In search of the social in social semiotics: a historical perspective

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In search of the social in social semiotics: a historical perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the importance of the social to the analysis of historical multimodal texts and how some concepts and analytical tools from SFL can prevent researchers from getting the most from their data. Building on the work of Ledin and Machin (2018), it looks at three main areas of concern when dealing with historical multimodal texts—context, attention to micro, meso and macro levels, and historically-developed affordances—and uses examples of Edwardian book inscriptions to suggest ways that archival research can help overcome these problems. Overall, it argues how greater attention to the social brings to the fore how semiotic choices can be used strategically to foreground individual positions and/or subvert aesthetic norms. In doing so, it frames historical multimodal texts not as static representations of communication, but as dynamic, highly contextual and involved in a complex process of co-construction between producers, their imagined audiences and broader sociocultural meanings. It also suggests that a focus on historical context can also move multimodal studies beyond a predominant focus on the contemporary, as well as challenge the supposed novelty of certain communicative practices, thereby fostering more nuanced interpretations that recognise the broader lineage of patterned practices and uses.

KEYWORDS

Multimodality; systemic functional linguistics; social semiotics; history; archives; book inscriptions

Introduction

Since the seminal works of O’Toole (1994) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001), multimodality has developed into a growing field of inquiry concerned with analysing the combination of language and other semiotic resources that people use to communicate and interact in different social settings (Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hiippala 2017). While many approaches to multimodal analysis have since been developed (e.g. Scollon 2001; Norris 2004; O’Halloran 2004), most studies—particularly in a linguistics context—continue to be structured by Kress and van Leeuwen’s approach, which is derived from the core principles of the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) of Halliday (1978, 1985).
In recent years, this SFL-based multimodality has come under scrutiny for the way in which it derives context from texts without accounting for the broader social practices, processes and people involved in their production or reception (Hiippala 2015; Machin 2016; Ledin and Machin 2019; Aiello and Parry 2019). This debate was started by van Leeuwen and Machin (2005) who argued that texts need to be connected to social contexts and placed in historical processes to fully understand them. This important argument has since been extended by Machin and Mayr (2012), Machin (2016), Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hiippala (2017) and Wildfeuer et al. (2019) but, most notably, Ledin and Machin (2019) who have outlined the problems of SFL when it comes to doing multimodal critical discourse studies effectively. They claim that SFL-based multimodality is too often framed as a “grand theory” of all forms of communication, with texts removed from the macro and meso levels which link them to broader social settings and canons of use. Using the example of a news photograph, they demonstrated that meaning cannot be established at the level of the contents of the image itself, leading them to conclude that multimodal analyses risk becoming interpretations of textual semantics if the social continues to be downplayed.

Ledin and Machin’s (2019) paper sparked an important discussion about the continued use of top-down approaches to multimodality, with critical responses from Bateman (2019), O’Halloran, Wignell, and Tan (2019) and Caple (2019) that showcase the range of perspectives and concerns that drive multimodality. While Bateman agreed that SFL-based multimodality can be self-referential, there was disagreement among O’Halloran, Wignell, and Tan (2019) about the descriptive tools of visual grammar and the extent to which scholars remain reliant on them when conducting analyses. Caple, on the other hand, recognised that context was a “highly contested space” (522) in SFL-based multimodality, but believed that it was addressed through Martin (1999) and Martin and Rose’s (2008) work on genre. Similar debates about whether SFL-based multimodality truly invokes the social have been the theme and indeed the catalyst for much work in the area of multimodal ethnography. Pahl and Rowsell (2006, 2010), Dicks et al. (2011), Rowsell (2011), Flewitt (2011), Rowsell and Chen (2011) and Martin (2018) all stress the importance of carrying out detailed and contextual multimodal analyses to foster a better understanding of how individuals and social groups organise their lives and make sense of their experiences, as well as how culture and knowledge is (re)produced.

When it comes to the analysis of historical multimodal texts, this emphasis on the social is even more important because we cannot draw on our pre-existing contemporary understanding of the world. Instead, we must develop knowledge based on their historical context of creation, sociocultural norms and communicative affordances/constraints in order to decipher them judiciously. While limited work has been carried out in this area to date, Holmberg’s (2021) recent geosemiotic study of a Viking runestone offers a key example of how decontextualising verbal messages can result in insufficient interpretations of a material artefact. Similarly, previous research by Gillen (2013), Adami (2020), Thompson and Collins (2020) and O’Hagan and Serafinelli (2022) has shown the importance of grounding interpretations of contemporary texts in historical artefacts to challenge their supposed novelty. O’Hagan (2019, 2021) has also demonstrated the value of archival records in piecing together the lives of text producers, given that first-hand accounts of their motivations can no longer be obtained. Archival records not only facilitate the reconstruction of social experiences and anchor communicative practices in the systems and
institutions of the social world, but also help uncover the connections between specific semiotic choices, meaning-making practices and their sociocultural effects.

