

Review

COPE, B., & KALANTZIS, M. (2020). *Making Sense: Reference, Agency, and Structure in a Grammar of Multimodal Meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
KALANTZIS, M., & COPE, B. (2020) *Adding Sense: Context and Interest in a Grammar of Multimodal Meaning*. Cambridge University Press.

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The publication of *Making Sense* (MS) and *Adding Sense* (AS) is the result of an ambitious project by Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis. It is a monumental piece of work, divided into two volumes. The authors themselves define it as encyclopedic (AS, p. 3). As with any other encyclopedic work, it covers a wide range of subjects and topics, drawing from diverse fields of expertise, from artificial intelligence to philosophy to physics. On the other hand, such coverage also reveals gaps and absences, which is also typical of an encyclopedic work.

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The main objective of these books is to put forward what the authors call transpositional grammar (MS, p. 13), based on the concept of design and with the ambitious goal to be “a grammar of everyday life” (p. 1), or a grammar that ties together “the meaning of everything” (p. 326). In order to explain the main aspects of this grammar, Cope and Kalantzis divide meaning into forms – text, image, space, object, body, sound, and speech – and functions – reference, agency, structure, context, and interest. *Making Sense* covers the three first meaning functions: reference, agency and structure, whereas *Adding Sense* deals with context and interest. It is clear then that these books are a development of the multiliteracies project, published twenty years earlier (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), especially as far as meaning forms are concerned, since they are related to the idea of multimodality. In this recent development the authors do not refer to multiliteracies very often. Multimodality, on the other hand, takes a central role, as I will discuss further on.

The explanation for the way in which these functions are distributed along two books is that reference, agency and structure “are addressed in conventional accounts of language” (MS, p. 2), while context and interest are described as conventionally belonging to the domain of “pragmatics”. In both cases, Cope and Kalantzis make it clear that they want to avoid language-centered accounts of meaning and to focus on multimodal ways of meaning making. They also suggest that the books do not need to be read in a specific order, since each section can be read separately (p. 5). Both books are structured in two main categories: Elements of a Theory and Examples and Discussion. The first one is divided into parts and sections, which are then subdivided into smaller subsections. Examples and Discussion further develops the ideas presented in Elements of a Theory. For the sake of space, I will lay out below only the Parts and Sections of the books:

Table 1 – Parts and Sections

Book	Parts	Sections
<i>Making Sense</i>	0 – Meaning	0.1 – Participation
		0.2 – Meaning form
		0.3 – Meaning function
		0.4 – Grammar
	1 – Reference	1.1 – Specification
		1.2 – Circumstance
		1.3 – Property
	2 – Agency	2.1 – Event
		2.2 – Role
		2.3 – Conditionality
	3 – Structure	3.1 – Ontology
		3.2 – Design
3.3 – Relation		
3.4 – Metaontology		
<i>Adding Sense</i>	0 – Meaning	0.1 – Meaning form
		0.2 – Meaning function
		0.3 – Multimodality
		0.4 – Transposition
	1 – Context	1.1 – Materialization
		1.2 – Participation
		1.3 – Position
		1.4 – Medium
		1.5 – Association
		1.6 – Genre
	2 – Interest	2.1 – Rhetoric
		2.2 – Program
		2.3 – Reification
		2.4 – Sociability
		2.5 – Transformation

Source – *Making sense* (p. vii-xiii) and *Adding sense* (p. vii-xii)

For each Part, there is also an overview section. So, this is a sample of how the whole structure looks like:

Table 2 – A sample of the contents

ELEMENTS OF A THEORY	EXAMPLES AND DISCUSSION
Part 0	
<i>Making Sense: An Overview</i> §0.0	§0.0a <i>Big Yam Dreaming</i> , By an Artist We Don't (at First) Name
<i>Meaning</i> §0	§0a Andy Warhol's <i>Water Heater</i> §0b Walter Benjamin's <i>Arcades</i> §0c Bundling §0d Supermarket Order
<i>Participation</i> §0.1	
Representation §0.1.1	
Communication §0.1.2	
Interpretation §0.1.3	
<i>Meaning Form</i> §0.2	
Text §0.2.1	§0.2.1a Unicode §0.2.1b Learning to Read
[...]	

