

Multimodality as an access to literacy for preschool children ¹

Abstract

Nowadays written texts are consistently getting more multimodal; this means that different representative modes are composed for the creation of meaning in a written text. The information conveyed by any text is not derived exclusively from its linguistic content but also from the contribution of other semiotic resources such as the iconic, typographic or chromatic systems. The article deals with the possibility of using multimodality as an access to literacy for preschool children. For this reason, a certain type of multimodal texts (titles of newspaper articles) is presented and proposals for teaching use are made.

In recent years the investigation of multimodality (Kress & Leeuwen 1996, Kress 1997, Kress 2000, Kalantzis & Cope 2000, Kalantzis & Cope 2001) in the many and varied analyses of written texts has highlighted the large number of representative modes which are composed and contracted in the generation of meaning in a written text. It appears that the action of the language itself can be added to, complemented or even cancelled out by the action of the other modes of constructing meaning. The decline in the domination of the field of public communication by the written language – as observed by Kress (Kress 1997) – and the increasing use of visual means to convey the meaning of a text, compels us to re-examine the way in which we perceive written texts and to seek different procedures for analysis and production of written information.

The information conveyed by any text is not derived exclusively from its linguistic content but also from the contribution of other semiotic resources, such as iconic, typographic or chromatic systems. In this sense, the written message is multimodal, and therefore for the understanding and generation of written messages it is not sufficient

¹ Στοιχεία δημοσίευσης (N. 6).

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merely to have a command of reading and writing as they are understood in the context of classical literacy. The need to manage multimodal texts entails a pedagogy of 'multi-literacies' (Kress & Leeuwen 1996, Kress 1997, Hondolidou 1999, Faiclough 2000, Kress 2000, Kalantzis & Cope 2000, Karantzola & Intzidis 2000, Koutsosimou-Tsinoglou 2000) which will include, in parallel to the analysis of the written discourse, pragmatic, sociological and semiotic analyses, which will together build the capacity to understand and manage pictures, plans, diagrams, tables etc. (Kalantzis & Cope 2000).

As a consequence of this new perception of the text it will be necessary to reorient the teaching of written texts in our schools, where until now teaching methods have mainly targeted the written language, using texts which, in their majority, are either constructed for the needs of the lesson or taken from works of literature. The introduction of authentic texts, at all levels of the education system – at present by no means a common practice – permits the development of a pedagogy of 'multi-literacies', which will require the analysis of multimodal texts and create a need for proposals as to how these can be utilized for various student audiences.

Taking as its starting point the view that for children of pre-school age the comprehension of multimodality in written texts might be the gateway to greater familiarization with written discourse, this paper seeks to analyze a particular type of multimodal text - titles of articles in a newspaper published for children – and proposes methods by which the teacher can utilize this type of text in the classroom.

The legislative framework

For teaching reading in the course of modern Greek in the 1999 state curriculum (Min. of Ed. 1999) for kindergarten, it is proposed that '*the right conditions be secured for the children to familiarize themselves in a relaxed and unpressured way with the various forms of written discourse (books, newspapers, magazines, written signs, etc.)*'. There are also frequent references to the need for variety in the kinds of discourse used, and in the kinds of texts the children are asked to observe and process. The curriculum recognizes the need to point out the relations between image and text and their interaction in generating the meaning of the written message; it also emphasizes the need to develop the children's capacity to make assumptions concerning the content of a text. Similar references are made in discussion of writing and written expression, although less emphasis is laid on them here than in the guidelines on reading.

The 1999 curriculum permits, indeed requires, the use of authentic material to introduce children of pre-school age to written discourse, while also permitting processes and activities in the context of a pedagogy of multi-literacies – without, however, stating this explicitly.

Furthermore, the new curriculum adopts the idea elaborated by Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky (Ferreiro & Teberosky 1982, Ferreiro 1990) that literacy is learned by children, gradually, through a constructive procedure. Children should be helped by teachers to construct their ideas about writing as cultural, social and symbolic system. In this frame, letters are not supposed to be taught separately but children should be helped to develop an understanding of the principles of an alphabetic writing system – such as ours- by their own attempts, and to discover the relationships between the oral and the written language.

