

## **Multimodality and the digital turn in teaching business discourse. An Introduction to the Special Issue**

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### **1. Digital technologies and multimodal discourse**

The study of digital discourse emerged through the use of diverse mediated discourses to communicate information. The discourse analytical tools that had been originally formulated to analyse language use were then extended to the analysis of digital discourse and to studies on digital business discourse (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009; Darics, 2015, 2016). However, common patterns of interaction in the digital world are changing and new patterns of interaction have emerged, particularly those concerning socio-semiotic resources for online configurations of forms of interaction such as video, blogging and social networking (Sindoni, 2013). The dynamic combination of multiple symbols and semiotic resources within a specific communication context has resulted in the emergence of multimodal discourse (Liu et al., 2024). Thus the analysis of discourse includes various semiotic resources and the study of a diverse array of mediated communication modalities including words, images, colour and sounds in the interactive and compositional meaning-making process (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). These new interactive modalities blur the distinction between oral and written discourse in digital texts. They challenge the current way of conducting linguistic analysis as simply analysing oral and written texts, and require multimodal frameworks of analysis (Sindoni, 2013).

In many ways, multimodality should always be part of digital discourse studies, as it has been considered a core concept in sociocultural linguistics and discourse analysis for some time (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Given the increasingly multimedia and multimodal nature of digital communication and the growing complexity of multimedia formats and media, the study of language symbols, both verbal and non-verbal, provides a broader socio-semiotic perspective to digital discourse studies (Thurlow et al., 2020). In this way, speech and writing are considered language modes and, as semiotic resources, on a par with image, colours, sound, etc. (Sindoni, 2013).

Liu et al. (2024) stress that discourse is a core research object with language as a key component of multimodal discourse studies (MDS). The authors find that applying semiotic resources across social media, identity, literacy, politics, education and gender illustrates MDS's broad scope and focus on knowledge construction and cognition, thus demonstrating interdisciplinary trends. While the literature in the field of multimodal studies is wide and varied for a number of disciplines, Liu et al.'s (2024) bibliometric analysis of MDS revealed that the study of multimodal discourse emerged gradually over the last 25 years. In fact, 2012 was the year when publications in multimodal discourse studies started to noticeably increase. On the other hand, of the most frequently discussed topics, only 17 publications concerned business disciplines compared to the top category, linguistics, with 496 publications. Overall, social sciences and humanities benefitted the most from multimodal discourse studies. Thus, this Special Issue fills this gap by providing a collection of activities for teaching and learning multimodal business discourse that are specifically tailored to the business communication context.

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One example of a multimodal business discourse study is Garzone's (2009) exploration of multimodal corporate communication in the Campbell Soup website. She discovered the extensive and effective use of multimodal resources that depict the company's distinctive American identity. Another example is Portman's (2020) social semiotic analysis of Instagram, which is used for corporate marketing focussing on food visualisation by two grocery chains in Switzerland. Although the depicted food was banal, the semiotic resources employed by the two grocery chains gave the impression that the food was more related to social hierarchies of taste and privilege. Drawing on the social semiotic approach to multimodality, Xia (2023) analysed how visual and verbal resources are strategically employed and combined in TED talks to explain complicated scientific knowledge to lay audiences. The results offer strategies for disseminating more engaging and accessible knowledge, as well as expanding semiotic and communicative repertoires that are increasingly crucial in the digitally driven world we live in.

Furthermore, students must understand these socio-semiotic resources and their meaning making in specific communicative contexts in order to produce effective multimodal communication for the digital age, and to be able to respond to the digital demands of the job market. Instructors need new pedagogical tools to help them move from conventional teaching practices, such as the curricula and qualitative assessment measures that categorise and judge individual performance, to more fluid learning and teaching practices in the context of multiliteracies and new pedagogies oriented towards multimodal digital texts, practices and communities (Sindoni & Moschini, 2022). Therefore, this Special Issue fills this gap by providing studies of innovative multimodal pedagogical practices.

## 2. Challenges for teaching multimodal business discourse

A growing number of university students, both native and non-native speakers of English, expect to acquire high-level digital communication skills and competences to successfully handle business communication in their future careers. These students belong to the so-called 'generation Z' (born between 1997 and 2012), an age group with innate digital fluency, active use of social media and expert consumption of visual and aural communication. In the digitalised information age, workers need to manage strategic collaboration activities and information flows within and across organisations (Pfeffermann & Gould, 2017). Indeed, digitalised information has led them to reassess management discourse, particularly the use of multimodal discourse. Thus, lecturers and trainers in higher education are faced with new pedagogical challenges to answer the needs and expectations of these new cohorts of highly digitalised learners.

