

SEM54. English multimodal pragmatics in the digital era

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 15

Convenors

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Abstract

The digital era has revolutionized how we communicate, transforming traditional language use and meaning-making boundaries. In this context, multimodal pragmatics – the study of how meaning is constructed and interpreted through multiple modes (e.g., linguistic, visual, auditory, and spatial) – has gained unprecedented significance, although specific research is still quite scant. English, as a global lingua franca, plays a pivotal role in shaping and being shaped by these multimodal practices in diverse digital landscapes.

This seminar seeks to bring together scholars and practitioners to explore the intersections of English language use, multimodal communication, and digital technologies. We aim to foster a vibrant discussion on how multimodal pragmatics operates in digital contexts, encompassing social media, virtual reality, online gaming, digital storytelling, audiovisual products – and audiovisual translation – and other forms of digital communication.

We invite contributions that address (but are not limited to) the following themes:

- Multimodal meaning-making in English digital communication: How do text, images, emojis, GIFs, memes, and videos work together to create meaning in English-mediated digital spaces?
- Pragmatic strategies in digital English: How are politeness, humour, irony, or persuasion achieved through multimodal means in online interactions?
- Global Englishes and multimodality: How do users from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds employ multimodal resources to adapt and transform English in digital settings?
- Multimodal pragmatics in emerging technologies: What roles do Artificial Intelligence (AI), augmented reality, and virtual reality play in evolving multimodal English communication?
- Pedagogical implications: How can educators address the challenges and opportunities of teaching English multimodal pragmatics in the digital age?
- Ethical and social dimensions: How do issues of accessibility, inclusivity, and power manifest in English multimodal pragmatics online?

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SEM54. Papers

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- *Lexicalisation patterns of punctuation marks in English colon a multimodal perspective* (Marco Bagli, Università per stranieri di Perugia)
- *The hypostatic union of multimodality and pragmatics in Dorothy Sayers' The man born to be king* (Aoife Beville, Università di Foggia)
- *Multimodal pragmatics at its best: A qualitative analysis of ASMR videos on TikTok* (Fabio Ciambella, Sapienza Università di Roma)
- *Do Google searches produce multimodally relevant results? A case study for searches in English* (Carmen Serena Santonocito, Università degli Studi di Messina)
- *Humor and modal interplay in TikTok's POV genre* (Audrey Willoughby, Università degli Studi di Milano)

SEM54. Abstracts

Lexicalisation patterns of punctuation marks in English colon a multimodal perspective

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This paper investigates the patterns of lexicalization and the pragmatic functions of punctuation in oral forms of language. Punctuation marks are written signs that traditionally lack phonetic realization in speech and are therefore not typically verbalized. Under certain circumstances and for specific pragmatic purposes, however, they may be explicitly realized or mentioned in conversation. Examples include the use of *slash* as a spoken conjunction (Curzan 2013; Fiorentini & Miola 2019) and the use of *period* as a marker of finality or affective emphasis. As communication becomes increasingly shaped by digital and hybrid media, the boundaries between writing and speech, and between visual and auditory modalities, are becoming more porous. In particular, computer-mediated communication—through social media, texting, and messaging apps—has amplified exposure to written signs and facilitated their migration into speech, a phenomenon recognized as a leading force in language change (Baron 1984; Crystal 2006). Adopting a multimodal pragmatic perspective (Haryanti et al. 2023), this study presents preliminary findings on how punctuation operates pragmatically in spoken English, focusing on its functions as a resource for meaning-making beyond its original syntactic role. Drawing on corpus data from the TV corpus (Davies 2019), it maps selected instances of punctuation undergoing lexicalization and pragmaticalization, and discusses their emerging roles as discourse markers, coordinators, or stance indicators. Rather than aiming for an exhaustive account, the paper identifies key trends that highlight how written signs are increasingly integrated into spoken language, not merely as symbolic artifacts but as active pragmatic tools. It ultimately argues that a multimodal pragmatic framework is essential to account for the complex interplay of modalities in contemporary, digitally influenced communication.

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The hypostatic union of multimodality and pragmatics in Dorothy Sayers' *The man born to be king*

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The Man Born to Be King is a cycle of 12 radio plays, based on the biblical gospel narratives, written by Dorothy Sayers and first produced by the BBC in 1941-2. While the recordings of the original wartime production have unfortunately

been partially lost, the 1975 BBC Radio production is, however, available in its entirety on the digital platform Audible.com (Sayers, 1975). The present study examines the multimodal and pragmatic features of the 1975 production in terms of characterisation and the construction of overlapping, interconnected meanings and implicatures.

The plays, written for serial radio production, employ verbal and auditory semiotic modes to present the character of Jesus as a captivating, extraordinarily human and divine presence throughout the plays. The disciples, the Pharisees, historical figures such as Pontius Pilate, King Herod, and other characters come to life through the dialogues. Suprasegmental auditory features such as prosody, together with audio effects, music, diatopic, diastratic, and diaphasic variation are employed to communicate both on intra- and extra-diagetic levels (between characters and with the hearer).

The current study aims to combine core concepts in pragmatics, such as Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1989), with foundational studies in multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2020) to examine the interplay of the verbal and auditory modes in this, hitherto understudied, cycle of radio plays. Preliminary findings point to a sort of “hypostatic union” or symbiosis between the semiotic modes in their construction of the human and the divine.