Source – *Making sense* (p. vii)

While presenting the details of this transpositional grammar, Kalantzis and Cope bring about various other grammars published throughout history and from diverse contexts. The first one is Panini's grammar (between 350 and 250 BCE), in Sanskrit. According to the authors (MS, p. 51-52), Panini's grammar influenced Western linguists such as Saussure, Bloomfield, and Chomsky. Then there is Ibn Jinnî's writings about the origins of speech. Writing in Arabic, Ibn Jinnî lived from 932 to 1002, most of the time in Baghdad (MS, p. 260). The grammarian challenged his colleagues at the time by going against the idea that speech was derived from "revelation" (p. 261). For him, speech was contingent, granting speakers freedom to modify speech and to even make errors. According to Cope and Kalantzis, a millennium later, structuralists and behaviourists have also restricted the scope for human agency, "constraining possibilities for meaning and living" (p. 261).

M.A.K. Halliday's systemic-functional grammar was one to have great influence on Cope and Kalantzis (MS, p. 43), as this was the basis for their previously mentioned work with multiliteracies

and multimodality, together with the New London Group (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). In the present work they attempt to extend the notions of system and functions into a more encompassing, but also more flexible framework. So, the system in Hallidayan grammar becomes meaning forms, to which image, space, object, body, and sound were added (p. 44). As for the functions, ideational, interpersonal, and textual become reference, agency, and structure. To these Kalantzis and Cope add context and interest as additional functions. Not only do they rename and add functions, but they also revise their contents. Despite the changes, they acknowledge the importance of Halliday's functions to their own: "Following Halliday, we want to say that all functions are present in every moment of meaning. A functional analysis offers us a set of conceptual tools with which to examine meanings, and the meanings of meanings" (MS, p. 44). Cope and Kalantzis, however, do not fail to recognise the drawbacks of structuralist grammar systems, including Halliday's:

When the linguists try to get to the bottom of the nuances, Halliday, Chomsky, Dixon, Silverstein, Wierzbicka, and McGregor all come up with systems that are, for what one would think to be such obvious everyday things, surprisingly different. The more elaborated their arguments, the more their theories diverge. [...] This speaks to the ultimate failure of structuralist projects that attempt to distinguish components of meaning and order them into essentially static systems. The reality of meaning is the constant movement that we call transposition, where the patterning occurs across vectors of transposability and the potentially endless range of possibilities these offer. (MS, p. 211-212)

What they call transposition is the act of reframing meanings (MS, p. 1) in one or more forms, hence its close connection with multimodality. Since this process also takes place across diverse meaning functions, they call it "functional transposition" (p. 2). The result is a dynamic, flexible framework, despite its high level of detailing and depth: "we want to escape the narrowness of language-centered accounts of meaning in order to create a grammar of the multimodal transpositions in context and the expression of interest." (p. 2)

As mentioned before, one of the steps towards this expanded definition of grammar was the addition of image, space, object, body, and sound to speech and writing as meaning forms. So, the authors

turn “writing” into “text” and put forward a bold proposition: writing and text are closer to image than to speech, whereas speech itself is closer to sound. In fact, in the linear spatial disposition of the meaning forms, text and speech are on opposite ends:

Table 3 – Meaning forms

Meaning Forms	Text	Image	Space	Object	Body	Sound	Speech
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Source – *Making sense* (p. 19)

Cope and Kalantzis (MS, p. 30) justify this separation as a desire to “unsettle conventional wisdoms” about language, not only in linguistics but also in other social sciences. An example of how this separation happens in practice is a number of unpronounceable written texts in digital media, such as certain URLs and financial transaction codes (e.g., those used for Pix transactions in Brazil and cryptocurrency transactions all over the world). In such cases, they argue, texts function more visually than audibly. As a result, they avoid the use of a concept of language, which is traditionally restricted to speech and writing. But not before strongly warning the readers: “You’ll hear almost nothing of language for the rest of this book, and the one that follows” (p. 33).

In both books, multimodality also has an important role in the unravelling of the contents. For most of the contents, there are links connecting the written text to other meaning forms on a website (<http://meaningpatterns.net>), turning them into a multimodal experience.² For example, one of the subfunctions of “context” is “medium” (AS, p. 22). Then, the meaning form “sound”, as far as medium is concerned, is defined as “Meanings that are pulled from the audible context to mean something” (AS, p. 108). The analysis that follows brings some theoretical and historical accounts connected with the ethnomusicologist Norman Cazden. During the analysis, a link to related media is provided: <http://meaningpatterns.net/ncazden>.

2. Another interesting feature is the intertextuality between parts of the books, by means of cross-reference to ideas discussed or described in other sections (for example: §1.2.3 or §AS1.2.3). In a way, it works as hypertext, but without the automatic linking feature. This also reinforces the idea that the books can be read in a non-linear fashion.

