



Multimodality and Identity

Theo van Leeuwen



MULTIMODALITY AND IDENTITY

This book brings together the work of leading theorist, Theo van Leeuwen, on typography, colour, texture, sound and movement, and shows how they are used to communicate identity, both corporate and individual. The book provides a detailed approach to analysing the key elements of multimodal style, and shows how these can be applied to a wide range of domains, including typography, product design, architecture, and animation films.

Combining sociological insights into contemporary forms of identity with multimodal approaches to analysing how these identities are expressed, the text is richly illustrated with examples from fashion, the built environment, logos, modern art and more. With sample analyses, this user-friendly text provides clear methods for analysis and creative strategies for the practice of multimodal communication.

Providing an invaluable toolkit to analysing the key elements of multimodal design and the way they work together, this book is essential reading for students, teachers and researchers in the field of multimodal communication, whether in communication studies, linguistics, design studies, media studies or the arts.

Theo van Leeuwen is currently Professor of Language and Communication at the University of Southern Denmark and Honorary Professor at the University of New South Wales, Australia. His many influential publications include *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* (with Gunther Kress); *Speech, Music, Sound*; *Introducing Social Semiotics*, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*, and *Reading Images* (with Gunther Kress).



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Theo van Leeuwen

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INTRODUCTION

The “grammar of visual design” Gunther Kress and I first published 25 years ago (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996) focused on the way composition enables the representational and interactive functions of visual communication. Earlier work on images had mostly dealt with the denotative and connotative meanings of the people, places and things shown *in* images and treated composition in formalistic and aesthetic ways, or in terms of the quite specific conventions of genres like the Nativity, the Pietà, the Last Supper, etc. We wanted to show that composition realizes meaningful and systematic *relations* between those represented people, places and things, just as grammar realized meaningful and systematic relations between the words in sentences. To do so we combined concepts from literature on art and design, such as Arnheim’s (1982) theory of visual composition, with concepts from Halliday’s functional grammar, to show that images and words can make quite similar kinds of meaning, albeit in different ways.

This work had some success. A third edition of our book *Reading Images – The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996) has recently been published, and, during the 25 years of its existence, the book has stood model for other work on non-linguistic modes of communication and been of use to a range of research projects. Yet we soon realized its limitations. Two are particularly important.

First, in *Reading Images* we had focused mainly on images and diagrams. The book was called “Reading *Images*.” But visual design manifests itself in other ways as well. It also includes, for instance, typography and the decorative patterns that are so ubiquitous in our everyday environment. Although most people will never “read” such designs consciously, they will nevertheless appreciate them and choose them with care, as expressing *their* taste, and hence *their* identity.

Second, we had developed a grammar, which could be applied to materially very different images, to oil paintings as well as photographs, to still as well as moving images, and to two-dimensional as well three-dimensional images such as sculptures

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and children's toys. But perhaps oil paintings, photographs and other media, even when drawing on the same compositional resources, do not make meaning in quite the same way. Perhaps they bring their own unique semiotic resources into play as well. This realization resulted in the distinction between "modes" and "media", which we made in our book *Multimodal Discourse* (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, the semiotic resources we had described in *Reading Images* we now called *modes*, and semiotic resources that are grounded in specific materials we now called *media*, using the term the way artists do, as an indication of the materials used in a work. It also resulted in work on colour which we first published in 2001 and later included in the 2nd edition of *Reading Images*.

In this work on colour, we took our inspiration, not from grammar, but from phonology, the theory of the *sound*, hence the materiality, of language. In Jakobson and Halle's (1956) "distinctive feature" theory, speech sounds are bundles of simultaneously present qualities. A [p] for instance, is unvoiced *and* labial *and* plosive, among other things. Colours, we thought, can, similarly, be conceived of as bundles of features, features such as hue, value, saturation, luminosity, and so on. All of these are simultaneously present, but to different degrees, and it is through the way they combine, in their specific proportions, that colours acquire their specific character.

For Jakobson and Halle, distinctive features have no meaning in themselves. They function only to distinguish phonemes, and hence words, from each other. For us, distinctive features are also semantic features. To explain how they make meaning, we drew on the cognitive metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), for whom meaning derives from metaphors based on concrete, embodied experience. In the case of colour, this would include, for instance, our experience of day and night, of using lights and lighting in different contexts, and so on. We also realized that there exist standardized configurations of features, cliché's people can readily associate with specific provenances, with the times or places or other contexts from which they come. Meaning then derives from that provenance, from the associations which people have with those times, places or other contexts. In this, we built on the way Barthes (1977) described how "mythologies" such as "italianicity" can be triggered by the use of the colours of the Italian flag in an advertisement for a brand of pasta.