Selection and features of the type of text

Newspaper titles provide particularly valuable teaching material for children of pre-school age, for the following reasons:

- They are self-contained, independent texts, even if, given their length, the word 'text' is only just permissible;
- They provide a link to a fuller text (the content of the article) and also with the total contents of the newspaper. Use of the title in class may be confined to the title as part of the article or extended to take in the article in its entirety (subtitles, content, pictures, drawings, etc.);
- The linguistic information contained is brief and succinct. The titles are a compressed form of the fuller text, which can - if the teacher wishes - be read to the children so that they can see in what way the process of selection operates and how the title is formed;
- They are the centre of the article, towards which all the information therein – linguistic and non-linguistic – converges;
- They are mostly descriptive texts, which are more accessible for children of pre-school age;
- In terms of structure, they present a large number of noun phrases;
- Finally, a title must in various ways (both in terms of linguistic content and of form) entice the reader to read the article. In this particular case, the titles

chosen are multimodal texts in which the organization and transmission of the information employs a wide variety of representative modes.

What is innovative about the proposal that selected titles should be used to introduce the children to literacy is the fact that the children are not already familiar with the content of the words or expressions, but are required to make suppositions about their linguistic content by using the information provided through the various means of representation which coexist in the written text and other information they may have about particular letters.

In general terms, the use of titles serves a variety of purposes on a number of different levels:

- In terms of the medium of communication the children are called on to observe the influence of the medium on the ways in which the information is organized.
- In terms of the stance of the writer of a text, the children are invited to realize that the choices made by the writer of a text are not random, but serve specific objectives which it remains for us (the readers) to seek.
- In terms of the kind of discourse and type of text, the children are called on to appreciate the structure and characteristics of the title of an article, and more particularly of a descriptive text.
- In terms of the organization of the writing, the children should understand that often the written text is multimodal, and they should understand the ways in which the various representative modes function to generate meaning in the written text.

Analysis of sample

The five titles to be analyzed below all appeared in the newspaper *Oi Erevnites Pane Pantou* (Explorers go everywhere)², addressed to an audience of children and published as a supplement to the Sunday edition of the national newspaper *Kathimerini*. The articles themselves are a regular feature of the newspaper, which also offers its readers news, games, crosswords, comic strips, a correspondence page, advertisements, reviews of books and films for children, informational features, etc. The

² I would like to thank the newspaper responsables for their permission to use the following articles.

subject matter of the articles is varied and devising a suitable title is the responsibility of the writer or illustrator of each particular article.

Linguistic features

As regards the linguistic information they convey, the titles of the articles in question are for the most part noun phrases³:

- *island full fire and lava*
- *thunder and lightning*
- *chocolate: the food of the gods*
- *an of towers*

While in just one case a full sentence is used:

- *I discover machines*

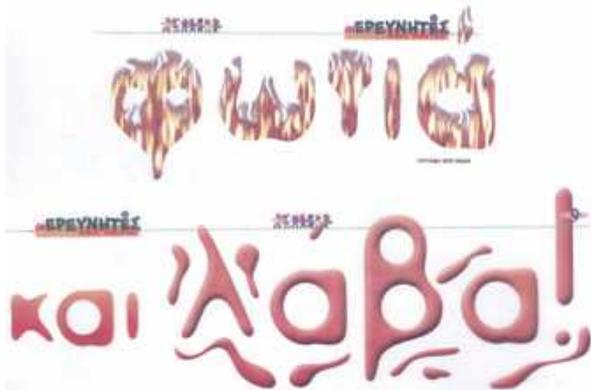
The five titles we shall be looking at in this particular paper were chosen from a group of about one hundred titles which appeared in the newspaper over a period of two years. Most of them are noun phrases with similar linguistic and semantic characteristics to the four presented above, although some are couched in the form of a question, for example: 'Do you sing in the bath?'. We also encounter nouns followed by explanatory phrases, of the type: 'Chess, the pawns have their own history', and – but far less frequently - proverbs and extracts from poems, etc. In this respect the first 4 titles are a representative sample of the general structure of titles in the newspaper in question and allow us to observe the structural features of this particular kind of discourse. We have added to them the fifth title, different in style from the others, to demonstrate that the above structure, while it may be the dominant form, is not the only one found in this kind of discourse.

As far as their content is concerned, the titles in question, like all those found in the newspaper, are descriptive texts which offer in condensed form the central kernel of information provided in an - also descriptive - article. The role of the articles in this particular newspaper is to offer information and a description of a natural or man-made phenomenon, an object, persons (more rarely), moments in time and places, manners and customs, etc. Finally, we often see titles with some playful or humorous feature, appearing either in their linguistic structure (e.g. "nicotiana tobaccum") or, most frequently, in their overall form.

Semiotic features

In the titles chosen we see that the writer or illustrator of the article chooses to reproduce in various ways the semantic content of the title, making it accessible even to children who cannot yet read. The same purpose is served by the presence of images, sketches, drawings and photographs, which make the article accessible to a broader age range. A brief analysis of each title will permit us to identify the varied means employed to attain this objective.

