INTERVIEW WITH LOUISE RAVELLI

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Dr. Danielle Almeida (Universidade Federal da Paraíba, João Pessoa, Brazil) interviews Dr. Louise Ravelli, Associate Professor of Communication and Journalism, and former Media Program Convenor from the *School of the Arts and Media* at the *University of New South Wales, Australia.*

First of all, thank you for accepting to be interviewed for this special issue of Ilha do Desterro on Multimodality. Some of the questions you'll see here have been elaborated in collaboration with the Visual Semiotics and Multimodality Research Group (GPSM) from Universidade Federal of Paraíba (UFPB). We feel very honoured to host you as the main guest in our debate about multimodal issues. As we all know about your great contribution to research on buildings as three-dimensional texts,

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let's start by asking you which areas you think could benefit from the knowledge that three-dimensional spaces should also be viewed as texts endowed with various meanings?

Firstly let me thank you for this invitation. It's a great honour and I really appreciate your interest in my work. As for your question, yes, it's important that what we do has some meaning and some social benefit. Any social-semiotic text analysis aims to enhance understanding of texts and their meanings in their social and cultural contexts, so this can only be of benefit! More specifically, an enhanced understanding of three-dimensional spaces is particularly useful in public spaces where there are practical factors to consider: like moving people through transport hubs or around hospitals; also where you want to enhance aesthetic impact or sensibilities, for example, to create a greater sense of community in a residential area; or to improve the appeal of an office or a classroom; and it's relevant to enhancing how spaces are or can be used, as with a children's playground, or a learning space, for example. So I guess I see the 'utility' of this kind of analysis in terms of the three metafunctions: textually, interpersonally and ideationally. At the same time it is important to say that we should not necessarily expect or require our research to produce immediate benefit: there is too much emphasis today on measurable 'outcomes', when the best research is often slow and painstaking, and the outcomes unimagined at the beginning.

Since meanings are influenced by their social and cultural contexts, to what extent should the analysis of three-dimensional spaces take into account their cultural dimension?

This is absolutely fundamental and has to be at the basis of the analysis. As Maree Stenglin has shown very well in her work on binding, the one resource or realization (for example, very small windows in a house) can have different meanings, depending on cultural factors (and also personal ones of course). So a hot climate that values breezes will view small windows negatively; a climate that has strong winds and duststorms will view them positively. And of course that can apply across the metafunctions. Similarly, the historical dimension is also very important to take into account. How we 'read' any text changes over time, and this particularly applies to buildings and other structures which are likely to last across generations. I think it is important that analysis of three-dimensional spatial texts begins with some basic historical research: when was this built, why, how many phases of change (renovation, etc) has it been through? So, the analysis needs to be situated in relation to a particular time and place, and potentially 're-read' for other times. Related to all this of course is reading position: are we reading the text from a compliant, a resistant, or a tactical point of view, as Cranny-Frances and Kress would describe, or is it a negotiated reading position, in the terms of Sturken and Cartright? From whose cultural, social and political position are we reading it? An easy example to illustrate this is in terms of any building which we might read as 'impressive', such as a court house, or a parliament building: buildings which tend to display the authority of the institution. For one person these might be reassuring; for another, intimidating. That doesn't mean we try to account for every nuanced response, but just for what are likely to be systemic reactions, culturally-bound.

I guess that one of the trickiest concepts for any visual analyst is to investigate the truth value of an element, taken that modality variables tend to vary according to the context. How does that idea apply to the reading of three-dimensional spaces like museums?