We referred to resources such as colour as *parameters*, because they co-occur with other resources in specific media. Oil paintings involve shape and colour, and perhaps also texture, for instance, and animation films involve shape, colour, timbre and movement, to mention just two examples. Parameters behave differently from the systems we described in *Reading Images*. Rather than offering more or less binary choices (placement on the right *or* the left, looking at the viewer *or* not) that lead to other more "delicate" choices, they offer bundles of features which are always all present, but *graded*. The choice is not whether a colour is either dark or light, but *how* dark or light, *how* luminous or dull, *how* modulated or plain and so on, a colour is, and it is this that gives colours their complex, composite meanings. The two colours in Rothko's *Red on Maroon* (1959), for

instance, are dark, a little desaturated, warm, mixed, modulated and luminous. This makes them dark and brooding (value), complex and subtle (modulation), ambivalent (red mixed with blue), yet also deeply felt (warm) and illuminating (luminosity) – not for nothing did Rothko call his paintings “mood pictures” (Moszynska, 1990: 167).

Over the past 20 years, I have developed these ideas further, together with key collaborators and friends, and applied them to work on vocal timbre (van Leeuwen, 1999, 2014; Mulder and Van Leeuwen, 2019), typography (Van Leeuwen, 2006; Johannessen and Van Leeuwen, 2018), decoration (Van Leeuwen, 2011) and texture (Djonov and Van Leeuwen, 2011), while two of my PhD students developed the approach to movement I will draw on in Chapter 7 of this book (Leão, 2012; Han, 2021, see also He and Van Leeuwen, 2019). One of the aims of the book is to update this work and bring it together in a single volume. The book therefore offers a comprehensive approach to analysing graphic shape, colour, texture, timbre and movement, and the way they interact in multimodal texts, artefacts and performances.

But the book has another aim as well. Parametric systems not only make meaning in a different way, they also make different *kinds* of meaning. Whereas the systems we outlined in *Reading Images* described the *functional* design of images, the resources I describe in this book realize the *style* in which this is done – and style is, and always has been, a resource for expressing identity. This book therefore complements *Reading Images*, because in contemporary visual design, functional design and identity design always go together.

Identity is a complex issue. It has been, and still is, differently understood and differently experienced in different times and places. In today’s complex and rapidly changing society, it is often something people search for, uncertain where and to whom they belong, and what styles of life they should adopt. The other aim of this book, then, is to study identity from a *social* semiotic point of view, showing how, not only stable but also hybrid and conflicted or confused identities manifest themselves through different uses of shape, colour, texture, timbre and movement, and how these uses are socially and culturally valued and regulated.

The first chapter will set the stage by presenting different conceptualizations of identity in their cultural, social and historical contexts, with particular emphasis on the contemporary “lifestyle” identities that form the main topic of this book, and the way in which they transform other, older concepts of identity. The second chapter explains the differences between functional design and identity design, stressing that both always co-exist, even though identity design will form the main topic of this book. The third chapter discusses the semiotic principles that underlie how style realizes identity design. The remaining chapters describe and exemplify methods of analysing shape, colour, texture, movement and timbre, and, in the final chapter, a new take on analysing how they interact in multimodal texts, artefacts and performances. As digital technologies play a key role in providing every computer user with resources and platforms for identity design, technology will play a key role in all of these chapters. Finally, throughout the book, I will make a point of showing how 20th-century experimental artists have paved the

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way for contemporary identity design. The book therefore not only provides methods for analysing the values that are expressed in contemporary identity design but also seeks to understand the history of identity design, asking how and why identity design, and the values it expresses, has become such a dominant aspect of contemporary culture.

1

THE SOCIAL SEMIOTICS OF IDENTITY

Introduction

The term “identity” plays a key role in today’s social and cultural life. While it may seem to suggest something fixed and definite, as often as not it refers to something searched for, something lost that must be rediscovered, or something to be created anew from a bewildering range of possibilities. As Bauman has put it (2011: 19):

One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself amongst the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other’s presence. ‘Identity’ is the name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty.

In seeking to understand identity, we will need to draw on two kinds of resources, sociological (and sometimes philosophical) resources for understanding what identity *is*, and semiotic resources for understanding how identity *is expressed*.