With the aim of encouraging greater attention to context in multimodal studies, I reflect on the importance of the social to the analysis of historical multimodal texts and show how some concepts and analytical tools from SFL can create problems and prevent researchers from getting the most from their data. I demonstrate this by drawing upon examples from my research on Edwardian book inscriptions (1901-1914) and suggest ways that archival research can help overcome these problems. Building on the work of Ledin and Machin (2019), I argue that multimodal analyses must move beyond text-centred focuses, with archives and historical resources offering one such way to provide concrete evidence that can support hypotheses about the forms and functions of texts. With this paper, I do not wish to discount the value of SFL’s concepts and analytical tools, but rather stress the need to foreground context when conducting analyses, particularly when dealing with historical multimodal texts. With greater attention to the past, contemporary multimodal texts can also be situated within a broader tradition of sociocultural practices, sociopolitical forces and patterned uses. This, in turn, will foster a deeper awareness of the role of earlier historical conventions of meaning-making in certain semiotic and compositional choices, as well as their evolution in response to technological change and innovation.

In search of the social in social semiotics

According to Ledin and Machin (2019), a major concern with SFL-based multimodality is its assumption that all forms of communication can be approached through the same common set of principles and analytical models. In this form of “grand theory multimodality” (3), a metafunctional hypothesis is supposed: all semiotic modes must serve three metafunctions to operate as a full system of communication (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, 40). These metafunctions stem from the work of Halliday (1985) and organise the various elements and systems of a mode into three domains of meaning: ideational (the communication of ideas and experiences), interpersonal (the formation of social relationships and identities) and textual (the creation of coherence). When conducting multimodal analysis, many scholars begin by identifying the underlying grammatical systems of choices which realise these metafunctions. Then, they use the choices selected to analyse the text and interpret their combinations according to register and genre (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O’Halloran 2016).

As Forceville (1999) and Machin (2016) have pointed out, this reliance on metafunctions means that examples are often selected that allow certain concepts to be illustrated, with little attention given to how these signs shape (and are shaped by) the world around us. Thus, analyses can appear as post hoc interpretations justified by the use of terminology rather than insights into a particular research problem (Machin 2016). Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hiippala (2017, 231) describe this as the “description trap.” They also highlight two other traps into which many multimodal researchers fall: “pseudotechnicality” (when technical terms can be removed without changing the results) and “circularity” (when technical descriptions rely on the proposed results of the analysis to be applied). Antaki, Billig, and Edward (2003) also bring up the important point that labelling phenomena is not the same as conducting analyses, while Reynolds (2012) argues that not enough
has been done to show how these descriptive tools can produce new insights into a text. For Forceville (2010), much of the terminology associated with multimodality is untested, which he attests to the tendency to explore a wide range of topics rather than conducting localised studies on one object to develop robust principles and concepts.

In a nutshell, starting from an SFL perspective can close our eyes to other perspectives that may enable us to get better traction from the selected objects of analysis (Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hiippala 2017). The first step of multimodal research must, therefore, be to fix an analytical focus and think about the broader sociocultural issues that are being posed by the text. This is of particular relevance to historical multimodal texts because treating them as static objects tied to their immediate context neglects their movement in time and the various actors involved in their production and reception. Equally, it means that we risk framing the semiotic choices of producers as guided by the same conventions regardless of canons of use, which overlooks the crucial link between certain resources and how they are deployed for specific ideological purposes at specific points in time (Machin 2016). In other words, it is often the deviances from the norm that are most insightful, particularly when exploring issues around discourse and power in texts.

In what follows, I look at three main areas of concern when dealing with historical multimodal texts—context, attention to micro, meso and macro levels, and historically-developed affordances—and how they can be addressed by greater attention to the social in SFL-based multimodality.

The importance of context

In SFL, field, tenor and mode are important for describing the way in which context and language are interrelated. Field describes what is going on, tenor refers to the relationship between participants and mode concerns the channel of communication, which map onto Halliday’s ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions, respectively. However, these three components that make up what Halliday (1978) calls a context of situation have been criticised by van Dijk (2008) and Ledin and Machin (2019), among others, for their arbitrary description of context and their inability to account for distinctions between institutional and spatiotemporal settings, the properties of participants and power relations.

While the link between metafunctions, systems and contextual features is effective for spoken language, difficulties arise when applying it to written texts. As Ledin and Machin (2019) have demonstrated using examples from Halliday and Hasan (1989), attempts to relate written texts to the context of situation often result in the event, participants and channels being projected from the text itself rather than looking beyond to its broader sociocultural context. Holmberg (2012) and Machin (2016) have also used journalistic essays and photographs to show how an SFL interpretation of context can be problematic. This interpretation of context becomes even more problematic when dealing with historical multimodal texts, as we shall see below.

The image in Figure 1 shows a Sunday school prize sticker awarded to Alice Urie in 1910. The sticker was written by Superintendent R.H. Keeble on behalf of J.E. Watts-Ditchfield, the vicar of St James-the-Less Church in Bethnal Green, London. To understand the meaning of such a text, we must know details of its canons of use.
Canons of use are described by Ledin and Machin (2019, 5) as the “traditions of use” for instances of communication, along with the types of semiotic resources that tend to be employed in them. These canons of use have established meanings and patterns, are used as means of communication in typical social practices and are infused into patterns of production and use.