Modality is certainly a fascinating area, and a lot more work could be done here, especially as it relates to coding orientation. You can't do modality unless you take coding orientation into account: how 'real' something is depends entirely on from whose point of view this is presented, as Kress and van Leeuwen explained in 'Reading Images'. For three-dimensional spatial texts generally, when we are looking 'at' buildings (in terms of their overall impact, for example), we can ask 'how real is this presented as being', and the naturalistic coding orientation (again, see Kress and van Leeuwen here), is whatever is standard (common, mainstream) for architecture at a particular point of time. Mostly we don't notice architecture: it's the norm. Standout buildings try to break the boundaries, and be 'beyond real' for the time. So a really way-out building, like the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao: what is its truth-value? Maybe, because it is so beyond the standards of basic architecture, it means something like 'wow, that can't be real! How could that be a building? Will it actually stand up?' All that would be from a naturalistic coding orientation. Or maybe it would be read as 'wow, that's a dream! It's not a building; it's a boat/a bird/a ….' All that would be from a fantasy coding orientation (as explained by Unsworth). For museums it's not just the exterior of the building which is important but also how the interior exhibitions are presented. They are dealing with real things and mostly (but not always) aim to present this as having high modality, that is, as being 'real', but this can be from different coding orientations. It might be high modality from a scientific coding orientation, where you want

to emphasise the credibility and factuality of the information. Or it might be high modality from a naturalistic coding orientation, perhaps where you want to recreate a real-world context, and help visitors understand the physical or cultural environment of a phenomenon. Or it might even be high modality from a fantasy coding orientation: where you want visitors to engage in an imaginative context, for example. All these are possible and can be exploited in different exhibitions or in the one exhibition at the same time.

The knowledge that a given space may be designed to make us feel more or less comfortable or more or less secure and the understanding that this, too, can be studied in a course like Linguistics sounds quite innovative. Until not so long ago such knowledge was confined to courses like Architecture and Design. Which impact do you think this can have on educational environments outside Australia, where, I believe, this is far more consolidated?

I think we are still at the beginnings of this in Australia, too, to be honest. What's at stake here is fundamentally a broader understanding of 'text': in relation to language, we've already moved beyond high-culture texts (for example, in the school curriculum) to include popular culture texts as the focus of study (TV, films, cartoons…). That's fairly well accepted now, although still sometimes a matter of debate. Because of the impact of multimedia in everyday life, there is also a growing understanding of the role of visuals in meaning-making, as well as other modes, such as sound. This too is becoming quite well established in the schools. Len Unsworth and his colleagues have been particularly strong in this regard (see for example recent work in Painter et al, 2013). Moving beyond that to

three-dimensional spatial texts is an even bigger leap! At the tertiary level I try to do this in a staged way: beginning with analysis of two-dimensional visuals; moving to more complex multi-modal texts, such as websites; and then bringing in the three-dimensional texts. I think for anywhere, the issue is that very broad understanding of text, and of how the fundamentals of a metafunctional, social-semiotic analysis can be applied to any kind of text; that is, to any kind of cultural artefact that has been put together for a social purpose.

To what extent do you think that producers of three-dimensional spaces could benefit from knowing SFL's multimodal frameworks?

I think one of the main benefits it gives is the ability to pull things apart in a systematic way (using the metafunctions as one angle of analysis; the ranks as another, etc), and account for the relation between resource (or realization) and impact (or meaning). So it can be a very useful tool for analysing and articulating what's going on. At the same time, professionals (e.g. architects, designers) already have their own tools, theories and perspectives. SFL – MDA[3] would not replace any of these, but could provide a complementary perspective. Just as with language (e.g. for an author of fiction), a practicing professional might do better without any explicit tools at all, just their own embedded, tacit knowledge. But I always believe, that the more you know about a phenomenon, the more likely you are going to be able to exploit it effectively; and you absolutely have to know about it in order to be able to teach it to others.

Since you act (or have acted) as a consultant to museums in Australia, could you mention some specific examples of your work with museum managers or exhibition producers?