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Multimodal pragmatics at its best: A qualitative analysis of ASMR videos on TikTok

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This paper examines the multimodal pragmatic techniques employed in Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) videos on TikTok, demonstrating how creators strategically activate multimodality and multisensoriality to induce relaxation and sleep in viewers (Barrat & Davis 2015; Poerio et al. 2018; Engelbregt et al. 2022). ASMR content relies on a combination of auditory, visual, and tactile cues to trigger tingling sensations and deep calmness. By analyzing a selection of popular TikTok ASMR videos, this study identifies recurring multimodal pragmatic strategies – such as whispered speech, rhythmic tapping, and deliberate hand movements – that enhance sensory engagement.

The research adopts a multimodal discourse analysis framework (see, for instance Wang 2023) to explore how these techniques function synergistically, leveraging TikTok’s short-form video format to maximize immediacy and intimacy (Bhandari & Bim 2020). Particular attention is given to parasocial interaction, where creators simulate personal attention through direct gaze and soft-spoken role-plays, fostering a sense of connection that amplifies relaxation. Additionally, the study investigates how visual aesthetics (lighting, framing) and editing techniques (close-ups, layered sounds) contribute to the overall sensory experience.

Findings will suggest that TikTok ASMR videos exploit multimodal affordances to create an immersive, soothing environment, catering to users seeking stress relief or sleep aid (Zappavigna 2019). This analysis not only expands pragmatic research into digital discourse but also highlights the growing role of multisensorial communication in social media’s therapeutic uses. The study ultimately argues that ASMR content on TikTok exemplifies how digital platforms facilitate new forms of sensory-driven, pragmatic engagement to address contemporary wellness needs.

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Do Google searches produce multimodally relevant results? A case study for searches in English

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The pervasiveness of multimodal meaning-making in digital contexts has created a shift in epistemological processes (Sindoni and Moschini 2021), including the multimodal representation of sensitive groups such as same-sex couples, which have long been subject to various forms of discrimination and violence (Paterson and Turner 2019).

Building upon Sindoni's (2013) concept of the "multimodal relevance maxim", this study integrates multimodal pragmatics (O'Halloran *et al.* 2014) as a novel perspective to investigate meaning-making in digital landscapes through both the interaction of different semiotic modes and contextual factors. The digital landscape from which data are collected is Google Search, here conceived as a "semiotic technology" (Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018), i.e., not merely a neutral information retrieval tool but an active participant in meaning-making processes where the interaction among different modes communicates corporate interests and human bias (Santonocito forthcoming).

Since the notion of conversation in digital landscapes has extended beyond verbal text alone, this study examines how algorithmically curated content on Google Search challenges traditional conversational principles of quality, quantity, relevance and manner (Grice 1975). Employing a multimodal social semiotic framework (Kress 2010), the research analyses the combination of verbal and visual resources in constructing multimodal relevance when querying the term "same-sex couples" within a UK-based digital landscape, with a focus on how Google's algorithmic processes prioritise the multimodal arrangement of search results in response to potentially discriminatory queries.

Building on recent advances in digital-era multimodal pragmatic analysis (Haryanti *et al.* 2023), this study ultimately argues for the integration of algorithmic and multimodal awareness into contemporary pragmatic frameworks to better capture how digital technologies participate in the co-construction of discourse and ideology.

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Humor and modal interplay in TikTok's POV genre

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TikTok is widely recognized for its humor-driven performances, which have become a dominant form of user expression. However, the ways in which humor is constructed through multimodal choices on the platform remain underexplored. This paper presents an exploratory study of English-language humorous point-of-view (POV) videos, investigating how users craft meaning and negotiate shared understanding through modal interplay. The POV format offers a popular means of presenting ironic or exaggerated takes on everyday life. Humor often arises through layered performances and tonal shifts, shaped by TikTok's affordances and grounded in shared references that make them recognizable to in-group audiences (Trillò, 2024).

The study investigates 20 such videos using a multimodal discourse analysis informed by the framework developed by Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hiippala (2017), which emphasizes the structured interaction of semiotic modes and their functional interdependencies. It asks: What semiotic configurations recur across POV videos, and how do these support comedic framing? Annotation is conducted in ELAN using a tiered coding system to capture sequencing and modal coordination over time. This approach draws on Wildfeuer's (2014) extension of the framework to time-based narrative media, offering tools to analyze how viewer interpretations are guided by shifts in framing, temporal alignment, and modality-based cues.

Special attention is given to the ways in which modes are combined to enhance, contrast, or shift meaning. For instance, a solemn facial expression paired with a cheerful caption may create irony by prompting the viewer to reinterpret the tone of the message as sarcastic or delivered in a deadpan style, rather than sincere. Likewise, a sudden camera zoom timed with a character's expression of realization can amplify the punchline by visually mirroring an emotional shift, aligning the viewer's attention with the intended moment of surprise or emphasis. These examples show how humor may arise not just from what is represented, but from how and when modes are combined.

This study contributes to multimodal pragmatics and humor research by offering a methodologically grounded account of how humorous meaning is realized through the coordinated use of modes in short-form digital video, highlighting the pragmatic work involved in guiding interpretation and negotiating shared understanding in platform-specific genres. In doing so, it demonstrates how humor in digital contexts serves as a socially situated, meaning-making practice shaped by the affordances and expectations inherent to the medium.

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