The manifold facets of business communication and the great variety of genres, both written and oral (Garzone & Gotti, 2011) have been strongly impacted by the overwhelming power of the visual component and by the use of digital technologies. Remediation of traditional channels of communication (ranging from brochures to web based genres) and resemiotisation (from verbal texts to a range of semiotic resources) have modified the way communication takes place today. Lecturers and trainers are challenged by the rapidly evolving media and the new forms of digital communication more than ever, and are therefore called upon to reshape their materials and methods. These redesigned materials and methods must train students to identify and analyse the grammar of visual discourse (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) and how business communication takes shape through new media. Without previously analysing the discourse of online genres such as emails (Roshid et al., 2022), blogs, text messages, forums (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010) and networked interactions (McKee & Porter, 2017), students may run the risk of appearing impolite (Decock & Depraetere, 2018), miscommunicating, reducing productivity and harming business relationships (Davis et al., 2009), or sending the wrong signals (Skovholt & Svennevig, 2013).

Another ongoing issue is declining literacy (Sindoni, 2013). Only in the last ten years have multimodal discourse studies emphasised solving social and educational issues. Recent developments in multimodal literacy suggest that the integration of multimodal discourse analysis in various disciplines, as well as the broad application of multimodal resources and pedagogies, have a positive effect on digital literacy in social media and language learning contexts (Liu et al., 2024; Sindoni, 2013). Thus students and instructors need to understand various symbols, both verbal and non-verbal, and their collective influence on the construction of effective multimodal discourse.

In spite of the need for new forms of digitalised communication pedagogies, previous research into teaching business communication has mainly focused on business discourse (Ainsworth, 2020; Alessi & Jacobs, 2016; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009; Bargiela-Chiappini et al., 2013; Darics, 2015; Mautner & Reiner, 2017; Pfeffermann & Gould, 2017), genre approaches and models to teach business communication (Ainsworth,

2021; Daly & Davy, 2016; Jonsson & Blåsjö, 2020; Szanajda & Ou, 2017) and language for business (Darics & Koller, 2018). Less attention has been paid to teaching semiotic strategies that take into consideration the multimodal dimension of business communication (Hartle et al., 2022). Even less emphasis has been placed on pedagogical approaches for teaching business discourse (Ilie et al., 2019; Mautner, 2016). Thus, students need to learn new discourse strategies for effective online communication in business contexts (Darics, 2016; Jensen, 2009). They need to understand the role of online discourse and methods to socially and professionally construct appropriate discursive interactions in the evolving digital business economy (Pfeffermann & Gould, 2017).

Other elements to consider are broader developments in society, particularly societal values, attitudes and beliefs, which bring new ideas and new contents involving profound changes in discursive practices and patterns of interaction. The complexities of teaching business discourse have increased as communication flows have intensified (Pfeffermann & Gould, 2017). Moreover, different organisational and professional discourse communities need to be considered when developing teaching methods and materials (Brueckner et al., 2018). Therefore, academics need to consider the impact of different contexts on new teaching modes and practices in multimodal business discourse that mirror the evolving socioeconomic environment of this digital age.

### 3. Contributions

Drawing from scholars, teachers and practitioners in the fields of business discourse and business communication, the papers included in this Special Issue exploit the impetus of digital technology and multimodal resources in communication to propose the application of innovative pedagogical approaches and materials to the ESP classroom. The project was initiated on the occasion of the ABC Europe, Africa and Middle East Conference held in Naples in January 2023.

The paper by Basanta, Vangehuchten and Van Herck addresses the goal to teach ESP students to handle professional email messages in response to online complaints, a professional skill also known as 'webcare' that requires specific pragmatic-discursive competence. On the basis of a corpus of authentic responses to complaints about products or services in the field of telecommunications, the authors first present a theoretical framework to identify the presence of defensive and/or accommodating response strategies as well as, at the rhetorical level, the content of the conversational human voice (CHV). Then they propose the application of this analytical model to the teaching of language mediation strategies specific to the genre of email messages in the cultural context of Spanish business discourse. This paper contains a wealth of example activities leading students to recognize discourse moves and submoves in email discourse, learn to use defensive vs accommodating strategies, safeguard the company's reputation, show empathy and propose an effective resolution for the customer's complaint.

