System remembers Gunther Kress

Gunther Kress' contribution to the study of language, technology, and learning

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Gunther Kress died of a heart attack on 20 June 2019 in Rome, Italy. He was on his way from the hotel to the A-Mode (Approaches to Multimodal Digital Environments: from theories to practices) conference venue to give his plenary speech when he fell ill and passed away later that day in hospital. The world lost a leading thinker in social semiotics, education, language and communication, literacy, and multimodality studies. There have been a number of tributes to Gunther (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1470035721983517). In this essay, I concentrate on his contributions to the study of language, technology and learning as this journal focuses on. First, a short biographical note about Gunther.

Life as an academic

Gunther Rolf Kress was born on 3 March 1940 in Fürth, Germany. His family moved to Australia when he was young. Upon leaving school, Gunther pursued a career as a furrier. He then studied English language and literature at the University of Newcastle, Australia (1962-66) and graduated with First Class Honours and a University Medal. Having worked as a lektor, a researcher and a lecturer in Germany (University of Kiel, 1966-1967) and the UK (University of Kent, 1967-1971), he returned to his studies and took a postgraduate diploma in general linguistics at University College London (UCL) in 1971. He was particularly attracted to the work and teaching by the late Michael Halliday who was a Professor of Linguistics at UCL at the time. Halliday's view of language as a social semiotic resource for meaning-making had a profound impact on Gunther's own thinking about language and communication. Gunther worked as a lecturer at the University of East Anglia (1971-1978) where the earlier versions of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was being developed. Language and power and language and ideology became Gunther's research interests, although he would approach them in different ways from CDA. He returned to Australia in 1978, and inaugurated the School of Communication and Cultural Studies at the South Australian College of Advanced Education, Adelaide. He later (1983) moved to the New South Wales Institute of Technology in Sydney, now University of Technology, Sydney, where he was Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. He was appointed Professor of Communication there in 1987. Gunther never did a doctorate as such. But on 2 May 1988, University of Newcastle, Australia, conferred the degree of Doctor of Letters upon him for his contribution to stylistics, language in education and critical linguistics.

During his time in Adelaide and Sydney, Gunther combined critical linguistics with education and the emerging field of cultural and media studies. He published *Language as Ideology* with Bob Hodge and *Language and Control* with Fowler Roger, Tony Trew and Bob Hodge, both in 1979. In 1982 he published *Learning to Write*, a reflection on his own children's developing sense of writing. He also published *Linguistic Processes in Sociocultural Practice* in 1985. In 1988 he and Bob Hodge published *Social Semiotics*. He developed and defined the concept of 'multimodality', highlighting how meaning is always made in different 'modes' – speech, gesture, writing, colour, music, etc. He first published the book *Reading Images: The grammar of visual design* with Theo van Leeuwen in 1990. The 1996 edition of the book became a seminal piece in the new field of multimodality studies.

Gunther moved back to the UK in 1991, taking up the post of Professor of English Education at the Institute of Education (IOE), then an independent research institute within the federation of the University of London. He was retitled Professor of Semiotics and Education in 2008. At the IOE, Gunther began to expand his work on social semiotics along educational lines. In *Before Writing* (1997) and *Early Spelling* (2000), he continued to think about 'learning' through making and engaging with text as a creative act. He explored the multimodal production of science and English in classrooms, on screens, and in textbooks, as well as the impact of social, cultural and technological changes on literacy and communication, as evidenced in his *Multimodal Discourse* (2001) and *Literacy in the New Media Age* (2003). In 2006, he established the ESRC-funded Centre for Multimodal Research with Carey Jewitt and remained co-director of the Centre with Jeff Bezemer until his unexpected death.

Gunther was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the 2012 Queen's Birthday Honours for services to scholarship. On 30 January 2015, he received honorary degrees from the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia in 1992, Uppsala University, Sweden in 2015, University of Southern Denmark in 2018, and University of East Anglia posthumously in 2019. Gunther was cremated after a humanist funeral on 30th July 2019 at the Golders Green Crematorium, London.

