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Web experience as an expansion: a perspective on covert sales from multimodal discourse analysis

Arianna Maiorani

Abstract – In this paper the multimodal discourse analysis method is applied to the study of the Internet as a multimodal semiotic system. The paper is aimed at testing the validity of the functional framework used in linguistics as a perspective to study Internet multimodal communication in relation to covert-sales strategies. Two cases have been taken as examples: *The Matrix* website and the *Lord of the Rings Online* game, both inspired by successful movies and both involving a thriving online market.

1. INTRODUCTION: INTERNET AS A SEMIOTIC CHALLENGE

Internet is a most challenging as well as interesting field of research for the multimodal branch of systemic functional linguistics known as multimodal discourse analysis. Multimodal discourse analysis is based on the concept of culture as a compound of semiotic systems: language is one of them and its primary function is to communicate through the verbal mode. Systemic functional linguistics, through the model of Functional Grammar created by M.A.K. Halliday, [1] studies verbal discourse as a function-oriented form of semiosis and allows us to recognise the systemic connection between the context in which a message is created and the lexico-grammar¹ through which it is realised. Furthermore, since all act of communication is functional to a specific *context of situation*, within a specific *context of culture*, the systemic functional study of language allows us to understand how texts encode the society and culture they belong to. Thus, the systemic functional perspective allows the study of society through the language as social semiotic. In order to allow communication language construes human experience, enacts social relationships, and builds intelligible

sequences of texts through which this construal and enacting is discursively organised. Halliday calls the basic functions of language respectively *experiential, interpersonal, and textual*². The context of a message is formed by three basic components, *Field, Tenor* and *Mode*, which activate the basic meanings: *experiential, interpersonal, and textual*; these meanings are then realised in the specific lexico-grammar of the text. As a social semiotic theory of representation, the functional framework has been developed to create models through which other modes of communication can be investigated [2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. Multimodal discourse analysis studies discourse realised through different semiotic modes in a systemic functional perspective based on the three metafunctions (Fig. 1).

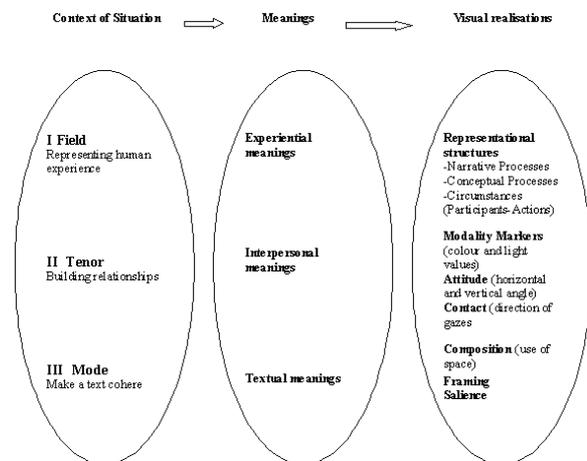


Figure 1. Functional relations between visual text and context. Based on Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; 2006.[2]

Internet is by nature a multimodal communicative dimension. It is an expansion of the outside world which is not subjected to the physical laws of time and space its same users have to obey. Can the functional framework be used as a tool to investigate the hyper-textual multimodal discourse? Can we

¹ Halliday sees the unity of lexis and grammar (*lexico-grammar*) in the realisation of all texts as the two poles of a single continuum (see Halliday 2004: 43 ff.)

² The term ‘metafunction’ is used to remind that ‘function’ is an intrinsic component of language: language is by nature ‘functional’ (see Halliday 2004: 31)

use multimodal discourse analysis to investigate a systemic relationship between society, hyper-context and hypertext?