Figure 1. Edwardian Prize Sticker.

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In this case, the prize sticker is part of a broader context of prize-giving practices that took place in Edwardian Britain, and it acts as a material marker that bears witness to the event and documents its reality. While there is a long history of awarding books as prizes in public schools, the practice trickled down from these elite settings into working-class environments in the late eighteenth century when the Sunday school movement was established. Worried that there was no provision to safeguard children from the “wrong” sort of literature when away from school, churches began to award religious books to children for good behaviour or regular attendance (O’Hagan 2021, 36). Following the 1870 Education Act, which made provision for the elementary education of all children aged 5-13, prize-giving became a regular part of working-class school life. It was not long before the practice spread to working-class clubs and associations throughout Britain. However, within each awarding institution, prize-giving practices varied according to disposable income and specific beliefs or traditions (e.g. a temperance society awarded temperance novels). These institutional differences demonstrate how canons of use must always be assessed on a case-by-case basis as the same genre of text (in this case, prize inscriptions) can showcase individual subtleties in line with the principles and world views of each individual institution and its target audience (see O’Hagan 2017 for specific details of prize book variations by school type).

At first, prize books were marked with hand-written inscriptions and awarded on an informal basis. However, as the practice of prize-giving grew and became embedded into British culture, printed commemorative labels known as prize stickers emerged. Thought up by canny booksellers and stationers, these stickers provided a way for awarding institutions to distinguish themselves from one another. Furthermore, publishers became anxious to exploit the growing popularity of working-class prize-giving by inventing prize bindings: a new type of book made to look as attractive as possible on the outside and its content moulded to the requirements of awarding institutions (O’Hagan 2021, 37). The materiality of the prize sticker and prize book will be discussed fully later in this paper, but already it should be clear that canons of use are not simply about reading backwards to the text or period under investigation, but also encompass a study of antecedents in the communicative histories of individuals and communities that shape a text’s creation (O’Hagan and Spilioti 2021, 2). This enables a better understanding of how texts build upon and are ingrained in historical social practices, and how they ground themselves in earlier historical conventions of meaning-making.

Thus, from looking beyond the text to establish context, we see how awarding books as prizes constitutes a case of gesunkenes Kulturgut, beginning as an upper-class ritual and, over time, developing into a uniquely working-class practice that imbued the reward with new social meanings of control and discipline (O’Hagan 2021, 37). Not only did the working-class prize book reinforce unequal power structures of age and class, but it perpetuated the idea that books and education had to be earnt. As Reynolds (2008, 206) notes, through this new form of prize-giving and choice of book, awarding institutions strived to balance an eradication of working-class culture with a reinforcement of class divisions. We can see, therefore, how texts become imparted with discourses that support the interests of specific ideologies and dominant groups in society. It follows then that drawing context from the text itself does not allow such rich findings to emerge.
The importance of acquiring contextual knowledge to interpret a text correctly becomes even more evident when moving from its broad canons of use to the specific institutions and individuals involved in its production and reception. For historical multimodal texts, historical records and archival documents, such as census returns, birth, marriage and death certificates, military service registers, maps, diaries and employment papers, can provide a wealth of first-hand evidence to support analysis. A comprehensive list of recommended resources can be found in Table 1.

For the prize sticker presented in Figure 1, a search of the Historic England archive—a register of more than 400,000 listed buildings—provides specific details about St James-the-Less Church, including its history, architecture, fixtures, denomination and notable clergy, while general statistics on church attendance and church membership/affiliation in Edwardian Britain can be found in Mcllhiney (1988) and Field (2013). The precise geographical location of St James-the-Less can be identified using Charles Booth’s Poverty Maps, which have recently been digitised and are searchable online,1 while an exploration of the British Newspaper Archive reveals articles about the Church’s prize-giving ceremonies, including that pertinent to the prize sticker. Combining these four resources reveals that St James-the-Less was one of several Church of England churches in Bethnal Green, an extremely poor area of London. It was surrounded by tumble-down multi-occupancy housing and its main congregation was working-class people of low socioeconomic status, many of whom worked as dockers, piece workers or casual labourers. Its prize-giving ceremonies were big events in the local community, with families attending to participate in the songs and prayers and see their children receive awards. Thus, St James-the-Less and its adjoining Sunday school were central features of working-class community life in Bethnal Green.

Turning to the awardee—Rev J.E. Watts-Ditchfield—an exploration of Who Was Who (a listing of prominent British people) and the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography show that he was an eminent Anglican vicar. During his time at St James-the-Less, Watts-Ditchfield successfully developed a Men’s Society with the aim of increasing church attendance amongst young working-class men, as well as a medical service and parish centre for his poor parishioners. However, he also sparked outrage amongst his peers for letting a woman preach in his church and for using his sermons to discuss the (taboo) topics of intemperance, class divisions and housing deficiencies. Understanding the prize sticker

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Table 1. Recommended Resources for Conducting Historical Multimodal Analysis.