What is their reaction when they come in contact with your professional advice? Ooh, this is tricky! First my role in Australia has been limited to the Australian Museum, in Sydney, and to a lesser extent, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia, also in Sydney. With both of these, the main focus was on the language of the exhibitions: the labels that visitors read, and how complex or accessible they were. We've all had that experience of reading a label and then scratching our head, or just being bored! With the Australian Museum I developed language guidelines in conjunction with some of their key educational staff (see Ferguson et al 1995) and then delivered workshops to staff groups (including scientists, designers, educationalists) about how to implement these. I think their texts improved! But it requires a huge – and ongoing - commitment from the institution. To have everyone on the same page, and keep them there, is not easy, especially when they may start from very different points of understanding, and when there are many factors competing for time and resources. But reaching the public is one of their fundamental drivers, so it is very important and most institutions could give a lot more attention to it. There is also a lot of misinformation circulated as fact (e.g. 'avoid the passive voice'), so it's important to contribute something that is well-founded. In terms of reaction, I've had some pretty funny ones. One of my favourites was when I was trying to explain how a written text can build a sense of Field and create a taxonomy of information within it. For this particular text (I think it was on cats), I explained how the written example created an odd – and definitely unscientific - taxonomy for

cats. The scientist who wrote this was in the audience, and told us, verbally, that I had misunderstood and he told us what the correct taxonomic relations were. But the written text really said something quite different, and he couldn't see that! This was quite eye-opening for me. We got there eventually but the sense that language actually construes meaning, and does not simply transmit something pre-existing, is very hard to convey. Anyway, all of this work on language is what made me interested in the three-dimensional question, as it was very clear that the written texts were merely one part of a much bigger and more complex whole, and that any explanation of the written text needed to be related to what else was going on in the museum, in terms of its exhibition design.

You've been to many museums and exhibitions all over the world; can you talk about one or two of your most favourite experiences? What was so special about them? Also, what do you value most, or what most calls your attention, when you attend an exhibition?

Two experiences stand out. The first was at the Museum of Natural History, London, at the entrance to their geological galleries. I wrote about this in my book. It's just the entrance, not even an exhibition: you step into a large foyer, and a long escalator takes you up to the start of the actual exhibitions on the third floor, and from there you wend your way down through the exhibitions. But the entrance space is beautifully designed and the escalator passes through an enormous revolving globe of the earth. It has a huge impact, and the sense of excitement for visitors was palpable. The practical impact was measurable: the Earth Galleries, as they are known, increased hugely in popularity. So that shows the power of great design. The second

example is one of yours: the Museu da Língua Portuguesa at São Paulo. I visited there in 2006. Again, there was a huge sense of excitement about the place; enormous visitor numbers, and great excitement when these crowds were inside. I know the museum benefitted from great media coverage, but it was also clear that visitors loved being there. There was a particularly fabulous temporary exhibition on the ground floor at that time: Passages of "Grande Sertão: Veredas", the novel by João Guimarães Rosa. As an exhibition this was highly interactive, immersive, dynamic, and definitely in the fantasy coding orientation! It was a wonderful exhibition and even though I didn't know that book myself, I could see how it was brought alive by the exhibition. At the same time, the museum as a whole creates a great experience. Just a few things to note are the very different binding experiences on different levels; this keeps the museum visit fresh and helps prevent 'museum fatigue'. The immersion experience in the amphitheatre, the 'planetarium of words', was an extraordinary multimodal experience; very moving. They had also found ways for people to look at exhibits about language and to engage physically with them (in language games, for instance). And while there is this great variety in the museum, it is all made cohesive, through a number of devices, such as the tree of language which passes through from the ground floor to the top, tying the different parts of the museum together. I heard some criticisms from fellow linguists at the time that the knowledge about language represented there was fairly shallow: limited to common-sense understandings of words and their derivations, for example, or the historical roots of Portuguese, the general impact of text, and so on. But I think making a museum of language even vaguely interesting to the general public is an enormous challenge, and this one really, really succeeded. So I guess what I value most, as a visitor, is a place which generates interest: this might be

excitement, or quiet contemplation, and it will obviously be different for different people, but the experience has to be something which makes you want to move forward, and keep investigating. I don't mean just the ideational component here, the 'what', but the whole experience, including the textual and interpersonal metafunctions. It's how they all work together that makes it interesting.

In your view, could three-dimensional spaces be interpreted as textual genres? Or should we say 3D, or spatial, genres? If so, how could teachers go about teaching them at school level?

