually) but polysemiotic (involving text and image). Spoken language and gesture then constitute multimodal and polysemiotic communication (Zlatev 2019).

In conclusion, the multiplicity of word forms in current use in academic discourse on this topic reflects the complexity of the phenomena we are investigating. As these phenomena can be viewed from a plurality of perspectives, the variety of terms available can be celebrated for how they allow us to reflect differentiation in the theoretical and methodological approaches possible in one's research.

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