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<tr>
<th>Historical Records</th>
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<td>Censuses</td>
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<td>Maps</td>
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<td>Marriage indexes</td>
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<td>Military service records</td>
<td>School logbooks</td>
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<td>Passenger lists</td>
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<td>Phone books</td>
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<td>Probate calendar</td>
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<td>Trade directories</td>
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<td>University alumni records</td>
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<td>Valuation Office survey indexes</td>
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within Watts-Ditchfield’s personal desire to better the lives of the poor enables a more nuanced interpretation of the aims of prize-giving and even challenges or softens the broader notions of the practice as being tied up with control and power.

To find out more about the recipient—Alice Urie—census records are an important place to start because they contain detailed information on the individual, their family and address. From these records, we learn that Urie was seven years old at the time. She lived with her parents and nine siblings in cramped slum housing at 59 Pownall Rd in Bethnal Green. Her father James worked as a boot laster in a factory on the nearby Richmond Rd, a poorly paid job carried out in unsafe working conditions. Urie’s profile, thus, fits exactly with the target recipient of Sunday school prize-giving. The prize sticker is marked with additional text by Urie herself that makes reference to Canada. A search of immigration records finds that, in the early twentieth century, the Canadian Manufacturers’ Association offered families in the East End assisted passage to Canada to resettle and supply the country’s urgent demands for good skilled labour. The Uries were one such family and on 8th June 1911, they boarded the RMS Royal Edward for Quebec, before travelling 714 miles to Walkerville, where Urie’s father and her two eldest brothers started working as machinists in one of the town’s fast-growing automobile factories. The move was unsuccessful, however, and the family returned to Bethnal Green just fifteen months later in August 1912, resuming their previous life.

This detailed archival research accentuates the fact that, contrary to the practices of many multimodal scholars, context cannot be directly gauged from within texts and that it is essential to find out the canons of use and social practices involved to carry out effective multimodal analysis. It is only through this information that the prize sticker is made meaningful; to focus on how the metafunctions are realised through syntax to uncover context and meaning is ineffective and more akin to textual semantics (Ledin and Machin 2019). Here, we see how texts are material objects, not just vessels of information, and that book inscriptions are rich semiotic resources that reveal details on individual book ownership, literacy and readership practices, identities and sociocultural knowledge, and even have the potential to transmit new accounts of life in Edwardian Britain when analysed correctly.

Attention to the micro, meso and macro levels of texts

As Ledin and Machin (2019) point out, another problem with SFL-based multimodality is the very notion of what comprises a text. Specifically, they argue that approaching all forms of communication and objects as realisations of metafunctions prevents an understanding of how texts are created and experienced as “material wholes” (6). In other words, this lack of attention to the multiple layers of a text not only disregards how they communicate with one another, but also the purposes for which they are deployed. Similar arguments have been made by Berge (2012) who claims that, by not departing from the concept of texts as wholes, SFL analyses prevent knowledge of how outer forms and inner structures work together.

In their study, Ledin and Machin (2019) use three diverse examples—a Facebook webpage, a shampoo bottle and a photograph—to demonstrate that texts operate on three levels. At the micro level is the text as a whole that we encounter in specific situations; at the macro level are the culture, traditions and different semiotic resources
with potentials for meaning-making; and in between is the meso level made up of canons of use and the social practices that shape meaning-making. They argue that, when conducting multimodal analysis, it is important to start from the canons of use and then see how the actual material text enacts these to make meaning. In this way, the interdependence of materiality and communication becomes apparent, thereby demonstrating how materials support and reshape communicative practices (Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hiippala 2017). This necessity to start at the outer level and then point to the semiotic resources deployed internally to achieve specific communicative goals is particularly necessary in a historical context, as we will see using the example of the prize sticker presented earlier in Figure 1.

The prize sticker is a semiotic material shaped as a whole and designed as a label that represents material proof of the act of prize-giving. Its location on the front endpaper of a book codes its contextual configuration and it is within this setting that communication unfolds. However, the prize sticker is also part of a broader communication network made up of a number of actors who play a key role in its creation, transmission and reception. To fully understand the prize sticker, then, we must look at both its internal and external layers, what Genette (1997) calls its peritext and epitext, respectively. Table 2 shows a detailed list of peritextual and epitextual elements to consider when carrying out historical multimodal analysis. For the purposes of book inscription analysis, the most pertinent peritextual elements are booksellers’ labels, binders’ labels, library stickers, “laid in” items (e.g. bookmarks, newspaper clippings) and bindings, while the most pertinent epitextual elements are publishing house catalogues, publishers’ stock books and stationers’/bookseller’s bookplate and prize sticker pattern books.