On the top of this webpage there are two boxes with an image and a short-written text next to it. In between there is another link that takes you to Spotify, where you can listen to some of Cazden's music. Scrolling down, you'll find music videos of artists such as Johann Sebastian Bach, Janis Joplin, and Pete Seeger. Obviously, you can use the links or not, exploring new, additional contents or just following the regular flow of the book itself. And that reminds me of video game players, who usually, especially in narrative games, have the choices to explore different scenarios, challenges, and puzzles or to just keep to the main narrative towards the accomplishment of the main goal. Therefore, there are various choices for navigating the page, and you can choose whatever sequence you like, which is a typical experience with hypermedia. So, I went straight for the video of Janis Joplin's performance in Woodstock in 1969. And while I was there, I kept thinking, "Shall I go back to the book"? I could also do both simultaneously, using the picture-in-picture feature. This is a real experience with multimodality and hypermedia, something that sets them apart from plain written text. Also, I was torn between a cerebral activity and a more enjoyable (well, the book was also enjoyable, but in a different way), sentimental one.

However, the above example was rather an exception, since most of the contents on these pages are constituted of an image followed by the reproduction of an excerpt from the book. The image could easily be just an appendix in the book, but it would look like a mere supplement to the written text. On the webpage, it happens the other way around: the text is supplementary to the image. However, in the end, despite the authors' attempt to make this project a multimodal experience, these two books are still heavily dependent on the written text.

When examining the impact that the invention of the phonograph and of the radio had on music performance and listening, Kalantzis and Cope (AS, p. 120)³ state that "contexts of listening could be more varied and music put to different kinds of use". This is so because, according to them, these inventions allowed for music to be transported across time and place, thus causing new disconnections: of the performance from its hearing and of its performers from their audiences. This

3. Part 1 (Context), section 1.4 (Medium)

reminded me of the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould's decision to stop performing live concerts in 1964. Gould is considered one of the best Bach interpreters of all time. The reasons for his decision were twofold: he had a preference for the recording studio, where he could control more aspects of his performances; and he considered recordings more democratic. In a live concert the audience's aesthetic experience would vary from person to person, since the music would reach them in different ways, depending on the places where they were seated (Thirty two short films about Glenn Gould, 2012).

Gould's first argument is in line with Kalantzis and Cope's thoughts about recorded music, but not the second one. According to them, "Paradoxically, recorded music is more 'accurate' than repeated performance [...]; but the reception is more varied" (AS, p. 121-122). At the time Gould stopped delivering public performances, this difference in reception was not so remarkable. People would listen to the recordings at home, on a record player. The variation would be restricted to the brand and make of the device and to the place's acoustics. Nowadays, people can listen to a recording virtually anywhere, in a great variety of situations. So recorded music can reach many more people, but the level of enjoyment is something that still varies, and that might depend on the listener's financial situation as well, thus not as democratic as Gould would like.

Now, the irony about this is that Gould was also a financial speculator and had a keen eye for the stock market (Thirty two short films about Glenn Gould, 2012). Interestingly, one of the final sections of *Adding sense* focuses on money and markets, just after a few sections dedicated to shopping and commodities. The authors argue that they could have used any other "equally expansive and fraught meanings – 'race', 'gender', 'environment', or such like" (AS, p. 276). It looks like the text is taking an economicist turn here. At the same time, however, these "fraught meanings" can be seen as some of the various gaps begging to be filled. After all, the framework is all there.

Both commodities and money are under the final meaning function: interest. Further splitting the function, commodities are linked to reification, whereas money comes under sociability.⁴ The latter is then

4. Sections 2.3 and 2.4.

split into two other subfunctions: antagonistic interests and solidary interests. Kalantzis and Cope argue that even the capitalist market economy is, to some extent, based on solidarity. Even in the most basic transaction, selling and buying, there is “a sociable interest in the sale, a differential interest between buyer and seller that is solidary in one meaning function but antagonistic in another. This is intrinsic to exchange and the market, their function as sociable meanings” (AS, p. 280). As for the market, the tendency, however, they argue, is for a domination of antagonistic interests, which may lead to self-destruction.

A concrete example of such function is the recent entrance of the MST (Brazil’s landless rural workers movement) into the financial market. An unlikely actor in this area, the movement has resorted to the market not for speculation, but to raise funds for their family farm agricultural enterprises (Adachi, 2021). However, the kind of certificates that the movement is dealing is traditionally linked to agribusiness (Agribusiness Receivables Certificates), one of its most traditional adversaries (Zacchi, 2010). This is a good example of the transpositional nature of events, where changes are immanent and imminent, as Kalantzis and Cope put it. As for the MST, it is one more appropriation of aspects from opposing groups, a process that actually happens both ways (Zacchi, 2010; 2016, p. 186).