2. INTERNET COMMUNITIES AND COVERT SALES STRATEGIES: TWO CASES.

As an expansion of the world outside, the Internet world has its own communities of many different typologies[7], and has also favoured thriving community markets. Communities of game players or movie fans, in particular, can keep on watching trailers, discussing in forums, searching for information and, most of all, buying related products through dedicated websites. Websites allow a continuous updating of on line games. They also keep a movie market 'alive' well before its theatre release and long after it. The most important items of this market are clothing and gadgets and, very often, role play on line games which promise to 'expand' the movie plot. Massive Multi-player Online Role Play Games (MMORPG) are another very interesting multimodal Internet phenomenon. Players can create one or more game identities and join the other members of the community during the game sessions. The way in which the presence of a user is represented in covert-sales oriented hyper-contexts will be the focus of the following multimodal analysis, which will be performed both on *The Matrix* movie website and on *The Lord of the Rings Online* MMORPG (hereafter LOTRO) This choice has been determined by three factors: both internet products are inspired by very successful movie trilogies; both movie trilogies have developed a thriving market of by-products for fans; they both belong to the science fiction/fantasy genre of narrative events.

3.a *The Matrix* website covert-sales strategy and the cockpit perspective.

The Matrix trilogy website is basically sales-oriented and advertises all items related to the Matrix world and philosophy. *The Matrix* was the first movie of the Internet era which was entirely based on the dichotomy virtual world/real world. The movies were

released between 1999 (*The Matrix*) and 2003 (*The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*). During the almost four years which separate the release of the first movie from its sequels, the website had the primary function of giving news and updates about the second and third movies, keeping the interest of the public alive. At the same time it also developed a thriving online market based on video/audio material, clothing, fan gadgets.

The website communicative strategy is based on the core of the movies plot [8]: the Matrix is a virtual world where the outside world is just replicated for those who enter it unconsciously, while it can be unlimitedly expanded for those who access it consciously. Online sales are construed as a consequence of experiencing the website as a 'door' to the Matrix world. The buyer's perspective as a traveller connected to the Matrix is construed though the use of cockpit-like environments through which the user can access different sections of the website and, most of all, through Quick Time .mov files, created by Apple to handle and reproduce simultaneous multimodal data. These files, located in the website Mainframe, are capable of containing data from different kinds of tracks (audio, visual, textual, etc.): each different track contains codecs or reference to its specific media stream, so that data of different nature can be kept separate but reproduced simultaneously. This allows the visualisation of digital environments that the site visitor can edit around his/her central point of view, which these environments implicitly reproduce. Figure 2 shows a schematic representation of how the .mov file, represented as a rotating cylinder, construes the central point of view of the web user:

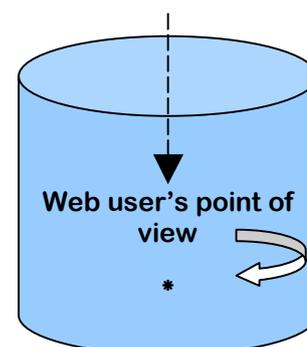


Figure 2. Schematic representation of a .mov file perspective.

Rather than displaying images or trailers to the site visitor on a classic bi-dimensional webpage, these files offer the possibility of virtually navigating in spaces developed around the implicit presence of a viewer, who, just because he/she is construed as being *inside* the Matrix, must not be reproduced by a multimodal (or, at least, visual) *alias*. A multimodal functional analysis performed on this kind of .mov generated environments reveals the intrinsic sales-oriented quality of this typology of files: in terms of experiential metafunction they allow the web user to visit a tridimensional environment by clicking on screen buttons (Fig. 3) provided on the online console frame. The user can also click on some highlighted spots (screens, levers, etc.) to scroll data pages or be directed to consecutive environments. All items that the user experiences during this visit are linked to items on sale on the website. In terms of interpersonal metafunction, they are structured to construe the web user as having the power to decide which environment to visit, which hyper-path to take; however, the user is always guided by predisposed mouse sensitive links that interact with him through beaming lights and beep sounds signaling sales oriented points of interest. In terms of textual metafunction, the web user is always construed as being the implicit centre of the .mov file multimodal output, the one around whom the whole Matrix world and its market rotate.