The prize sticker is placed in a book called Ruth’s Path to Victory, a temperance novel written by Evelyn L. Thomas in 1898 and published by the Religious Tract Society. Temperance novels were a sub-genre of the religious novel and, as the name suggests, were aimed at persuading young readers to reject alcohol. For the stories’ protagonists, giving up alcohol and finding God resulted in immediate positive effects on their appearance, family life and finances (O’Hagan 2021, 56). Alcoholism and economic poverty were

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both major problems in the East End where Urie lived, so the prize book is a calculated choice by the awarding institution to promote an idealised way of living to its Sunday school attendees. This is further apparent in the promotional literature for the book, which describes it as “wholesome,” “decidedly good in tone” and “sure to appeal to all girls.” The fact that the book was awarded twelve years after publication is also significant as it suggests that awarding institutions relied on older material due to its conservative depictions of what it meant to be male and female (Entwistle 1990).²

Looking beyond the content of the book to its materiality, we see how it was made to look as attractive as possible on the outside, with its colourful cloth boards, illustrations, gilt lettering and Art Nouveau typeface (Figure 2). Inside, however, the paper was a low-quality wood pulp and had unadorned endpapers and compressed print. As books were awarded at prize ceremonies, institutions recognised the importance of aesthetics in bringing other benefits, such as increased membership or monetary donations (O’Hagan 2021, 150). Oral history accounts show that, although many working-class children did not read their prize books, they valued them as material objects. In households with few possessions, these decorative volumes served as tangible markers of achievement and signs of outward status in the local community (O’Hagan, 2017:519). A focus on these details, thus, shows how the prize sticker must be interpreted as part of a broader tradition of beliefs, social relationships and canons of use aimed at the working classes and go far beyond the act of awarding good behaviour.

Moving to the prize sticker itself, we see that it is split into two parts: the first half features the name and location of the awarding institution and the date, while the second half indicates the name of the recipient, vicar, superintendent and reason for prize-giving. The combination of printed text and blank boxes that invite handwritten responses are part of an established format that allows a certain communicative infrastructure. However, this format developed gradually as the prize book movement grew and only consolidated when the first prize stickers were printed (O’Hagan 2021, 47). This move from handwriting to print developed standardised forms of prize stickers and dictated unspoken social rules, which were quickly followed across all awarding institutions. While individual prize sticker designs and semiotic choices varied, the textual content remained the same, indicating the constraints of both provenance and social conventions.

The first known prize stickers date back to the early eighteenth century (North Lee 1982). However, they did not become mainstream until the late nineteenth century when prize-giving became an established part of British schooling, following the 1870 Education Act. Recognising their potential lucrativeness, stationers and booksellers started to produce catalogues of designs in different price tiers and branded as “basic,” “standard,” “premium” and “deluxe” to appeal to a cross-range of institutions (O’Hagan 2017). These institutions then browsed the catalogues and selected certain designs. While basic prize stickers allowed little room for customisation, deluxe designs had templates where institutions could request the addition of their own logo or even endorsements (e.g. “Her Majesty’s Inspector reports this is a wonderful school”). This commercialisation of prize-giving infused the act with multiple functions: now the prize sticker could serve as an advertisement, which merged the importance of the institution with the success of the scholars (Reynolds 2008, 190). This, in turn, could improve the status of the institution in the local community.
Figure 2. Ruth’s Path to Victory.
Alice Urie’s prize sticker is a standard design, fairly typical of a Sunday school in an impoverished area. At the level of its inner structure, we find choices of colour, typography and framing, but these micro-level choices are very much linked to meso and macro ideological goals, sociocultural norms and historical traditions, making it clear that any interpretation of semiotic resources cannot be detached from context. First, the polychrome red and blue print of the prize sticker is reflective of the chromolithography print method that was invented in the mid-nineteenth century and quickly adopted for prize-giving as it facilitated the production of eye-catchy designs (O’Hagan 2021, 174). The exuberant visual appearance of Edwardian prize stickers was embedded in working-class traditions and tastes, the rich colours and pseudopageantry reflective of popular theatrical fairground art, which spread from pleasure parks to pubs, trade unions and marching banners (Lewery 1991). However, this was also balanced with more conventional elements that appealed to the tradition and practices of the Church. The Gothic font, for example, draws upon medieval illuminated manuscripts like the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the *Book of Kells*, which are important symbols of British religiosity. Additionally, the floral section breaks reference the biblical importance of plants and flowers (i.e. Garden of Eden, Tree of Life) as representative of beauty, growth and love.

The handwritten elements of the prize sticker also reveal historically specific meanings and functions. The main inscription is written with a black ink fountain pen. While fountain pens are considered status symbols today, this was not the case in Edwardian Britain. By the turn of the twentieth century, fountain pens were used across all class groups, offering a cheaper and more reliable alternative to the previously popular dip pens (O’Hagan 2021, 169). The choice of black ink was also influenced by the colour being the cheapest and most readily available on the market. However, added to this, was the formal guidance of letter-writing books which advised Edwardians to always write in black because it was the most durable colour and transmitted an aura of respectability (ibid). Thus, we see how both tradition and practicality played a key role in the decision to use a black ink fountain pen.