In order to meet the learning needs of MA students in a Department of Modern Languages specializing in international communication, Giacosa and Pulcini describe a course in English Language and Linguistics in which students study corporate crises. The authors redesigned the course combining the observation of language patterns through the use of professional communication language corpora and the multimodal analysis of company websites. The teaching method was task-based to stimulate student engagement and critical thinking through practical group activities. This paper particularly examines students' feedback obtained by tutors through an end-of-course questionnaire, a common practice in higher education to provide quality assurance. The results confirm that the modules of CMC and multimodality helped the most to develop students' professional skills; the module on corpus linguistics contributed to the development of English competence; the choice of this course's content and pedagogical framework greatly contributed to the refinement of students' digital skills. Overall, the strong interdisciplinary nature and relevance to the world of business were the most appreciated characteristics of this course.

Meredith's paper deals with and stresses the importance of blended mobility for training students in international business communication. In the face of increasingly AI-driven work environments, the benefits of a course aimed at developing 'human intelligence' skills such as intercultural competencies, communication skills, problem-solving, critical and analytical thinking are presented and discussed. The outcomes of the blended program that involved business students from universities in the United States and Hungary in 2022, 2023 and 2024 emerge from the analysis of students' self-reflection narratives. Digital media literacy appears to be the starting point for the learning of a much wider range of 'employability skills' that are fostered by the combination of technology-based and short-term physical contact, including 'real world' experience, self-

awareness, adaptability, conflict resolution and increased confidence to successfully face an increasingly interconnected and globalized world.

Parini proposes the introduction of audio-visual material with automatic subtitles in the ESL/ESP classroom to improve students' listening, translation and post-editing skills. After an exhaustive overview of audio-visual translation and of technological advances in the generation of interlingual and intralingual subtitles through the application of automatic speech recognition and machine translation, the author presents a microteaching experience with a TED talk video on the topic of marketing, broadcast by YouTube. Students were first encouraged to identify, classify and correct mistakes in the intralingual subtitles generated by the speech recognition system and subsequently to analyze the 'cascading' errors in the automatic intralingual Italian subtitles. The benefits of this activity may not only impact on students' language competence but also on their exposure to and engagement with sophisticated digital technology, which, despite its remarkable progress, cannot do without human supervision to guarantee high standards.

The digital format of Annual Corporate Reports is an example of genre migration in business communication to the digital environment, moving away from a traditional paper or static pdf format to a multimodal artifact. A collection of video CEO statements is analyzed by Ruiz-Garrido and Palmer-Silveira from a multimodal perspective in order to pursue the attendant goal of exploiting these materials in the ESP classroom to enhance students' business communication skills. Videos are indeed a new digital genre and a powerful medium to inform stakeholders about the company's performance and present a positive narrative of its identity. Moreover, the authors claim that "the humanized discourse fulfilled by the CEO's emotions and attitudes is an asset of multimodal discourse that the written statement can hardly achieve". The authors suggest that the use of these materials may greatly contribute to the development of students' public speaking competence, engagement strategies and leadership skills.

The final paper by Strong presents a model to assess digital multimodal communication literacy, based on 4ML (four meta-literacies), i.e. digital literacy, multimedia skill literacy, multimodal design literacy and rhetorical literacy, which she summarizes using the descriptive labels of 'responsibility', 'skill', 'design' and 'audience'. In order to evaluate the efficacy of this model, a case study conducted in a business communication course in the United States in 2022 and based on the evaluation of student-created presentation slides, is described in detail. The researcher used a scoring rubric to evaluate two sets of students' slide decks in different semesters, to which a visual analysis of multimodal content was added. The results of this study show that digital literacy (the ability to present information in digital format) was the initial lowest skill, while rhetorical literacy (the appropriate and audience-centric use of language) was the initial highest skill. The intervention of explicit instruction determined an overall growth of all meta-literacies, but digital literacy was the skill that scored the most significant improvement. This study shows that a model for a structured, systematic evaluation of users' digital and multimodal skills may have a strong diagnostic power to implement adequate training of digitally literate workforce and content creators for communication in the new digital business landscape.

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