

# Writing and reading in the contemporary world of multi-modality and ‘social media’

Many matters loom large in the contemporary world of learning and teaching of language(s) in Europe. They fall into one of two categories: broadly social-cultural issues and broadly technological ones. The two are connected, everywhere, yet each needs to be discussed in its own right. Here, in a journal issue focused on *literacy* in the “teaching of foreign languages and Danish as a second language”, my over-arching question is: “What, actually, *is* writing at this point in time; and how do we need to think about writing and reading now?” (Kress 2003; 2010; Bezemer & Kress 2016)

To get somewhere with that large question, I ask two more specific ones: the first focuses more on the socio-cultural aspects, the second more on the technological characteristics and effects of *the new (social) media*. The two are entirely inter-related, so it is essential to keep both in view at all times. Given their overwhelming presence, the so-called “social media”, are more evident by far than the socio-cultural issues. Yet in my view it is the social/political factors which are fundamental in understanding the overall question.

Below I quickly sketch what I regard as the essential frame for dealing with this topic. I consider three crucial social issues in the learning and teaching of writing, before turning briefly to discuss some of the characteristics and effects of the new social media. I conclude with the implied point that it is no longer possible to think of *writing* in isolation but that we need to think of it as one element in more complex compositional arrangements for making meaning.

In respect to writing, there are two crucial aspects of the *social*: first, there is the fact of deep ethnic/linguistic/cultural *diversity* which



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characterizes (nearly) all European societies; second, there is the matter of *'generation'*, that is, the social differences which are now associated with chronological age. The effects of diversity reach deep into all social domains: and markedly so in matters of learning and teaching of languages, especially in formal, institutional, environments. While it is a common factor of all European societies, diversity has a distinct appearance in each, making it essential to be clear about which society, which languages, and what 'audiences' are in focus. Each particular combination of ('local' and 'non-local') languages brings specific issues. In all cases the wider political environment plays a crucial role.

The second aspect, *'generation'*, has different though equally profound cultural effects. Members of generations below the ages of 40 to 45 have been 'socialized' in a world dominated by the neo-liberal market. While the former social world had emphasized *authority*, *social responsibility* and *community*, the neo-liberal world by contrast emphasizes *individual* and *choice*. The imperatives and certainties of authoritative knowledge are not recognized by *choice*; it is based on individual 'taste'. That factor has the widest possible repercussions on how learners see their identities, their capacities and potentials in all social situations, including attitudes toward languages, towards (forms of) teaching and their motivations for learning. For this generation the 'new media' and in particular the 'social media', are the entirely normal – 'naturalized' – means of interaction, together with face-to-face communication.

The world of the *new media* presents an entire difference compared to the previous communicational world, both in the practices and in the production of texts-as-messages. The *platforms* of the social media bring distinct arrangements: socially, for interaction; and formally, in their *affordances* – their potentials and their limitations - for producing texts. They differ from the affordances of '*pages*' of various kinds. In the many and distinct '*sites*' of the new media, the place, the functions and the characteristics of *writing* have undergone a far-reaching change; and continue to do so.

In the contemporary communicational landscape, *writing* is no longer the dominant resource for making meaning that it had been previously. (Kress 2003; Bezemer & Kress 2016) In many cases, in many sites, *image* has taken the place formerly occupied by *writing*.

As one consequence, *writing* is establishing a new 'place' amongst the numerous resources with which meanings are now made and transmitted. From being central, *writing* has become one among many modes available for making meaning: central, still, in certain

cases, and entirely marginal in others. A new order is evolving, and being established, among all the modes available. It is a phenomenon with profound consequences for the learning and the teaching of writing.

Yet even before we look at social, political, technological matters, there is a circumstance common to European (except anglo-phone) societies, namely the (near overwhelming) presence and dominance of 'English' – the language – in many domains of popular culture (as well as in many formal institutional settings). That has an enormous impact on the nuanced hierarchy of cultural valuation of languages in Europe and well beyond. It is a hierarchy which is led (still) by 'English'. As a factor in language teaching and learning it cannot be ignored. Effectively, at one level it turns most European languages – with the exception, perhaps, of French and Russian – into 'minority languages' in certain domains and dimensions. It is an effect not only for so-called 'smaller' languages but affects a language large in numbers of speakers such as German as well. It makes the teaching (and learning) of 'foreign (European) languages' problematic in several different ways. For younger generations, English is still a 'brand leader' in the 'market' of (foreign) languages, making all others relatively less attractive in cultural terms.

It is a calamitous situation which requires innovative responses and overt political support, if we do not wish to see a far-reaching collapse in the learning, the uses and the continued cultural productivity of (European) languages. The matter is made more problematic by the fact that in many European countries institutions of Higher Education are aware, increasingly, that they operate in a global market in which they need to compete for esteem, for students and for funding. More and more, academics feel the pressure to publish and even to teach in English. That pressure transmits itself downward, into the school system. It has damaging effects on 'local' languages, cutting off essential ceaseless cultural renewal.

