

‘Engaging other crises through the COVID-19 crisis’: A Multimodal Social Semiotic Analysis of Inscriptions on COVID-19 Cloth Masks

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Abstract

Recent trends in sociolinguistics have shown a growing interest in visible linguistic signs in public spaces. This differs from the tradition of focussing on oral language in sociolinguistics. Semiotic signs constitute a given area’s linguistic landscape (LL) in their different forms. Digital cameras, in addition to notebooks, are indispensable tools that a LL researcher should have since texts and images constitute the LL. These texts and images can be either immobile or mobile. This study examines inscriptions on COVID-19 masks as instances of mobile LLs. It uses the multimodal social semiotic approach to explore how different actors produce inscriptions on masks that address the many-sided crises that bedevil society. Within the social semiotics model, the multimodal social semiotic approach focuses on meaning-making using all socially-organised resources and modes. At the core of this approach is the argument that all semiotic signs are motivated, and even the most mundane signs have meanings. The study, therefore, seeks to uncover the messages that the texts and/or images communicate and the producer’s motivation for crafting them. The study’s preliminary findings indicate that producers of texts and images inscribed on COVID-19 masks purposefully encode messages intended to be decoded by an imagined audience. A sample of seventy-five (75) inscriptions constituted the data for this study.