It is also possible to establish a link between the handwriting of the inscriber—Superintendent R.H. Keeble—and broader cultural traditions. Its slant, body proportions and marked contrast between thick and thin strokes are characteristic of the Vere Foster style, which was taught to middle-class and working-class boys in the 1860s and 1870s (ibid, 186). Thus, even without searching for the superintendent in archival records, we can infer his age (a cross-comparison with records confirms that Keeble was indeed born in 1867). Alice Urie, on the other hand, writes with a plain lead pencil. Lead pencils were typically kept for mundane everyday scribal practices and were favoured by young children who had not yet full command of an ink pen (ibid, 170). While Urie’s writing may seem fairly competent compared to a contemporary seven-year-old, some of its shaky letter shapes indicate that she has not yet developed her handwriting style. The contrast between the two forms of handwriting, thus, unconsciously transmits knowledge about unequal power dynamics.

This in-depth look at the micro, meso and macro levels of the prize sticker indicates the necessity of starting from a canon of use and then considering how the text acts as an instance of this when conducting multimodal analysis. This approach differs considerably from the typical practice of devising the grammar of a semiotic mode through...
metafunctions and systems and projecting context from within. Starting from a canon of use is more enriching in its ability to identify the long history of patterned practices and uses in which the prize sticker is embedded, socioculturally induced meanings and functions specific to Edwardian society, the communicative motivations and roles of institutions in semiotic choices and the way in which meaning potentials may shift over time.

**Historically developed affordances**

The central underpinning of social semiotics is the notion of systems and choices. The grammar or “system” that SFL proposes maps meanings paradigmatically into system networks and these meanings are construed as choices. As Ledin and Machin (2019) have shown, the concept of choices of meaning can work for some forms of communication, but whether these choices can be represented as system networks is another matter. They claim that starting from a “one-size-fits-all” (8) approach to look for how a text realises meaning is problematic. Such an approach entails looking for processes, participants and circumstances (ideational metafunction), identifying such features as gaze, social distance and perspective (interpersonal metafunction) and then considering how these relate to one another through framing and salience (compositional metafunction). Like Ledin and Machin (2019), both Bache (2013) and Berry (2013) have argued that we must tie choices to specific contexts and forms of expression to understand how they are communicatively motivated rather than model these networks of choices in an uncritical manner.

The importance of this position can be seen when using the example of the bookplate in Figure 3. Starting from an SFL perspective, we would outline how the linguistic processes are realised in clauses and how the roles and actors are dependent upon these processes. Thus, we could say that the figures in the bookplate are involved in a “bidirectional transactional action” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001, 74) because an eyeline vector is formed that connects the two interactors. Continuing with this form of analysis, we could also argue that the vectors create a visual narrative between the Reacter (the participant who does the looking) and the Phenomena (the participant at whom the Reacter looks). However, this type of analysis risks falling into the “description trap” (Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hiippala 2017, 231) if the context and canons of use are not accounted for, nor the affordances of semiotic materials, i.e. what it is possible and not possible to express with different modes (Kress 2010). From this perspective, affordance is not about perception, but rather the way in which the meanings of particular semiotic resources are materially, culturally, socially and historically developed.

Given this criticism, Ledin and Machin (2019) suggest that analyses should begin with a general description of what the text shows rather than approach it from linguistic processes and syntax. Applying this suggestion to the bookplate, we could say that it shows a shield bearing the image of a tree flanked by a snake and dove. The two creatures face one another, the snake with its tongue forked: an expression that could suggest anger. Above the shield is a gauntleted arm holding a sword, while below the shield is a banderole with a Latin motto. At the bottommost part of the bookplate is the owner’s name written in a handwritten font. Engaging with the bookplate from this descriptive perspective foregrounds the idea of “indexing” (Ledin and Machin 2019,
10). In other words, the bookplate is not coding a process that unfolds over time; rather, it is indexing a range of actions and emotions that are embedded in a specific canon of use.

We can develop this idea further if we consider the affordances of the bookplate within their broader sociohistorical context. Viewed as a whole, we see that the bookplate bears features associated with the discipline of heraldry. Heraldry dates back as far as the High

**Figure 3.** Armorial Bookplate.
Middle Ages when a system of visual identification of rank and pedigree was created and shields were marked with coats of arms to distinguish individuals in battle. Over time, coats of arms became used as ownership markers on everything, from stationery and luggage tags and to trinket boxes, cigar cases and, of course, bookplates (O’Hagan 2021, 25). Heraldry also developed its own language with its own semantics and grammar, demonstrated in the syntax and rhetoric of blazoning (correctly displayed armorial bearings).

Thus, armorial bookplates—such as that of Figure 3—are part of a semiotic domain in which the meaning of signs is fixed by historically-dictated rules. This means that, although the image contains “participants,” to use SFL speak, they are not creating a narrative and are rather part of a figurative representation with very specific meanings. Even if this figurative representation could be classified in SFL terms as a “conceptual structure” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001, 114) made up of “symbolic attributes” (208), many of the rules of visual grammar do not apply because this domain has its own strict canons of use when it comes to symbols, colour and framing. Therefore, to understand the affordances of the bookplate, we must move beyond the idea of general systems and choices and enter into the realm of heraldry.