## Social matters in writing and reading

The givens of social diversity require that we understand, with great precision and in great detail, the dominant, relevant, political, ethnic and linguistic characteristics of the society in which a language is being taught and learned, whatever the environments and purposes. Most of the factors mentioned here are well known from decades' long theorizing (e.g. in Applied Linguistics) and experience of language learning and teaching. The difference is an effect of the

degree of intensity and the spread of diversity in a specific group; and with these, distinctively different forms of identity. All bring specific problems: different for curricular knowledge and for pedagogic practice; such as differences, for instance, between a dominant 'local language' and the original language(s) of the learner. Whatever the language being taught – whether the 'indigenous/local' language or a foreign language – it is essential to know to whom it is being taught and the purposes for which it is being taught.

In contemporary conditions of deep diversity, such situations are repeated many times over in any one classroom of urban schools. That calls for entirely new pedagogic as well as curricular strategies in teaching and learning.

One example – seemingly simple – is the relation of forms of an alphabet with the spoken forms of any of the languages involved: whether those of the mainstream community or of the languages brought by learners into the environments of teaching and learning. Italian and Spanish are examples, in Europe, of relatively straightforward relations of the Roman alphabet and the spoken forms of the languages (ignoring here the often extremely marked dialect differences between 'standard' and dialect forms of pronunciation). The complexities of the relation of the Roman alphabet to the pronunciation of Standard English are notorious. It is an example of something which – at least in principle – now needs to be understood for quite distinct instances likely to appear in the one classroom.

For many of the students in a given classroom the relation of alphabets of different kinds (Arabic and Roman, say, or the alphabets of the Indian subcontinent) to their 'home-languages', are likely to have shaped 'common sense' expectations about what is 'normal' in that relation. In such cases teaching (and learning) become questions of *mediating* between well established understandings of the relation of spoken language and an alphabet and the adaptation/transformation/integration to new regularities of the relation of spoken form and alphabet of the language to be learned.

We know that alphabets are not sensitive to features such as *intonation*, *accent* or *rhythm*, even though the spoken forms of different languages make use of such features in tellingly significant ways. The combination of the rough-and-ready relation of alphabet and pronunciation, joined with the marked particularities of intonation, produces real difficulties for learners of a language – in speech as much as in writing.

The relatively simple example of the alphabet makes clear that teachers need to be aware of the salient characteristics – the linguistic/semiotic resources – of the language they are teaching, as well as

having a good grasp of the *principles* – if not the detail – at work in the languages which students bring into the environment of teaching and learning. Of course, not all the students in the classroom might have a linguistic/cultural background in which an alphabet was or is the dominant means of producing writing.

The second social issue is that of *generation*. In the formal institution of the school it becomes manifest in far-reaching differences of ‘dispositions’ – attitudes to authority for instance – between generations of learners now in school and the dispositions of older generations of teachers, still working there. It effects both what is taught, the *curriculum*, and how it is taught, the *pedagogy*. Traditional curricula offer the seeming safety of “what worked *then*”; while traditional pedagogies (in the UK symbolized by a return to the compulsory wearing of School uniforms) promise a return to stable social relations – in the classroom at least. By and large, in many countries in Europe, the older attitudes are embedded in educational policies, explicitly – as in the UK for instance – or implicitly under the guise of a variety of labels. Yet as the formerly taken-for-granted link of schooling and employment becomes ever more tenuous and indirect or has disappeared entirely, the more pressure there is likely to be on schools to achieve the entirely impossible and to restore that relation.

## The characteristics and effects of the ‘new media’

The platforms of the ‘new’ and the ‘social media’ present potentials and constraints of a social and of a textual/formal kind (Bezemer & Kress 2016). Each of the various platforms suggests particular forms of identity of and for its users, as well as potential social relations in interactions with addressees/interlocutors. The means for this include not just the structure of interactions but the material realization through which these are made material: whether through writing, through image – moving or still, or combinations in different proportions of these; through speech; or the use of other, further possibilities such as layout or colour.

In these ‘sites’ the social and the technological intermingle. Material means – *modes* – are used to make meaning, and in doing so produce social effects. The (no longer entirely) new, digital media use *screens* of various kinds rather than *pages*; on these screens image and writing appear jointly. The proportions of that relation, as well as compositional features of various kinds, are governed in fundamental ways by algorithms specific to particular forms of these media. In many instances, the sites privilege *image* over *writing*, in a variety of ways.

Below are two examples. Figure 1, the first example (from a website called ‘Poetry Archive’), shows an arrangement of two ‘modular’ elements, which is part of a larger text (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). One ‘module’ consists of *writing*, the other consists of an *image*. For their ‘completeness’ they depend on each other – either by itself would not offer a ‘completed meaning’. In other words, meaning is made through the use, jointly, of image and writing. Neither the question “which is prior?” nor “which is more important?” arises in any relevant way. Each complements the other, much as a *subject noun* in a written sentence relies on a *complement* – a *verb* or *verb phrase* – to produce ‘completeness’.