➤ *fire and lava*



In the first example we observe that a different colour and design has been chosen for each word in the title, rendering visible its semantic content. In the word 'fire', the letters are printed in yellow and orange; the upper row of letters is incomplete and reaching upwards, appearing to spill over into the adjacent space. The grey colour used for the upper part of the letters is a visual evocation of the smoke emitted by a fire. In the word 'lava' the letters are round and red, like the colour of the lava issuing from a volcano. Drops of red ink follow the letters in a wavy pattern recalling streams of lava.

➤ *thunder (in Greek ΚΕΡΑΥΝΟΣ)*

³ This is the case with most of the articles in the paper.



In the second example, the title occupies a commanding position above the text. It is placed at the upper edge of a photograph showing the night sky, alive with lightning, above a contemporary city. The colour of the night sky forms the background to the title, which cuts across the background just as the lightning races across the sky. The yellow colour of the letters is a visual reminder of the lightning which flashes across the natural landscape below. Overall, both the central parts and the extremities of the letters are of angular design, while all round surfaces are eliminated. The intention appears to be to create a sensation of fear and aggression. The lower extremities of the letters cut across the photograph, with the bottom part of the letter K made to resemble a flash of lightning – a design echoed in miniature within the space of the letter O.

➤ *chocolate: the food of the gods*



Sensations of a very different nature appear to be inspired by the next title, accompanying an article on chocolate. The choice of a dark brown colour reminds the reader – in this case a young child – of the colour of chocolate, while the drops of colour dripping from some of the letters in the word evoke the propensity of chocolate to melt, and thus help to evoke the taste experience of eating the substance. The letters are also

joined together, reminding us of the tendency of chocolate to stick to other surfaces, while the circle formed by the letter O is distorted, as if, like melting chocolate, unable to retain its solid form. The main focus is on the word 'chocolate', not only printed with thicker letters than those of the other words but also occupying the dominant position in the text. The three illustrations in the article's subtitle convey in visual terms the content of the article which follows, and describe the historical and vegetal origins of chocolate.

➤ *an island full of towers*



The final title in this category might be regarded as considerably less sensational than the ones we have been examining. The choice of colours appears to be random, although the blue used for the nouns does provide some aesthetic emphasis for the two dominant words. The size of the letters leads to the same conclusion. The article in question contains linguistic information, photographs, an architectural drawing and the negative of a drawing on a black background. A background picture of a sunset provides a context for the whole article. The main stylistic characteristics of the towers, emphasized in the whole range of representative modes, are the vertical straight lines and the battlements at the top of the towers. These features are reproduced in the letter Π of the title. This particular letter stands out from and dominates its fellows thanks to its greater volume, thicker shadow and the small protrusions along the upper part which evoke the battlements of the towers. The letter is designed to appear three-dimensional, and in its volume it evokes the very structure to which it refers. The letter maintains a relationship of illustration (Peirce, 1978) with the object signified.

➤ *I discover machines*



This title differs in linguistic terms from those above, because of the fact that it refers to a book of the same title. As for its form, we observe that the letters are formed from the shapes of tools or parts of tools, resembling to a greater or lesser extent the corresponding letters. The whole title is set against a white background, with no particular dominant colour.

In the titles of articles presented above we have observed that a variety of representational means was used to render the semantic content of specific words. The relationship between the multimodally signified words and their linguistic counterparts does not appear to be arbitrary, conventional and symbolic. In these instances the words presented are in themselves primary means of representation, reproducing directly the extra-linguistic reality without the intervening medium of linguistic transfer. In the fourth example, in particular, we see the full range of semantic content of the word 'tower' rendered in visual terms through appropriate modifications to just one letter.

Proposals for teaching use

The words in the titles will not necessarily be familiar to the children. In this sense the selection of material of this sort poses a challenge to the teacher who wishes to use this material as part of his literacy teaching for pre-school children, the reason being – as we stated earlier – that there are no obvious points of connection to probable existing knowledge possessed by the children on the level of a 'holistic' reading of words.

Classroom use of this kind of material requires first of all an appreciation of the broader context in which the article appears. This means that the children should be divided up into small groups and allowed to discover that the newspaper presented to

them is in fact a supplement to an adult Sunday paper. Next, they should be asked to leaf through the whole supplement to see what else it contains, until they have made the discovery required by that particular lesson. Subsequently, they should be asked to observe the form of an individual article, the amount of space it takes up in the paper, its unity of content (i.e. the fact that all its elements are connected in some way towards a specific purpose) in contrast to the other material in the newspaper. This preparatory activity will allow the children to form a first idea of the article as genre of text – an idea which they will confirm and enlarge when the overall processing of the article is complete.