Absolutely. I find genre a very useful and applicable concept. It's about getting a sense of what is the 'same' about texts, in terms of their fundamental structure and social purpose. We see that in buildings just as in language. Every house may be unique, but they nevertheless fall into key types. José Luis Meurer explained this nicely, as a balance of unity and diversity, and there is a good illustration of genre in spatial texts in McMurtrie 2011. In terms of teaching, you have to have at least three examples of the same genre to start with: show the students what is the same, explain how they function, and their social purpose. Then expand to more examples (that you provide, or which they gather for themselves) and test the limits of the concept: is the new example part of the same genre, or a different one? Why? At the school level all this would depend on what else is in the curriculum and how the students have been introduced to this notion of 'text', but if they have been prepared for it, then genre is a really important way of grasping what is fundamental about a text. It helps you both 'master' that text, and also to manipulate it and exploit it creatively: once you know the rules, you can break them!

In my personal experience, one of the main difficulties while teaching visual semiotic analysis through the framework offered by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) has been dealing with my students' need to go through all visual metafunctions separately for analysis, without getting the metafunctions back together at the end for general meaning. Do you deal with the same sort of limitation in Australia?

How do you think we could make our students go beyond such descriptive analysis? There are two things going on here; one is pulling things apart before putting them back together; the other is the purpose of the analysis. And yes, I've experienced all of this, every time I teach it, for both language and other modalities! You can't teach the metafunctions without pulling things apart; firstly it's part of the whole point, to see the different contributions of each metafunction to meaning-making; and secondly, it's not practical unless you do them one-by-one. There is a lot of metalanguage and (typically) new perspectives to take in, and you simply can't do it all at once. So you have to pull it all apart before you can put it back together, as you say. That's the first thing. But then once you have put it all back together, it has to be for a reason. I call this the 'so what' part of the analysis: here is the analysis, so what? What does it tell to you, to say that this text has a certain kind of informational structure, a particular kind of modality, and construes a particular process type? So what? The analysis needs to be related to purpose (genre, culture, society, discourse, ideology… call it what you will, some larger purpose), and some sense needs to be made of the individual components and how they work together (or sometimes, against each other). In our grading system in Australia, a good analysis without explanation will earn a pass, but not much more. To get a higher mark, the explanation is essential. The analysis needs to be able to illuminate the text, not just describe it.

Have you had any experience teaching small children about the multimodal frameworks? If not, do you know anyone who has? How do children like learning about them? And how fast can they learn?

I haven't taught this to young children, but with a son who is now 10 we have had some personal experiences! Personally I find playgrounds fascinating; they are not the same in all countries, they can be very successful, or rather dull, so it's interesting to reflect on what's going on there. And with a child in school, the design of a classroom and how it is used is always interesting. One lesson we learnt at home was when we moved our son from a smaller bedroom to a larger one, thinking he would enjoy the extra space. He hated it! We had to move him back, and of course what he wanted was the secure binding of the smaller space, or its cosiness, in non-technical language. Of course there are many in Australia working with multimodal texts, especially images, at school level, such as Len Unsworth as I already mentioned, and there is of course also a lot of experience here about teaching the linguistic analysis, especially with the genre work started by Jim Martin, and not surprisingly, kids have no trouble at all taking on these concepts, if they are well presented. Geoff Williams has done a lot of work on this. After all, kids can handle complex abstractions like addition and subtraction, why not textual analysis? I saw a great language lesson in a kindergarten (age 5) class: the teacher was teaching process types, starting with material Processes. How did she teach material Processes? By getting the kids to do them, of course! She set up activity stations, where they had to 'throw' a ball, 'jump' up and down, 'run' and so on. They picked up cards with the relevant Process written on them, then had to come inside and write a sentence using it. This taught them about

the Participants that go with the Process (one, two, what roles and so on); the different tenses of the verb; and gave them a great sense of that Process type as a group. It was a very simple but very effective activity. Kids can handle all of that, if it is taught appropriately for their age and stage. There is so much we can do as teachers; I think we are only just beginning.

Thank you very much!

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Notes

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3. The acronyms SFL and MDA stand for *Systemic Functional Linguistics* and *Multimodality*, respectively.

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