If the states have been supplanted by the market in the administration of goods and services, the latter has become increasingly responsible for solidary initiatives, “commodifying all spheres of life, including those hitherto protected ones (love, leisure, religion)” (Belluzzo, 2021, p. 49),⁵ and fulfilling David Harvey’s (2005) prophecy of the “commodification of everything”. Take ESG, for example. The acronym stands for Environmental, Social and Governance, which has become a major trend in the financial market, especially when it comes to the environment, giving rise to new concepts and expressions like “green energy”, “green money” and “carbon market”. The rationale behind this tendency is quite paradoxical, because it means that most companies, and that includes large corporations, will have to adhere to that policy in order to survive. It comes as an enforcement from the financial market, a somewhat closed rhetoric (AS, p. 202) that forces companies

5. My translation from the original text in Portuguese.

to adjust to its criteria. BlackRock, for example, is the largest asset management company in the world and voted against 53 companies in their annual meetings this year, including Exxon Mobil and Volvo, for not complying with its gas emission reduction policies (Viri, 2021).

On the other hand, these companies are purporting to decrease their environmental impact without losing profitability and attractiveness to investors. In the quest for humanity survival lies a deeply ingrained interest in the market's own survival. Therefore, it seems that, disguised as solidarity, there is in fact a genuine process of reification: "Processes of transposition by means of which social meanings are presented (activation) and distorted or concealed (alienation) by their objectification, thereby serving interests differentially" (AS, p. 240).

The range of subjects covered by the authors is outstanding. There is one that I find particularly important and that gives support to several other issues and topics throughout the books: the relationship between the ideal and the material, not necessarily as opposites, but as part of a continuum that swings both ways. Cope and Kalantzis define this dualism as the two main ways to "frame the structuring of meaning" in the modern history of philosophy: idealism and materialism (MS, p. 271).

But the authors argue that the material and the ideal "of our sense-making" are never separate (MS, p. 272).⁶ Such an interplay is what they call "ontology", because "There are excesses of meaning in the world – things we do not yet know but that are discoverable. And there are excesses of meaning not yet in the world, things that are imaginable and possibly realizable" (p. 271). They go on to discuss several authors who fit into each category, having Descartes (idealism) and Locke (materialism) as the leading theorists. As far as language is concerned, their focus lies mainly on Saussure and Chomsky (idealism) and Skinner (materialism). Cope and Kalantzis also mention that, although their "sympathies are with the materialists", they don't wish "to neglect the dialectic of interplay with the ideal" (MS, p. 319).

6. Part 3 (Structure), section 3.1 (Ontology)

All this eclecticism is present throughout the project. At the end of *Adding sense*,⁷ Kalantzis and Cope make it clear: “So, we want to have our Foucault-Derrida, and our Husserl-Stein too. We want our contextual relativity and human universality as well. We want our historical contingency and our humanism. The purpose of this grammar has been to show how we might be able to have both” (AS, p. 317). This is what they call “to parse”: “To account for patterns of meaning and to bring to account the unequal play of differential interests” (AS, p. 316).

So, from Arabic grammarians to The Rolling Stones to the aboriginal band Yothu Yindi, the references are legion. There would even be space for Raymond Chandler, if that were the case. There are a few minor editing errors in the books, but funnily enough Raymond Chandler appears on page 282 of *Adding sense*, when in fact the reference is Alfred Chandler, according to the footnote. I mentioned at the beginning that the project is described as encyclopedic, which also implies gaps and absences, since it is not possible to simply cover everything, as we learn from Borges’ map (Borges, 2021). In fact, the books are so instigating that I could not refrain myself from making connections with other, supposedly absent references.

To name just a few, I missed Paulo Freire, who also put forward an earlier version of multimodality. In his *Pedagogia do oprimido* (Freire, 2005, p. 135),⁸ first published in the 1960’s, he presents a series of “channels” to “codify” a text, which can be visual, tactile, auditory, or “multiple”. Their mentioning of the work of the ethnomusicologist Norman Cazden, who “transcribed and notated the as-yet unwritten music of the poor and the marginal” (AS, p. 117), reminded me of the Hungarian composer and also ethnomusicologist Zoltán Kodály (as well as Kurt Weil and Villa-Lobos). Also, Paul Virilio (2008) raises relevant discussions about the consequences of the advance of technology nowadays, directly connected with some of Cope and Kalantzis’s meaning forms, such as space, time, and body: “Home shopping, working from home, online apartments and buildings: ‘cocooning’, as they say. The urbanization of real space is thus being