By asking appropriate questions the teacher can allow the children to speculate on the content of the article in question. Such questions might be, for example, 'What do you think this article is about?', whereby the teacher elicits the subject of the article and then asks the children to explain on what evidence they formed this view.

Let us take for example the article 'An island full of towers' (/ena nisi gemato pirus/). The teacher might first of all ask the children what is the subject of the article in question. If they reply that the article is about towers, he can ask them to tell him how they understood this. It would be useful if the observation was not confined to the information conveyed by the photographs, but also took in the black negative, the architectural drawing and, probably, the letter П, which resembles a tower – although this last point may be omitted at this stage. Next, the teacher may ask the children to describe a tower, observing the whole range of means available. In their description, the children must identify the battlements, the sheer walls, the small apertures of the windows, the location of the towers (i.e. the fact that they are frequently sited at the highest point of the village) etc. If during the first phase the children spotted the similarity between the letter П and a tower, they can now move on to observe its characteristics more closely and compare them with those of the other letters, prompted by such questions as: How was the letter designed? Why does it look like a tower? Why did the artist make it look like a tower? and so on. If the children had not spotted the resemblance for themselves in the earlier stage, the teacher can turn their attention to the similarity now, and then move on to the same questions. Next, the teacher can read the whole title to the children, and let them observe the different colours and different sizes of font which have been used.

The teacher can then proceed to directing the children's attention to the captions of the photographs and architectural drawing, asking them how many times the word

'tower' is used in the total of seven captions. In order to perform this task, the children must mentally restore the letter Π to its original form. This is a useful process because it helps the children understand that that particular form of the letter Π was a playful invention on the part of the illustrator or writer, not the conventional form of the letter. Likewise, the children's interest may be aroused in carrying out a similar search for letters in the subtitles or in selected parts of the text, while the discussion of towers may be brought to a close with a reading of the whole article.

The same procedure can also be followed in reverse. For example, in the case of the title 'Chocolate: the food of the gods' (/sokolata/), the teacher could initiate discussion of the article by showing the children the title and reading it to them. He would next ask them to explore the choices made by the writer or illustrator in his design of the letters, asking, for example: Why did he choose this colour? Why are drops of colour falling from the letters, and from what part of the letters are they falling? Why are the letters sticking together? Is this happening by chance or was it deliberate? Finally, there might be discussion of the inner circle of the letter O, where it seems as if the chocolate has not completely solidified. Through their answers the children will recognize the distinctive properties of chocolate and realize that the design of the letters was not a matter of chance but was in fact intended to convey a number of messages. Finally, the children might discuss with their teacher the question of whether the letters would have been designed in the same way in a paper for adult readers.

The third example I would like to discuss, is the title "Thunder" (/keravnos/). This article could be given to children after a discussion in classroom about natural phenomena such as rain or it could be used to start the negotiation of the subject. The teacher can ask children if they have ever observed how the image of a city appears during a night storm and then they can look at the picture. Children should be encouraged to discover the use the colour and the shape of the letters plays to the distribution of information. A closer look to the first letter of the word can reveal the shape of the lightning created by the extension of the line of the letter.

A similar presentation could also be made for the title "Fire and lava" (/fotia ke lava/). The teacher can encourage children to reveal the similarities between the way the words are written and the natural phenomena. S/he can ask questions about the colours that appear in a fire, the way the smoke is oriented upwards and invite children to see how the same phenomena are reproduced in the creation of the letters that form the word "fire". The same procedure could be followed for the next word, as the fluidity and

the red colour of the lava are also reproduced in the creation of the letters of the word "lava".

Conclusion

The four cases we have looked at above consist of games with words and letters intended either to arouse a child's interest and make him keen to read the accompanying article, or to make the article seem more accessible to children who have not yet learned to read. This sort of multimodal text, presented via a suitable didactic approach, can help children of pre-school age to realize that one or more pieces of information can be conveyed through a variety of semiotic modes, and at the same time provide children of this age with an access to literacy. Furthermore, during the didactic procedure children can implicitly convey information about letters and their relationship to phonemes by the attention drawn to some letters of the titles which hold the main part of the information. We can not know for sure which letters will our preschoolers be finally able to discern but as the actual teaching of letter to sound correspondences remains out of the field of the preschool education and away of our new curriculum for introducing pre-schoolers to literacy, this approach could be helpful in order to enable them to make suppositions about letter to sound correspondences and, mainly, develop the ability to use the other modes to discover the linguistic information of a text.

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