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Book review: reply

JOHN BATEMAN, JANINA WILDFEUER and TUOMO HIIPPALA,
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A QUESTION OF DEFINITIONS: FOUNDATIONS FOR MULTIMODALITY

A response to Charles Forceville's review

Reviewing books is a time-consuming process and we must be very thankful that there are researchers and practitioners who find the time for this service for the broader community. And, of course, reviews can also fall out differently to how concerned authors and editors might have wished them. A review might also present aspects of a work in ways dramatically at odds with what the work was intending; this is part and parcel of academic life and so in general is certainly not only to be accepted, but welcomed. In some very specific cases, however, such reviews can raise the need for discussion of the *reasons* for divergences because those reasons have general relevance for the community at large.

We suggest that this is precisely what has happened with respect to one very specific aspect of Charles Forceville's review of our recent textbook on multimodality. Some of Forceville's comments raise fundamental issues concerning how the field of multimodality, including the study of visual communication as a particular case, should best proceed, particularly with respect to just what is required of 'definitions' of the field's primary theoretical constructs. Although Forceville's review is in general quite positive, towards the end of his description of what our book does and does not do, he makes the following, textually prominent, remark:

More worrying, I find, is the refusal (or inability) to define 'mode'. This makes for a concept with *very* fuzzy borders, which I fear will hamper the development of multimodality as a discipline.

Since our textbook comes as a result of over a decade working on precisely how most effectively to define 'semiotic mode' and we consider a clear position on what a semiotic mode is (and is not) a *precondition* for any

multimodal research and education concerning multimodality, something fundamental had evidently gone awry.

In Section 4.1 (pp. 112–123) of our book, we bring a general multimodally-oriented characterization of communication, already ranging across any possible materiality or perceptible traces, to the point where the notion of a semiotic mode can indeed be explicitly defined. Forceville's evaluation of our discussion at that point as too 'fuzzy' reveals interesting differences in what a definition should be and how the function of a definition can be achieved. For many readers in visual communication, we suspect that our definition might even be thought to lie too far in the exact opposite direction of 'fuzzy', since we couch that definition not in terms of examples or in textual rephrasings, but rather in the form employed when defining axiomatic systems, such as Euclid's definitions of geometry. Learning how to make definitions of this kind work to the advantage of concrete analyses is one of our textbook's main aims. Consequently, to help readers, particularly students, we express this definition primarily in graphical form, with the word 'definition' clearly given in the figure's caption (p. 117) and again in the following paragraph. It may then have been our reliance on a predominantly graphical form that led Forceville not to recognize or accept its intended illocutionary force as a definition.

It is however fundamental for any readers of the book that the properties we give in our definition of semiotic mode indeed be understood as *definitional*: if a semiotic system or constellation of semiotic resources does not have the properties there defined, then it is, according to our definition, simply *not* a semiotic mode. Since the field of multimodality will never be (and indeed does not need to be) in the position of being able to list 'all' semiotic modes, our definition is, by necessity, extremely *general*, but it is not fuzzy. Forceville seems at this point to confuse generality with vagueness, which may also reveal an interesting difference in disciplinary discourses. For example, Euclid's geometry makes statements about all triangles: this is very general, but it is not fuzzy or vague. Precisely the same holds for our definition of semiotic mode and it is this that allows it to be applied in hard cases of actual analysis.

For clarity and ease of reference, we rephrase (re-semiotize) the definition given in our textbook in a more traditional verbal form:

Definition: A 'semiotic mode' is a constellation of practice within a community of users that enables meaning constitution in a manner co-describable at the following three abstract semiotic levels, all of which are individually and specifically necessary for the determination of each and every semiotic mode:

- i. a deformable perceptible materiality, potentially involving multiple sensory channels (*canvas*),
- ii. a classification (paradigmatic) of formal units and structures (syntagmatic), which defines the material deformations that are pertinent for the semiotic mode, and

- iii. a level of *discourse semantics* that provides dynamic mechanisms for the abductive construction of discourse structures assigning contextual interpretations to the form classifications deployed.

Each of these components has further definitions and the constellations as such are embedded formally into our definitions of media at a more abstract level (pp. 123–127) and materiality at a less abstract level (pp. 101–109). The relevant sections in our textbook also provide extensive references to many other works from recent years (including but not limited to our own) that delve deeper into these topics so as to encourage both evaluation and refinement of the definitions proposed. While we do not expect all readers of the textbook to immediately refer to these works, we consider it the responsibility of a textbook to give overviews of related literature for those who do wish to take the discussion of definitions further. This is not, in our opinion, supported well by definitions which remain overly vague.

Forceville offers instead his own preferred approach, which is ‘to define modes as closely as possible in relation to sensory perception’, choosing not to acknowledge that our textbook already *explicitly argues against* this rather traditional position (pp. 19, 27–28, 36–37, 113–115, 247) precisely because we have found it inadequate both theoretically and methodologically when conducting multimodal analyses of complex semiotic artefacts and performances: when the actual empirical research is done, semiotic modes often turn out to cross senses. He then argues further that it would really be necessary to propose a general model of communication (citing his own earlier work on such a model), at the same time omitting to note that that is precisely what our textbook does in order to reach the definition of semiotic mode given. Again, the review appears not to grasp the importance of the *overall systematic* pursued in the book that places the definitions offered in precisely those theoretical contexts necessary to make them functional.

What makes definitions of an axiomatic kind work is that consequences follow from them: just as when one can make, on the basis of the classification of a geometric figure as a triangle, a host of further predictions concerning that figure, so the assumption that a practice of meaning constitution is a semiotic mode similarly entails predictions concerning the presence of a discourse semantics (which has its own *necessary* properties, such as the application of dynamic defeasible logics), of regularly classifiable distinctions in materiality, and a certain ‘slice’ of materiality (with its accompanying affordances and possibilities). It is precisely such predictions that drive focused empirical investigations, providing motivations for particular schemes of corpus annotation and hypotheses for experimental studies. With this and our overview of quantitative research that Forceville positively highlights, as well as the exemplary analyses we give in the case studies of our textbook, we quite explicitly work against Forceville’s (not, as Forceville suggests, our!) ‘fear’ ‘that attempts to define “mode” run the risk of getting bogged down in endless

debates without doing much practical work.' Axiomatic definitions are one of the most effective ways known of cutting through 'endless debate' and should not be discarded lightly.

In consequence, Forceville's review suggests a far more fragmented take on what is being presented in our book than is actually the case and, if followed, would leave potential users of the book with an inaccurate view of what is being asked of them. Forceville's suggestion that we do not define semiotic mode therefore needs to be strongly countered as it compromises much of what the book is aiming to achieve. Working with our textbook without strictly applying the definition of semiotic mode given would leave a significantly weakened methodology that would not be in a position to give students and researchers the support they now so crucially need to take the study of complex situations of multimodality 'to the next level'. While it is, of course, by no means necessary that all readers and researchers agree with the definition we offer, engaging with the consequences of the definition in order to find more appropriate and more predictive definitions is exactly what is now needed to further the scientific study of multimodality.

We thus encourage the community to consider more explicitly just what properties a definition of the basic concepts of our field should exhibit and to work with those proposals, including our own, by applying them in practice in empirical research. Applying hard definitions is not easy, but the pay-off, we believe, will be essential for the future.

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