There are many different ways of thinking about identity. Some focus on the unique individual characteristics that distinguish the “self” from others, whether in psychological terms such as “personality” and “temperament,” or in terms such as “character,” which carry moral overtones. Others focus on dimensions of our social selves, for instance gender, skin colour, religion, nationality and culture. Appiah (2018) has stressed how complex such identities can be – he himself was born in England with an English mother and a Ghanaian father, grew up in Ghana, is black, gay, and lives in New York. While Appiah accepts and even appreciates this complexity, others may turn a single strand of their complex identities into the

core of how they see themselves and want to be seen by others. And that is not all. The social self also includes the roles we have to play in life, as partners in different kinds of relationships, as parents or children, as workers of one kind or another and so on, and the attitudes and lifestyles of the real or virtual communities we belong to or would like to belong to. Again, some think of identity as something that can change, or even be chosen, for others identity is an inescapable label that constrains the rights and opportunities they have in life. All of these are discursive resources for understanding and for making identity.

The second set of identity resources is semiotic – resources we use to *express* our identity in ways that others can recognize and accept as evidence of our identity. As already foreshadowed in the introduction, these are *stylistic* resources – styles of embodied performance (the way we speak, the facial expressions we use, the way we hold and move our bodies) and the styles of the material artefacts we use to express identity – styles of dress and grooming, the styles of the objects we use, and the styles of the settings we create for our lives.

This chapter will describe four concepts of identity, together with the way they manifest themselves semiotically – *social identity*, in which our identity essentially derives from our place in the social order; *individual identity*, in which our identity is a set of consistent, individual and *inner* characteristics; *role identity*, in which we have as many identities as the roles we have to play in life; and contemporary “*lifestyle*” *identity*, which focuses on leisure time activities and consumer preferences, but also on attitudes and worldviews. I will try to show that these different concepts of identity have different semiotic realizations which, however, often co-exist in complex combinations.

Social identity

Social identity, as I use the term here, stems from people’s place in a pre-existing social order. It has no place for a deeper self, a “real me,” separate from society. It has two key characteristics. First, it defines identity in terms of people’s *relations* to each other, for example in often complex kinship systems. Von Sturmer (1981:13) has described how Aboriginal Australians, when they first meet, introduce themselves in terms of their relation to each other before a conversation can be properly started:

MAREEBA MAN: Where you from?

MICKEY: I’m Edward River man. Where you from?

MAREEBA MAN: I’m Lama Lama man ...do you know X?

MICKEY: No, do you know Y?

MAREEBA MAN: No, do you know Z?

MICKEY: Yes, she’s my auntie.

MAREEBA MAN: That old lady is my granny, I must call you daddy.

MICKEY: I must call you boy. You give me a cigarette.

This differs from contemporary Western introductions, where, in meetings with strangers, people's names (hence their unique identities) and professions (roles) are usually the first questions asked, together, of course, with nationality or ethnicity if you happen to have a foreign accent or "look different."

Second, in this kind of social identity, the social order mirrors the order of the known world. Social identity has *meaning*, through stories that describe this known world and its creation by real or mythical founders or original ancestors. It relates people, not only to other people but also to things, places, animals and their spiritual values.

Social identity is crucially expressed on the body. Durkheim (1976 [1915]: 232) already noted that people "are led by an instinctive tendency, as it were, to paint or cut upon the body images that bear witness to their common experience." The face is a specially important signifier of identity, and in the case of social identity, the unique face we are born with must become a *social* face. Maori face tattooings or *mokos* (traditionally they involved chiselling the skin to form furrows) are a case in point.

The face shown in Figure 1.1 is a kind of identity card in which each area conveys specific identity markers – the centre forehead (*ngakaipikirau*) indicates rank; the area above the brows (*ngunga*) position; the temples (*uma*) marital status; the eyes and the nose kinship group (*uirere*); the cheek the man's kind of work (*taiohou*); the chin prestige and sacred power (*wairua*); the jaw birth status (*taitoto*)



FIGURE 1.1 Maori moko. Wikipedia

and the area under the nose (*raurau*) bears a “signature” used, for instance, in buying property or signing contracts. But the patterns do not just signify the elements of social identity. They are also, as Lévi-Strauss noted (1963: 257) “messages fraught with spiritual and moral significance. The purpose of Maori tattooings is not only to imprint a drawing onto the flesh, but also to stamp onto the mind all the traditions and philosophy of the group.”

Today, many people again seek to imprint a durable identity on their faces, or on other body parts. But, as I will discuss in more detail later on, the identities they convey are now *individual* identities. A New Zealand tattoo studio (<http://www.metadigital.co.nz>) explains “how to tell your story in kirituhi (skin art) tattoo otherwise known as ta moko” and provides potential customers with a catalogue of motifs, whose meanings now convey individual character traits, a dog skin cloak (*hikuaaua*) representing courage and strength, for example, and fish scales (*unaunhi*) abundance and health. As the catalogue explains, you can then “add the important people in your life journey” as well. In short, tattoos are now seen as giving meaning and value to people’s individual identities and life stories.