In heraldry, the descent of arms in England and Wales is determined by the laws of arms, which only allow transmission through the male line. Looking up the bookplate owner’s surname—Majendie—in the Genealogical and Heraldic Dictionary of the Landed Gentry, this line of descent becomes apparent. The dictionary states that the Majendie coat of arms dates back to the early seventeenth century and first belonged to Ashurst Majendie of Hedingham Castle. The bookplate owner W.R. Stuart Majendie is his great grandson. The dictionary describes the coat of arms as follows:

**Arms:** On a base vert, a bay tree between a serpent erect on the dexter, and a dove, close, on the sinister, all ppr.

**Crest:** An arm embowed in armour, in the hand a scimitar, all ppr.

**Motto:** Qualis ab incepto.

Here, we see vocabulary specific to this semiotic domain, such as vert (green), dexter (right), sinister (left) and ppr. (proper as in “the colour of nature”). Now with a knowledge of these conventions, we can turn back to the bookplate to see how it is embedded in this historical practice. Vanrigh (2009, 227) notes that heraldry is not always about truth and people can add signs that make claims for a status that others may not be willing to grant. This was a particular problem in Edwardian Britain because armorial bookplates were transitioning from privately commissioned artist designs to cheaper stationer-produced templates, and stationers were not concerned with maintaining accuracy (Bookplate Society 2008). We can see an example of embellishment in Majendie’s bookplate: the rows of dots in the shield symbolise gold when no gold is present in the official coat of arms. Given the associations between gold and opulence, it is likely that the addition of this colour was a conscious choice by Majendie.

The other elements of Majendie’s bookplate stay true to the heraldic dictionary and have specific symbolism. According to A Glossary of Terms Used in Heraldry (1894), the bay tree, for example, represents fame, posterity and the resurrection of Christ. The snake, on the other hand, signals wisdom and defiance with biblical associations of
evil, while the dove is a recognised symbol of the Holy Spirit, peace and purity. Even their positions vis-à-vis one another are symbolic, the left in heraldry being traditionally associated with evil (Hall 2008, 25). Viewed together, the central image reads as an allegory of the battle between good and evil, with the power of Christ serving to unite the two sides. The image in the crest is an established symbol of warrior strength, while the Latin phrase roughly translates as “the same as from the beginning” and comes from Acts 3:21, which affirms that all religious prophecies will be fulfilled. Thus, overall, the bookplate projects an image of wealth, piousness, conservatism and high social status, in keeping with the owner himself who was a prominent Church of England clergyman.

While Majendie’s bookplate does not stray too far from his family’s historically established coat of arms, in other cases, Edwardians with no right to a coat of arms took advantage of the democratisation of the bookplate to create fake armorials. The bookplate in Figure 4 is a case in point, which belonged to the domestic servant Maude Goff. Goff’s coat of arms is topped by a crest—a feature which, according to the rules of heraldry, cannot be used by women because they did not historically participate in wars or tournaments. Not only is the crest illegitimate, but it is also pseudoheraldic: the red squirrel is not a recognised heraldic symbol and has instead been chosen as a visual metonym for “Goff”, which means “red haired”. The square shield in Goff’s bookplate also goes against convention; the strict rules of heraldry dictate that women’s shields must be lozenges (diamond shaped). The shield also flouts the tradition of using the two divided parts to indicate the husband and wife’s lineage. Evidence from heraldic dictionaries indicate that the left design, in fact, belonged to Lionel Trevor Goff—Lieutenant-Colonel in the Royal Artillery and no relation to Maude Goff—while the right is an eclectic assortment of arbitrary tinctures and symbols. The motto “fiere sans tache” has also been adopted from Lionel Trevor Goff. Goff purchased this bookplate shortly after her marriage in 1906 to William Goff, a storekeeper from an intellectually ambitious lower-middle-class family. The bookplate, thus, serves as a self-conscious display of its owner’s social mobility and aims to project a higher social status, even though this status risked being rejected by those with a knowledge of the heraldic system.4

So, we see how to start from the general systems and choices of visual grammar is to overlook much rich information. For bookplates, affordances are specifically class-based, dictated by what it was possible for book owners to express or communicate based on their social status or wealth. Not only must we delve into the specific canons of use of heraldry to interpret the bookplates correctly (despite looking the same on the surface), but we must also use these canons of use to check for accuracy and identify any deviances, which tend to have social significance and serve particular communicative goals. Thus, through this approach, bookplates move beyond their role as markers of ownership and become performances of class identity and self-fashioning, serving as a microcosm of many of the social tensions in Edwardian society. This example demonstrates the need for more flexibility in the interpretation of semiotic choices and processes, recognising that texts do not have fixed meanings and do not always adhere to distinct configurations; rather, they are influenced by the broader practices, systems, institutions and forces of the social world at work during their time of creation, as well as fixed genre and discourse rules.
Conclusion

The purpose for writing this paper was to build upon the work of Ledin and Machin (2019) by reflecting on the importance of the social to the analysis of historical multimodal texts.
and how some concepts and analytical tools from SFL can hinder the potential rich findings to emerge from collected data. By using examples from my research on Edwardian book inscriptions, I have outlined how SFL-based multimodality is often presented as a “grand theory” for all forms of communication, which gives rise to three issues: the importance of context, attention to micro, meso and macro levels, and historically developed affordances. While Ledin and Machin (2019) demonstrated how these issues are relevant to contemporary multimodal texts, my focus on the historical further accentuates them, given that the producers are no longer alive and we can no longer use pre-existing knowledge to interpret them. Thus, understanding historical context of creation, sociocultural norms and communicative affordances/constraints becomes even more essential to correct interpretation.

Specifically, I have argued that SFL-based multimodality has a tendency to derive context from texts without accounting for the fact that texts (and people) can only be understood as part of a wider dialogue with the social world. In doing so, it removes texts from their macro and meso levels, thereby preventing sufficient knowledge of the setting that surrounds their creation and the link between their composition, creator(s) and broader sociocultural meanings. It is, therefore, only through detailed, contextual examinations that we can fully understand how institutional communication, the operation and organisation of societies and socially constructed knowledge of reality are formed through visual and material artefacts.

Like Ledin and Machin (2019), I contend that multimodal analyses must begin with a research question and that only relevant semiotic resources must be examined. For this purpose, canons of use are an important starting point, with archival research as essential to unearthing the narratives behind the semiotic choices of historical multimodal texts and how they indicate otherwise hidden elements of people’s lived experiences. Relying on primary resources helps move multimodal analyses beyond subjective judgements or narrow focuses restricted by the descriptive labels and rules of visual grammar. This, in turn, enables cultural practices to be accurately reconstructed, leading to a better understanding of the complexities of past sociality and cultural activities. Specifically, it reveals how multimodal texts are, in fact, complex sociocultural artefacts whose semiotic choices are embedded in individual experiences and attitudes, as well as socially situated activities and traditions.

As we have seen with the prize sticker example, it was part of a broader tradition of prize-giving practices with its own canons of use and subtle class and gender implications. Consequently, it is only by supporting multimodal analysis with archival evidence on the awarding institution, the inscriber and inscribee that the prize sticker is made meaningful. Furthermore, it is essential to examine the micro, meso and macro levels of the prize sticker to gain a full understanding of the interdependence of materiality and communication. Observing its epitextual and peritextual resources, as well as individual semiotic choices, highlight the text’s strong connections with established conventions, specifically the symbolic meanings of colour and typography, the influence of education on handwriting choice and the impact of technological printing developments on design. The armorial bookplates, on the other hand, showcase the challenges of using SFL’s general systems and choices network, which ignore the specific rules of genres and sub-genres and the way that the affordances and symbolic meanings of semiotic resources are materially, culturally, socially and historically embedded. Lack of consideration for these details
can overlook acts of deviance (e.g. fake armorials, addition of gold), which are often tied up with specific ideological goals.

Overall, greater attention to the social brings to the fore how semiotic choices can be used strategically to foreground individual traits, attitudes or positions and/or subvert aesthetic norms. In doing so, it demonstrates that historical multimodal texts are not static representations of communication; rather, they are dynamic, highly contextual and involved in a complex process of co-construction between producers, their imagined audiences and broader sociocultural meanings. Deconstructing texts within the context of wider forces rather than based on “interpretative, impressionistic and subjective” assumptions (Hiippala 2015, 3) can also help multimodal research capture visual genre ecologies and genealogies of vernacular practice. Not only will this move multimodal studies beyond a predominant focus on the contemporary, but it will also challenge the supposed novelty of certain communicative practices, fostering more nuanced interpretations that recognise the broader lineage of patterned practices and uses. Ultimately, establishing context from outside the text rather than inside ensures that we do not lose sight of the social, which should be at the heart of social semiotic analysis.

In closing, one final point to stress is that, with this paper, I am not rejecting SFL-based multimodality; rather, I am emphasising that, to fully understand texts, multimodal analyses must encompass a greater historical awareness of how institutions and social structures influence and/or dictate semiotic choices. Without supporting historical multimodal analysis with context derived from archival research, the original intentions of the creator(s) and any socioculturally-induced meanings and functions in texts, as well as the ways in which they may change over time, risk being lost, thereby resulting in ineffective interpretations that rely too much on subjectivity. Within multimodal studies, contemporary texts still form the main body of research being conducted. It is hoped that this paper illustrates the rich findings that can emerge from historical multimodal analysis when good research practices are followed and that it encourages more scholars to delve into this underappreciated area of study.

Notes

1. Between 1886 and 1903, Booth carried out a survey of poverty in London, coding streets with seven different colours from black (vicious and semi-criminal lower class) to yellow (wealthy upper-middle and upper classes) to mark their level of poverty.

2. Inscriptive evidence shows, however that children did not always respond to books in the way that awarding institutions intended. In a temperance novel awarded by Leigh Council Boys’ School, for example, 12-year-old Richard Ritchie wrote the repeated comment “fab!” next to any references to alcohol, indicating a touch of cheeky defiance to the novel’s aim of discouraging drinking (O’Hagan 2021, 237).

3. Females can only inherit arms if there are no male heirs in the family.

4. The upper classes were highly suspicious of stationer-designed bookplates referred to them pejoratively as “diesinkers” (diesinkers were responsible for stamping designs on coins and medals) because they were made by steel engravers with little artistic flair.

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