Thus, these files elicit interaction aimed at purchasing items on sale online as a consequence of having been *into* the Matrix world, rather than having watched it from outside. For this reason, I have defined the .mov files that have revealed this specific functionality as *Elicitors*. Furthermore, in order to experience these files, the web user has to purchase and download a specific software from the Apple website, which is a business partner of the Matrix market.



Figure 3. Example of *Elicitor* on the Matrix website.

Elicitors are linked to each other as a sort of 'net within the net'. They construe the web user as *interactively represented Participant*: that is, he/she is implicitly represented as 'point of view' when making the hyper-context move and activating links around his/her non-physical presence. He/she is interactively construed as being already *inside* the Matrix and constantly put in the position of 'piloting' his/her experience in the hyper-context of the website³. The functional analysis of these multimodal environments has therefore revealed that *Elicitors* are .mov files specifically used for covert sales multimodal on line strategies and that their functions are determined by sales-oriented hyper-contexts related to entertaining events and products. This specific multimodal strategy is based on what I will define as the *cockpit perspective*.

Representing the web user as if he/she were *inside* an Internet environment is a strategy used also for selling subscriptions to MMORPG. The following paragraph will show how, in this case, perspective changes according to the on-sale product.

3.b LOTRO: the *director's perspective*.

³ With respect to the definition of a web surfer interacting with a hyper-text as an "ergodist", discussed by A.K.K Chiew in O'Halloran 2004: 132 ff., the path described by visitors of *Elicitors* is characterised by a specific sales-oriented disposition of *lexia* (complex multimodal scrolling pages) and links that aim at covertly guiding the user towards purchase.

As a Massive Multi-player Online Role Play Game, *The Lord of the Rings Online*, can be said to be the by-product of the cinematographic transposition of a verbal text. It has been chosen as an example for the repeated transmediality of Tolkien's verbal text and therefore for its worldwide renown.

In order to start playing, the on line player has to create the character who will be his/her own representation in the multimodal hyper-context of the online game. This *alias* will have to be able to communicate with game generated characters and other players' representations⁴ [9]. The creation of a character is achieved through three consecutive attributive phases which imply the choice of a race and gender, the choice of a class and of a name, a geographical background and specific physical features. In each phase, the player has to make choices within a framework displayed on a webpage whose central focus is the character under construction, surrounded by a suggestive landscape (Fig.4)

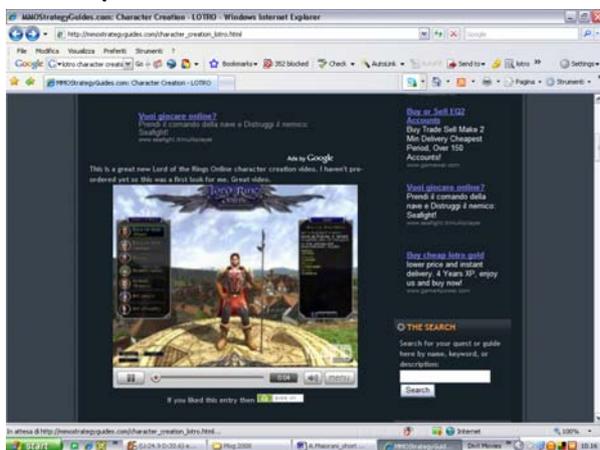


Figure 4. Creation of a LOTRO character.

Choices are presented through verbal texts within Celtic style templates and then visualised on the character during the creation process. The system of choices offered on the left side is paradigmatic: all elements are

⁴ J.P.Gee (2004) associates what he calls the “inherently social” nature of video games to their usefulness as learning tools. As in this article, in terms of social interaction patterns, he doesn't make any difference between game generated interactive characters and players' aliases.

available at the same time and in the same hyper-context. The system of choices on the right side is syntagmatic and depends on the choices made within the left-side system, which determine a series of possible features combined with character/gender specific powers and tools.

Choices will enable the character to perform specific actions, establish specific relationships and appear with a specific aspect: the character is therefore a multimodal text that realises the meanings activated by the three systemic metafunctions.

