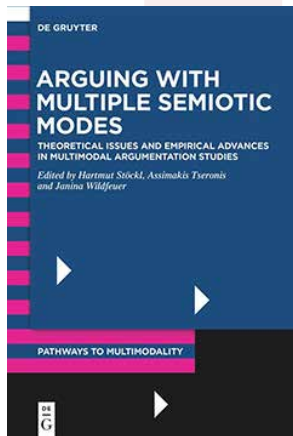


Literacy in the age of multimodal argumentation

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Arguing with Multiple Semiotic Modes: Theoretical Issues and Empirical Advances in Multimodal Argumentation Studies

Stöckl, Hartmut, Assimakis Tseronis, and Janina Wildfeuer (eds.) 2026, vol. 2. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH/De Gruyter Brill, vi + 372 pp. Open-access PDF (CC BY 4.0; ISBN 978-3-11-222117-4); print ISBN 978-3-11-914424-7; EPUB ISBN 978-3-11-222129-7. DOI: 10.1515/9783112221174.

1. Overview

This collection examines how arguments are produced when language operates with images, sound, bodily movement, layout, symbols, and even smell. The editors position the volume at the intersection of argumentation theory, rhetoric, pragmatics, social semiotics, and multimodality studies. Their central claim is not simply that nonverbal signs can persuade, but that they can contribute identifiable content and structure to arguments. The task, therefore, is to reconstruct and evaluate arguments without reducing every mode to a verbal paraphrase or ignoring the distinctive affordances of each semiotic resource (Stöckl, Tseronis, and Wildfeuer 2026).

The collection contains fourteen chapters arranged in three parts. Part I develops theoretical and methodological proposals; Part II tests methods on social media videos, crowdfunding pitches, environmental protest, sound, and advertising; Part III examines Pride advertising, digital news, student comics, editorial cartoons, and olfactory evidence in law. This architecture moves from foundational disputes to analytical

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procedures and then to domain-specific applications. Although the chapters differ in theoretical vocabulary and evidential scale, they share a commitment to treating real communicative artefacts as integrated combinations of modes rather than as verbal arguments decorated with images or sound.

2. Evaluation

The volume's most important achievement is its sustained challenge to the verbalist assumptions that have historically shaped argumentation studies. Leo Groarke's opening chapter provides the clearest philosophical statement of this challenge. By expanding an epistemological account of propositions so that visual and other nonverbal forms can make assessable claims, he retains logic's concern with truth and inference while widening the range of materials that logic can analyze. This is a strategically effective opening because it addresses the objection that images may influence attitudes but cannot genuinely argue. The chapter also establishes the collection's broader ethical urgency: manipulated images, deepfakes, and highly edited audiovisual messages can advance false or defective arguments even when their inferential force is not expressed in sentences.

Subsequent chapters do not settle on one universal method, and this is both a strength and a limitation. Jean Wagemans develops the Multimodal Argument Type Identification Procedure, which seeks to aggregate cross-modal reference and predication without first translating nonverbal material into language. Hartmut Stöckl proposes a three-tier heuristic involving modal reach, multimodal coherence, and discourse structure, grounding the model in a corpus of plastic-pollution advertisements. Jan Albert Van Laar, by contrast, adopts dialogue theory to explain how multimodal messages can manipulate audiences by suppressing information needed for critical scrutiny. Together these chapters demonstrate that multimodal argumentation is not one analytical problem but a cluster of related problems: identifying propositions, assigning argumentative functions, modelling relations among modes, reconstructing implicit premises, and evaluating reasonableness or manipulation.

This plurality is intellectually honest and appropriate for an emerging interdisciplinary field. The editors explicitly acknowledge the absence of a common metalanguage and call for greater engagement among competing frameworks. They also recognise the need for corpus research, reception experiments, clearer analytical criteria, and stronger connections with semiotics, rhetoric, and pragmatics. Such self-reflexivity is a major virtue. Rather than presenting the volume as a completed theory, they identify its chapters as provisional advances and state that analysts occupy a position of evaluative privilege that carries ideological responsibility. The introduction therefore displays awareness of methodological positionality, especially the assumptions involved in deciding what counts as an argument and which reconstruction is considered plausible.