7. Part 2 (Interest), section 2.5 (Transformation).

8. This is the latest edition of the book in English: Freire, Paulo. (2018). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 50th Anniversary Edition*. Translation: Myra Bergman Ramos. 4. ed. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

overtaken by this urbanization of real time which is, at the end of the day, the urbanization of the actual body of the city dweller” (Virilio, 2008, p. 20). As for the relation between the verbal and the visual, regarding the contemporary role of images, Virilio proposes the creation of concepts such as “freedom of perception”, “right to blindness” (p. 96), “ecology of images” and “optically correct politics” (p. 97). Finally, their work also resonates Manovich’s ideas about the new media (2001). Kalantzis and Cope: “In the twenty-first century, the logic of digital media is driven by rhetorics, not of assimilation, but differentiation” (AS, p. 220). Manovich (2001, p. 30): “new media follows, or actually runs ahead of, a quite different logic of post-industrial society – that of individual customization, rather than mass standardization”. And his comparison between Virilio and Benjamin – a largely quoted author in the books – brings to the fore, again, two of the meaning forms: “if for Benjamin the industrial age displaced every *object* from its original setting, for Virilio the post-industrial age eliminates the dimension of *space* altogether. At least in principle, every point on earth is now instantly accessible from any other point on earth” (Manovich, 2001, p. 172 – italics added).

On the other hand, Kalantzis and Cope make it clear that they are bringing forward their own context. They explain that they not only sought to interpret meanings, but also “to set them in the context of their making. [...] as we pass by thinkers and actors in this book, we do this to acknowledge the way they have touched our thinking and acting. They are our context” (AS, p. 63). So, this explains their choices of authors and theories, but I also read this as an invitation for each reader to build his or her own context. The good point about this is that, despite aiming to be a grammar of everything, the books cannot encompass every point of view. Nevertheless, they provide a handful framework for those who want to adapt it to their own contexts. I, for one, would like to see how local authors and actors (like Paulo Freire and Villa-Lobos) would fit into the project. Expanding this proposal a little, I might bring decoloniality in. Cope and Kalantzis’s context remains largely Western and modernist, notwithstanding the contributions from Arabic, Indian and Australian (especially aboriginal) epistemologies. In a Brazilian, South-American context, Grosfoguel’s (2012) proposal of transmodernity and pluri-versalism might be quite enriching. Also, Viveiros de Castro’s (2014) concepts of Amerindian

perspectivism and multinaturalism might engage in an interesting dialogue with Cope and Kalantzis’s discussions involving indigenous epistemologies, among others.

The way I see it, a transpositional grammar gives enough room for that. Despite being a grammar – which we tend to think of as something fixed and stiff – it is quite flexible, since “transposability makes stable categorization impossible” (MS, 182). Perhaps, an encompassing definition of their proposal can be drawn from these two quotes:

Our cultural range includes: indigenous or first peoples, with a focus on Australian peoples with whom we have worked at earlier stages in our research careers; the historical evolution of meaning practices in the Indian, Chinese, Arab, and European traditions; and the globalized social practices and cultural sensibilities of the digital age. So, the frame of reference for our grammar is global-wide and species-long. This means that, from a practical point of view, all we can do is offer pertinent and we hope also poignant examples. (MS, p. 3)

In our notion of “design,” we [...] are as interested in structures where unique meanings can be made by persons, where change is as important as replication, and where we enact our meanings in a history whose future remains open. In our notion of “transposition,” we want to track patterns of dynamic change, tracing microhistories of meaning within meaning functions and across meaning forms. The imminent transformability of one meaning into another is just as important as the paradigmatic logic of a stable system-in-the-moment. (MS, p. 267)⁹

All in all, these are two books more than worth reading. They might be of interest to a wide range of areas, but pragmatics and applied linguistics would probably benefit the most. Despite the depth and breadth of the discussions, simple, accessible language is used. The authors sometimes adopt a rather confessional tone, using themselves as examples in some cases. At the very beginning of *Making sense*, there is an interesting account of their relationship with the theorists they discuss: “We come to these folks at points where we feel it would be illuminating to bring them into the conversation. Each time we

9. Another interesting contribution here would be Maturana’s (2002, p. 59) approach to change and immutability in living systems. However, for him, it is the structure of the system that changes, whereas its organization remains immutable.

come back to them, it seems like we know them as friends” (MS, p. 3). Reading these two books sometimes feels just like that – like knowing Kalantzis and Cope as friends as well.

Conflict of interests

The corresponding author has no conflict of interest to declare and bears full responsibility for the submission.

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