The context of situation in and by which this multimodal text is created is determined by the *Lord of the Rings* transmedial text experience of the game player. Thus the player is required to create a multimodal text which is a product and a process⁵ that in order to be developed and enhanced will need more experience of the same hyper-context in which it will work: the player will therefore have to keep on learning about the game by buying subscriptions and enhancing computer hardware with up to date audio-visual processors, especially of the ATI Radeon series.. The initial phase of the game enacts in this way a covert-sales strategy based on the multimodal representation of the player in the game world.

After having completed the character and entered the game, several icons appear at the bottom of the screen during the whole game session that link the player to text windows displaying the character's resources. In the top right corner a compass is visualised, in the top left the character status is displayed. Furthermore, all characters speak mainly through written texts⁶ appearing on the screen either as verbal pop-ups or in text windows.

⁵ See the complex notion of text as instantiation and realization in Halliday 2004: 26 ff. A text is an instantiation of the language system functional to a context which, on its turn, it contributes to change.

⁶ Interestingly, this unexpectedly extensive use of written text is a characteristic typical of mulymodal advertising texts; as H. Stöckl (in Ventola et al. 2004: 21 ff.) underlines: “Print advertising is a textual genre whose reliance on language-image-combinations is almost obligatory.” [5]. Indeed, some of the game generated characters seem to speak by slogans.

The on line game page looks therefore like the display of a digital camera. Background music also follows the various audio/visual performances: it can also be deactivated as when using a camera.

Unlike what happens with the *Elicitors*, in the LOTRO environment it is the web user's point of view that rotates around the character. The player is construed as a movie director moving his/her character within tri-dimensional hyper-environments. The environments rotate around the character that represents multimodally the player in the game hyper-context. An example of this perspective is shown in Figure 6.

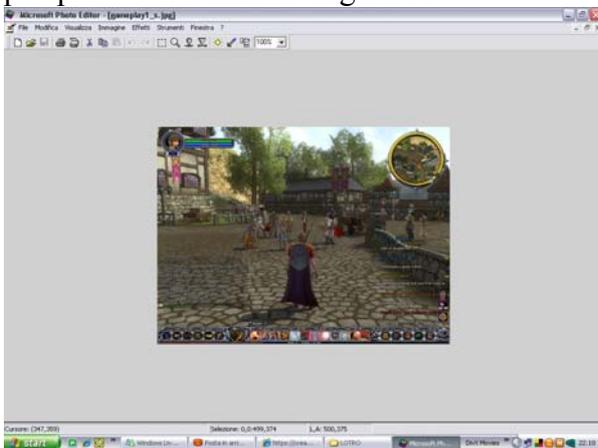


Figure 6. An example of *director's perspective* in a LOTRO screenshot.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The multimodal analysis performed on both *The Matrix* website and the LOTRO game has shown how the functional framework can be applied to an analysis of different multimodal texts realised in the Internet dimension. Analysis has focused on entertainment internet products where covert sales strategies have been enacted.

Two main perspectives have been highlighted through which the web user is construed in the multimodal hyper-context: the *cockpit perspective*, which implicitly incorporates the web user within the multimodal hyper-context, and the *director's perspective*, which construes multimodally the web user's presence as an *alias* in the hyper-context directed by a decision-making viewer from 'outside'.

It has also been shown that these two perspectives are linked to covert-sales

strategies merchandising products related to a movie trilogy market and to a MMORPG which, in itself, is part of a movie-and-book trilogy market. Furthermore, it has been observed that the enactment of these strategies is linked to the use of specific files and processors that imply, for the web user and game player, the visit of partner companies websites and the purchase of their on line software products.

This analysis has been performed on finished products: it would be interesting to study if and how the multimodal systemic functional perspective would effectively influence the creation of different or enhanced multimodal output devices. Would a pre-existent knowledge of the functional theory of communication change or influence the display of internet environments or the structuring of an *alias* creation process? And if so, would it allow the production of a different kind of online identity? And what kind of internet communicative strategies would this serve? These are all questions that only future interdisciplinary research can try to answer.

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