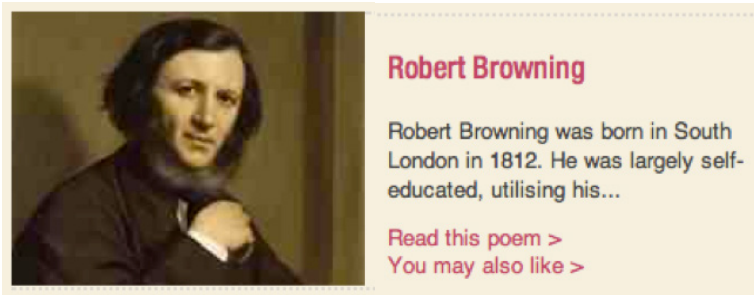


Fig. 1. Modular composition (from Poetry Archive)

Two relevant points: the first is that the composition is ‘*modular*’. The two modules of *writing* and of *image* are elements in a *composition* which is neither *written* nor *visual*. It is *multimodal*. *Modularity* is the compositional principle in arrangements on such platforms.

We can ask about the ‘status’ of the module of writing: either in the frame of a linguistic theory or in the frame of an approach of ‘literacy’. We might ask how we would describe it in a linguistic frame: could we say that it is a complete text? Or a paragraph within a text? In terms of an approach from literacy, the answer would be equally problematic. The fact of the matter is that we are here dealing with a new and rapidly developing phenomenon: that of *multimodal composition* and of *multimodal arrangements*, in multimodal communication.

*Modularity* is organized by *compositional principles* that tend to be *spatial*. One such is *linearity*. It appears, in English, in certain aspects of writing, in the organization of syntax. (In languages with a case system (*Latin*, *German* to some extent) linearity is less, or differently, significant). Both Figures 1 and 2, show another such principle, that of *sequence*.

**Robert Browning**

Robert Browning was born in South London in 1812. He was largely self-educated, utilising his...

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Fig. 2. Modular composition: the meanings/functions of *sequence*

The two arrangements, shown in Figures 1 and 2, differ in meaning. That difference derives not from the rules of the syntax of writing but from the regularities – broadly speaking – of *sequential arrangements* of modular elements in ‘western’/‘European’ visual composition; that is, the meaning potentials inherent in organization of elements along the horizontal axis. That is, sequential ordering is used to produce an opposition, broadly speaking in central and western European cultures of (left) *given* information vs (right) *new* information (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). In other words, the affordances of *spatial arrangements* are used to make meaning.

It should be clear that in culturally/ethnically diverse societies, the differing cultural potentials for meaning-making through the use of space will need attention. It should also be clear that in the move from *writing* (in the traditional sense) to *multimodal composition* the meanings of the term *literacy* will have changed.

Other platforms (e.g. that of Twitter) operate with similar principles, though with different compositional elements – e.g. ‘links’.

 Annals of Surgery liked

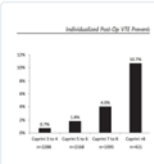


**Christopher Pannucci** @PannucciMD · 4h

VTE risk stratification with Caprini scores identifies the 25% of patients who benefit from chemoprophylaxis--and the 75% who may not.

**Annals of Surgery** @AnnalsofSurgery

Venous Thromboembolism Risk Stratification to Identify Benefits & Harms of Chemoprophylaxis in Surgical Patients [journals.lww.com/annalsofsurger...](https://journals.lww.com/annalsofsurger...)



Caprini Score	Individualized Post-Op VTE Percentage
0-4	~10%
5-6	~25%
7-8	~45%
9-10	~75%

↩
↻ 4
❤ 6

Fig. 3. A surgeon’s tweet

This makes it, as with the ‘social factors’ mentioned earlier, essential to get a quite firm sense which of these media the students/learners use habitually, and what place *writing* or other forms of *composition* have in each case.

## Concluding

It is clear that there are now entirely new relations of communicational resources – both in terms of *modes* being used (i.e. writing, image, other elements such as ‘links’) and the media of and for communication than there were even twenty years ago (see Kress 2003; Kress 2010). Young people in schools will in most cases already have begun to establish their own preferred practices: which is not the same as having settled irrevocably into a set of now ‘naturalized’ practices, or established conventions (Bezemer & Kress 2016). The task for the school is on the one hand to provide strong motivations for young people to become and remain strongly confident in relation to the traditional forms of writing – in terms of lexis, syntax, textual organization (e.g. genres); and on the other hand to make ‘teachers’ as confident and knowledgeable as possible about the compositional principles of the new media. Those who teach will need to understand how and why the ‘social media’ are embedded in the social world of those whom they are both teaching and guiding.

The present is a ‘cuspish’ time: older forms and practices of writing continue to be used as the forms of the powerful – though as Figure 3 shows the ‘social media’ are now used at the highest professional levels as much as are the traditional form. The newer forms need to be understood in terms of what they offer in relation to contemporary social, communicational and informational practices (e.g. booking an Uber on the iPhone); the older forms need to be ruthlessly examined for their continuing cultural benefits, and means must be found and developed to make their learning plausible to the younger generations.



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**Lara Vapio** @LaraVapio · Mar 8

Fearless

Adjective: Without fear

Synonyms: brave, bold, audacious

Note: Is a descriptive term that crosses gender lines

Happy Women's Day

