From instances to sequences: A framework for trans-contextual analysis

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This paper makes a theoretical and methodological contribution to the theme of language, time and space by presenting a framework for the study of meaning making as it traverses space and time, in particular, the way in which literacy, text-artifacts and other material objects link meaning making within sequences of events, which unfold over time to form social processes. The framework includes a language of description for the identification and study of “meaning making trajectories” (Kell, 2009). This unit of analysis shifts the focus of study away from bounded instances of situated communication and towards a focus on the moment-to-moment spatial distribution of meanings in the textually-mediated and linked events out of which social processes are composed. By focusing on the horizontal unfolding of meaning making processes, and on the careful use of the language of description for theoretical refinement rather than the search for generalization, the framework challenges the emphasis on vertical metaphors relating indexicality and scale which are prominent within the emerging sociolinguistics of mobility.

The paper then elaborates on this framework by taking one such trajectory and running it through recent and important theoretical perspectives that have not often been taken up within sociolinguistics. It shows how the original framework drew on both social semiotics and activity theory, in its conceptualization of linguistic and literacy resources as mediational means. It then shows what Actor Network Theory (ANT) could offer to the understanding of each element in the framework, given the premises of ANT. It then moves on to consider how the elements in the framework could develop given a rhizomatic approach, following Deleuze. Finally, it considers a post-human approach, in which the agency of objects is considered independently of their connection with human design and agency.

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