Critique of Van Leeuwen’s *Introducing Social Semiotics*

Van Leeuwen’s recent *Introducing Social Semiotics* focuses on grammaticizing semiotic “resources,” a term that he says has replaced the term ‘sign’ in social semiotics “because it avoids the impression that ‘what a sign stands for’ is somehow pre-given, and not affected by its use.” However, the term creates more problems than it solves, particularly as part of a proliferation of terms in *Multimodal Discourse* (primary semiotic principles, strata, design, distribution, and so on), which obscure rather than clarify meaning-making. It is one of the basic assumptions of social semiotics that signs change according to their use. Signs can be transparent or opaque – that is, they can be clearly understandable or hard to decipher, depending on the social positions of the producer and the interpreter of the sign. That is one example of signs changing according to their use. But the opacity and transparency of signs also makes signs behave in very much the same way as any text, in the sense that the interpretation of a sign is a fundamental aspect of its meaning (just as the interpretation of a text is a fundamental aspect of its meaning).

A more important problem is the nature of ‘resources’ (as opposed to signs) in *Introducing*. Is there any difference between resources and texts? A text is, essentially, an object of interpretation; if a resource is qualitatively different from a text, how is a resource understood or interpreted, and by whom? Or, to put it in other words, if a text is an object or practice that has meaning for someone, is a resource not also an object or practice that has meaning for someone (if only for the semiotician)? Is the difference between a text and a resource based on a division between ‘tools’ (resources) with which to make texts, which have no meanings in themselves, and readable – or unreadable – texts, which can be interpreted in many different ways? But if the same tools are used to produce and consume texts, why is there disagreement about what texts mean?

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (*Multimodal Discourse*), resources have a “meaning potential,” which I understand to be a small amount of meaning that is common to all of the meanings a resource might then produce in a text; or a basic meaning arrived at if a text is examined from the point of view of the transformations of meaning it contains. The meaning potential is then an ‘original’ meaning that has undergone change to produce a new meaning in a text, whose ‘original’ meaning is nevertheless perceptible in the text. Notwithstanding this type of transformation, which is basic to meaning-making, it seems there is no point at which a resource does not in itself already have a meaning. In other words, the ‘meaning potential’ of a resource is the same as the meaning of that resource (or text) at a given moment. When this potential is ‘realized’, there seems to be no theoretical reason why that realized meaning or text would be a qualitatively different entity than the meaning of a resource at its potential stage. What remains a powerful explanatory principle is the transformation itself, rather than a division between one kind of text (a resource) and another (an everyday text). These transformations are the focus of Hodge and Kress’ “Transformation and Time,” in *Social Semiotics*.

*Introducing Social Semiotics* also emphasizes that resources are often based on the experience of the human body (directionality, balance, ‘pulse’ or heartbeat). But this body is in itself always already semioticised, and it is therefore a doubtful resting place for absolute (instead of relative) meaning. For example, the pulse of the body is seen as a “natural” semiotic resource – but if a resource is a text, and therefore the pulse itself is a text, then its qualities are interpreted just as any text is interpreted, according to the social
position, the time, and place of the reader. Is the salient feature of the human pulse its regularity or its (less well-known, but quite a factual) irregularity? Is the pulse, in its beat-beat-beat, a text meaning the fragmentation of time or the eternity of time? Can the human pulse be a resource for showing the fragility of life – because it always eventually ends – and all possible analogies deriving from this? By what means does a text – as a resource – ever come to have the same meaning to all users at all times?

Adding the word ‘potential’ to the term ‘meaning’ (‘the meaning potential of a resource’) also ensures that a meaning potential is never actually seen, heard, or experienced in itself, but only as an abstract concept located in a semiotician’s descriptive grammar. These grammars have been, up to now, taxonomies, or groupings of entities according to commonalities and differences. Taxonomies are used because some of the first social semioticians were also systemic-functional linguists (e.g., Halliday, Kress, Thibault). Taxonomies are used by systemic-functional linguists to describe the grammar of a language; in a common confusion, these taxonomies are also called grammars (more on this in Chapter Four). Although the philosophical underpinnings of taxonomies – difference, oppositionality, choice – are fruitful and basic to semiotics, in recent work the formal implications of a taxonomy and the theory of social semiotics are beginning to contradict each other.

Taxonomies, in their static nature, suggest that grammars are much more stable than they really are; and they also suggest a very simplified relationship between text and social and communicative context/situation. Lacking any theoretical self-reflexivity in social semiotics, a social semiotician’s taxonomy must be taken as the grammar of the communicative situation of describing the semiotic ‘resources’ in the world as perceived by the social semiotician at the time of writing.

On the other hand, the grammaticizing impulse in Introducing Social Semiotics is not misplaced, because social semiotics lacks a formal explanation of how the meanings of Kress’ motivated sign circulate on a large scale and in relation to each other.

[The choices made by people at the level of individual, local conversations are always constrained to some degree; in social semiotics, following critical social theory, these constraints are ultimately based on social position, or identity. It’s important to explain the impact that social identity has on meanings; but in order to do this, we must also be able to explain how social identity itself is shaped by historical forces and relations of power. Once this kind of vertical integration is achieved in social semiotics, it will be able to fully explain semiosis.]

A grammar tries to answer the question, how do people understand each other? by describing a set of patterns common to all texts. (The assumption is that these patterns are then learned and understood by all.) In generative grammars, rules are written heuristically that try to predict what specific patterns will occur. But since conventions of meaning-making, such as languages, are always in flux, descriptions that try to capture these patterns are made out-of-date, inevitably and in some respect, the moment they are written. Social semiotic theory concentrates on practices of meaning-making rather than the meanings themselves, although of course it is impossible to think about one without the other. But if the focus is to remain on practices, then social semiotics needs to examine structuration (how grammars are produced in daily life) rather than structures.
(the grammars themselves). The question then becomes, what does a grammar that is in constant flux look like? How does it work?