Language, technology, and learning

Even during his earlier days as an academic linguist, Gunther was more interested in writing and reading than speaking and listening. Yet his idea of 'text' was never simply 'the written'. For him, human communication is always and inevitably multimodal and should be studied multimodally. Therefore, separating writing, reading, speaking and listening did not make any sense to him. He was interested in what he called 'communicational ensembles' and the specific meanings carried by different modes in these ensembles. As he studied children's learning to write, he was intrigued by the gradual transformation from drawing to writing. But instead of focusing on letter-sound mapping as most developmental linguists might do, Gunther was more interested in the spatial management and the materiality of the production of the writing on paper, on blackboard, with pen, or, increasingly, through touch. With the advent of digital media, Gunther began to focus, since the end of the 20th century, on the multimodal production of text, which included what linguists typically called non-linguistic signs and images. He did not feel that the division between linguistic and non-linguistic was meaningful at all. In his plenary speech at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2004, he talked about a semiotic revolution of the landscape of communication: a revolution 'of the modes of representation on the one hand, from the centrality of writing to the increasing significance of image', and a revolution of the media of dissemination on the other, from the centrality of the medium of the book to the medium of the screen' (Kress, 2005: 6).

Gunther's interest in technology was never the technical side of technological tools, old or new. Rather, he was keen to explore the technological affordances and the social semiotics of technologies in communication and learning. For him, digital technologies and new social media are designed to enable and constrain meaning-making through differential access, or lack of it, to many different modes of communication, colour, font choice, image, video, voice, etc. They therefore have power and effect. Whilst technologies offer rich arrays of semiotic resources for creating multimodal texts and artefacts, they also constrain their users' ability to perform key social practices and have the potential to transform these practices. The keynote speech that he was going to deliver, with Jeff Bezemer, at the A-Mode conference on the fateful morning on 20th June 2019 was going to be a social semiotic account of how technology was used for meaning-making in the intensive care unit and the operating theatre – where technologies make

available live information about the patient (e.g. their heart beat) visually (e.g. on screen) and/or aurally, how and when team members engage with, or 'read', what is presented, and how in a variety of modes they communicate and respond to their reading of information.

Learning was a central theme throughout Gunther's career. What started as an interest in how children learn to write developed into a life-long commitment to a new, social semiotic theory of learning. He used many varied examples to critique what is often taken for granted in the existing models of learning, and he was determined to take learning beyond the official school curriculum. He was deeply committed, and wanted his students and readers to be as well, to understanding what learning is about, how we learn, and the changing conditions for learning in cultural, social, technological, and semiotic terms. His own publications and speeches were always rich in descriptive detail and explanatory power and politically explicit. They draw attention to details and broader issues in a way other scholars rarely do.

A personal note

I had heard Gunther giving talks on several occasions and read many of his books and papers. He offered very practical advice and support to a doctoral student I was co-supervising with colleagues at the IOE when I was at Birkbeck. After I joined the IOE in January 2015, by then a faculty within UCL, our offices were in the same corridor and we had numerous conversations on a variety of things of common interest. He knew that I knew Halliday a little and asked about my views on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). I said honestly that I had no view on it because I never followed the details of SFL. That said, I told Gunther of a meeting with Halliday in the early 1980s in Beijing. Halliday talked of his work on Chinese linguistics and urged us to study Chinese more. He said, and I remember it very vividly, 'Linguistic theories would be very different if they were based on languages such as Chinese to begin with.' I told Gunther of my association with the colleagues who work on sign language and sign bilingualism who asked a very similar question: what would linguistic theories be like if they started with sign language. We talked about Halliday's idea of language as a 'meaning potential', and by extension, linguistics as the study of how people exchange meanings by "languaging"' (Halliday, 1985: 193). Gunther emphasised to me that language, in the conventional sense of speech and writing, was only one of many semiotic resources that human beings could deploy in meaning-making. He explained that he deliberately went for 'hyper-correction' and avoided using the term 'language' altogether, but that he was 'not uninterested in language'. He was eager to see my reactions to his new article 'Semiotic work Applied Linguistics and a social semiotic account of Multimodality' in *AILA Review* (2015) and expressed his pleasure in seeing my work on translanguaging that takes a broader view on language and incorporates his ideas of multimodality. He urged me to write more on Chinese. I showed him a draft of a short obituary I wrote in 2018 when Halliday passed away (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/pals/news/2018/apr/pals-michael-halliday-tribute), and he was very happy to see my mention of Halliday's work on Chinese, which Gunther said remained unknown to many linguists including Halliday's followers. He said he liked our article 'Tranßcripting: playful subversion with Chinese characters' (Li Wei and Zhu Hua, 2019) and suggested that we should work together on cultural differences in reading images. He said that their general grammar of contemporary visual design, which was articulated in his book with van Leeuwen, was based on 'western' cultures and he wanted to see non-western versions of visual grammar. We did in fact worked out a structure for a paper which would appear in an applied linguistics handbook, and agreed that the paper would be ready once we had sufficient amount of coffee AND wine, and he emphasised 'and' not 'or. I shall always remember the smile when he said that.

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