To give another example, Lévi-Strauss (1962: 171) has described how the hair of boys from the Native American Osage and Omaha people was traditionally cut to indicate their clan. These clans were named after the totems (objects, animals or parts of animals, etc.) which provided the main motifs, not only for the boys’ hair styles but also for other body decorations and for objects and dwellings, and which represented the clan’s key values and ideas and its rules for what the members of each clan could eat, who they could marry, and so on. All this, and more, was expressed quite precisely and quite specifically by hair style.

Like Maori tattoo motifs, such Native American “scalp lock” hairstyles have also come back into fashion, for men, women and children alike, sometimes even representing animals (the “Lizard Mohawk”). But again, rather than specific social identities, they now embody generalized values, often based on an association with warriors. In specific contexts, this can then come to signify, for instance, aggressive vigilantism (e.g. Robert de Niro in *Taxi Driver* (1979), rebellion (e.g. punks’ “Mohawks”), non-conformity (e.g. David Beckham, in one of his many guises) and more.

Dress is another key signifier of social identity. The Prague School semiotician Bogatyrev (1971 [1935]) has described how traditional dress and hair style signified social identity in Moravian Slovakia. It could tell you where the wearer came from – there were 28 costume districts, and you could, for instance, recognize a man from Pozlovice because he would wear two velvet bands round his hat and two carmine ribbons with a green one in between, while a man from Biskupice would wear one velvet band and a red ribbon. It could tell you the wearer’s occupation – magistrates wore boots, workers the rough leather *krpce*, a kind of moccasin. It could tell you the social class of the wearer – squires wore bright blue breeches, peasants black or coarse white ones. It could tell you the age and marital status of the wearer – in the Mutinece-Novorany district, for instance, unmarried men wore hats with narrow rims and red and white ribbons, while married men would widen the rim and wear

a broad gold band. It could even tell you the wearer's religion – Protestant girls would twist their hair around lacing, while Catholic girls would wear “horned” head pads. In short, costume very visibly indicated one's place in those small, rural communities, a place which would have been experienced as necessary and meaningful, and grounded in as yet unquestioned divine authority.

Bogatyrev wrote in a time of accelerating industrialization and urbanization, where such traditional communities began to be affected by the emigration of the younger generation. Earlier, Tönnies (2001 [1887]) had influentially written about the difference between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* – “community” and “society” – the former based on durable relations of kinship, neighbourliness and friendship, the latter on ever-changing, purely functional, contractual roles in which people act from individual rather than communal interest and values. This had created a nostalgia for (and perhaps idealization of) the idea of “community” and an interest in dialects and folkloristic customs which were in fact gradually changing or even disappearing. But few things disappear entirely. The costumes could still be revived in national celebrations, or, for instance, in the work of fashion designers such as Edwina Hörl (quoted in Mora, 2009: 75):

My collection celebrates the rediscovery of my Austrian culture and multicultural traditions. It embodies a humorous mix of elements from Central and Eastern Europe: artistic handicraft, like handmade straw shoes from Austria and embroidered fabric from Czech and Switzerland. I picked up clothing themes and silhouettes that are frequently inspired by what ordinary people wear in these regions, like aprons or a Sunday suit.

Traditional societies can also themselves recontextualize their identity signifiers. Anna Crane (2019) has described how the Aboriginal artist George Mung Mung created the sculpture shown in Figure 1.2.

The sculpture is hand-carved from wood and painted with charcoal, white and red paint and natural ochre, and was made for a school which the Sisters of St Joseph had established for the Gija people of North-Western Australia at a time when cattle barons had evicted them from their native lands to avoid complying with a new law that obliged them to pay Aboriginal workers the same wages as white workers. George made the “Warmun Mary” after the school's plaster statue of the Virgin Mary had broken. To mention just two examples from Crane's detailed analysis, the dotted design traditionally identifies unmarried girls, but now also came to stand for Mary's status as a virgin, while charcoal traditionally refers to Gija birthing practices, but now also came to stand for Mary's role as the mother of Christ. Thus the sculpture could be used in the school both to tell the story of the Virgin Mary and to explain traditional Gija female identities and spiritual and social practices. In the words of George's friend Hector Jandany (cited by Crane, 2019: 16), George “was looking forward to a blackfella way and a *kartiya* (white person) way, he was a two-way man for the Dreaming.”