The reflexivity is less developed at the level of socio-cultural and institutional positionality. Contributors work across several countries and disciplines, and the collection includes research from South Africa, China, Canada, and multiple European contexts. Nevertheless, most research topics concern Western commercial, political, legal, or social-media environments. The volume rarely asks whether culturally specific habits of viewing, listening, embodiment, or sensory classification might influence an analyst's reconstruction. Context and genre are treated as indispensable constraints, but culture is more often represented as shared background knowledge than as a contested and unequal resource. A more sustained engagement with indigenous, non-Western, multilingual, and disability perspectives would have tested whether the proposed categories travel across communicative contexts and traditions.

The empirical chapters are especially valuable for showing what is gained when analysts attend to modes that verbal reconstruction usually marginalizes. Janina Wildfeuer's analysis of three LifeVac videos combines multimodal discourse semantics, pragma-dialectics, and the Argumentum Model of Topics. It demonstrates how instruction, narrative, and argument can unfold simultaneously across speech, action, captions, editing, and visual demonstration. The analysis is technically demanding, but it captures an important feature of short-form digital communication: conclusions are often distributed across a sequence rather than stated in a single unit. Maciej Grzenkiewicz and Gabrijela Kišiček similarly show that sound can function as a premise in TikTok ad hominem attacks, distinguishing sonic stereotypes from character representations. Their typology is useful for analysing political ridicule because reused sounds import histories and associations that are not recoverable from transcripts alone.

The chapter on multimodal argumentation in crowdfunding campaigns, by Rudi Palmieri, Sabrina Mazzali-Lurati, Dimitris Sarafis, Chiara Mercuri and Kay O'Halloran, offers another example of strong interdisciplinary synthesis. Its three-level procedure entails connecting rhetorical segments, intersemiotic relations, and argument structures in four Kickstarter videos. The finding that successful campaigns integrate verbal and visual materials to frame products as enabling desirable social experiences is plausible and pedagogically useful. The authors are cautious, however, about generalizing from a purposive sample of four campaigns. This caution highlights a recurring weakness across the collection: many chapters rely on one case or a very small sample. While generating crucial hypotheses and demonstrating rich analytical possibilities, such studies cannot establish the frequency, reception, or comparative effectiveness of the patterns identified.

Yutong Ji's chapter, "The Merits of the Toulmin Argumentation Model for the Analysis of Visual Arguments," adds a more explicit bridge between reconstruction and evaluation. Using three print advertisements – the Colorado State Patrol tailgating billboard, a ŠKODA Superb advertisement, and Greenpeace's "Save the Arctic" campaign – Ji tests whether Toulmin's distinctions among claim, data, warrant, backing,

qualifier, and rebuttal can account for the argumentative work of visual images, visual symbols, and visual metaphors. The comparison with Groarke's Key Components Table is productive: Ji argues that a premise-conclusion representation can obscure functional differences among argumentative elements and does not adequately capture the dialectical tier, whereas Toulmin's model makes inferential warrants, degrees of commitment, supporting assumptions, and possible objections visible. At the same time, the chapter exposes the interpretive burden of multimodal reconstruction. Backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals are not necessarily encoded in the advertisement itself and may depend on audience experience, historical context, and field-specific knowledge. The chapter therefore strengthens the volume while also exemplifying one of its central methodological tensions: richer reconstruction can produce greater explanatory precision, but only by making the analyst's contextual inferences more consequential.

The editors acknowledge this limitation and advocate systematic annotation, larger corpora, and experimental research. That acknowledgement does not remove the problem but places it within a coherent research agenda. Future studies should test inter-analyst reliability, because multimodal reconstruction frequently depends on inferred premises, assumed genre knowledge, and interpretations of salience. They should also investigate audience response rather than equating a theoretically plausible reconstruction with actual comprehension or persuasion. Isabel Alonso-Belmonte and M. