Digital Communication and Media Linguistics

This textbook offers an interdisciplinary, comprehensive, and state-of-the-art overview of the media linguistics approaches to explain and understand digital communication and multimodality. Linking the fields of communication studies, applied linguistics, and journalism, it grounds communication practices in a deep understanding of the social and societal implications of language use in digital media. The tools to analyze multimodal texts are examined in light of the advantages and constraints that different communication modes pose, both individually and in combination. Aimed at upper-level undergraduates and graduates in applied linguistics, communication and media studies, including journalism and PR, this textbook contains case studies and professional examples highlighting the interplay between language use and digital communication and encouraging the reader to reflect on the themes covered, and put the acquired knowledge into practice. Online resources for students include videos, writing techniques, a guide to multimodal texts analysis, additional case studies, and a glossary.
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“Highly instructive and very readable, this book provides a clear overview of the broad field of public digital communication. It successfully bridges theory and practice by presenting research approaches from various disciplines as well as useful tools and methods for multimodal analysis.”

Professor Christa Dürscheid, University of Zurich

“The go-to resource for anyone doing research in digital communication! Combining selected theoretical concepts and illustrative analyses using diverse research methods, this book provides a modern understanding of today’s mediatized world to professionals and students alike.”

Professor Judith Bridges, University of South Florida
Digital Communication and Media Linguistics

WITH CASE STUDIES IN JOURNALISM, PR, AND COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION

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Aleksandra Gnach, Wibke Weber, Martin Engebretsen, and Daniel Perrin
Media are the communication channels through which we disseminate and exchange information on a daily basis. Over the last twenty years, digital media have hugely impacted our highly mediatized world, and even transformed public communication, a domain traditionally dominated by journalists and communication professionals. Nowadays, personal opinions shared on social media compete with journalistic news, political statements, marketing content, influencer posts, fake news, and social bot communication. Furthermore, public communication has become increasingly participatory, especially on social media, where individuals and interest groups are reframing, remixing, and reshaping media content while sharing it within networks and communities.

As a result, media linguistics – a discipline that lies at the intersection of applied linguistics, media studies, and communication research – has expanded its focus to include not only traditional media (i.e., TV, radio, and print media) but also the new media such as social media platforms.

The fundamental changes that come with the digitalization of communication – the multitude of different actors in the networked public sphere, and the diversification of communication formats and modes – influence the work and self-understanding of communication practitioners. Therefore, this textbook wants to help students of applied linguistics, communication and media studies, and practitioners in related fields to (a) refine their theoretical knowledge so that they can understand participants’ roles, reflect on professional norms, and contextualize their actions, (b) familiarize themselves with the methods and tools required to manage the complexity of the interplay between digitalization and public communication, and (c) respond to new technology and the implications that these have on communications strategies and routines.

From a media linguistic viewpoint, language functions both as a display of mental and social structures and processes and as a means to construct and change social reality. Therefore, by investigating language use we can draw conclusions about human actors, technology, social context, and the interplay between these elements.

In digital communication, however, language rarely appears in isolation. Rather, it intersects with other semiotic modes such as images, sound, or layout. Media linguistics has long taken into account that meaning making in this multimodal environment is not a matter of simple addition, but of the interaction and integration of all the modes involved. Thus, media linguistic approaches foster detailed analytical descriptions of multimodal meaning potentials, connect these to their social contexts, and give insights into technology’s semiotic work.

In our effort to discuss media linguistics in the context of digital communication, we had to rigorously select exemplary theories, methods, and media. Some topics, such as
the analysis of videos, quantitative methods of text mining, or reception analysis, have only been touched upon, but we made sure to direct readers to the relevant publications in the Further Reading section at the end of each chapter. Additionally, this textbook will be accompanied by online resources, including a video explaining what media linguistics is, case studies in the fast-developing field of public digital communication, as well as writing techniques and exercises.

Textbook’s Key Features

- Explores how the interplay of language and digital communication can be understood and explained through media linguistic approaches, combining linguistic, semiotic, and sociological perspectives. By doing so, it situates the phenomenon of digital communication in a broader context and links it with offline realities;
- Discusses real-world issues related to the interplay of language and digital communication and highlights the current complexity of digital communication through emergent paradigms (e.g., algorithmic culture);
- Enables the readers to ground their communication practices in a profound understanding of the social and societal implications of language use in digital media. This is crucial as issues raised in relation to digital communication have implications not only for communication professionals but also for society at large;
- Provides an overview of the methodologies and tools to analyze multimodal texts in light of the advantages and constraints that different communication modes pose, both individually and in combination;
- Includes pedagogical features such as chapter previews, learning objectives, activities, list of key terms, chapter summaries, and further reading to encourage readers to reflect on the themes covered, expand their newly acquired knowledge, and put it into practice.

Book Organization and Chapter Overview

Most of the chapters in the book offer a stand-alone reading experience, meaning that they can be read and worked through independently and combined individually.

Chapters 1 to 4 provide fundamental theories and concepts crucial for understanding and contextualizing public digital communication. Furthermore, the chapters help practitioners better assess the changing nature of their professional fields and gain a broader perspective on their daily work.

Chapter 1 introduces basic concepts and critical theories, which are the foundation of this textbook. We first outline the implications of digital communication for societies by explaining how technological developments affect social realities and vice versa. Then, since digital communication is inextricably interlinked with media, we zoom in on core theories of new media that help the reader understand what is “new” about them
and why grasping this “newness” matters. Finally, we outline the discipline of media linguistics and explain how media linguistics can help to make digital media and digital communication more tangible. We focus on three key terms crucial for understanding public digital communication: multimodality, media convergence, and mediatization.

Chapter 2 situates public digital communication in a broader theoretical context. In this chapter, we discuss how the interplay between different societal factors and new technologies fosters a new form of social organization that revolves around the idea of a network. We first explain the implications for public communication when networks are the dominant organizational form. We then shift the focus to social media and explain their role in building and maintaining social networks. The chapter concludes by discussing the influence of algorithms on socialities in a digital society.

Chapter 3 provides the practical context to public digital communication by introducing verbal, visual, and multimodal communication as social practices. In this chapter, we first shed light on the role of writing in the digital age and explore the media linguistic mindset required in rapidly changing digital environments. Then, we introduce social semiotics, an approach to multimodal communication that helps understand how people communicate by combining different modes – e.g., words, images, typography, and layout – into a meaningful whole.

Chapter 4 focuses on the professional context of public digital communication and elaborates on the implications of digitalization for journalism, public relations, and community communication. In this chapter, we provide an insight into the current developments in these fields and an overview of the novel forms and formats of digital communication. We discuss the daily work in journalism and PR and present the literacies and skills needed for writing and producing multimodal content in a digital environment. Finally, we address the ethical challenges that arise because of rapid changes in a digitalized world.

Chapters 5 to 7 aim to enable readers to design research projects on digital communication by outlining research frameworks and introducing methods for conducting linguistic, visual, and multimodal analyses.

Chapter 5 introduces research frameworks that illustrate the role of applied research in identifying problems in society and professions, and its contribution to providing solutions. We explain why the combination of linguistic and ethnographic frameworks is beneficial for finding out what people actually do when interacting in the context of digital media.

Chapter 6 takes the readers from the theoretical frameworks to the research methods applied in these frameworks. We introduce methodological approaches of linguistic, visual, and multimodal analyses and explain how quantitative and qualitative methods can be combined to understand digital communication from a process and a product perspective.
Chapter 7 illustrates the application of the linguistic frameworks and multimodal analysis methods with practical cases from journalism, PR, and community communication. The case studies bring together the perspectives of practitioners and academics and give both tools to examine digital communication processes and products critically.

Chapter 8 offers an outlook on future developments of public digital communication by exploring the implications of artificial intelligence for communication practices and the relationship between human and nonhuman actors. We highlight where communication professions might be headed, outline the challenges facing researchers and practitioners, and explain how media linguistics helps comprehend the dynamics of digital culture.

By combining theoretical reflections with case studies in journalism, PR, and community communication, the book explicitly targets students in programs related to applied linguistics, communication and media studies, including journalism and PR. However, students in other communication fields and practitioners interested in theory and analysis will also find the book relevant and accessible.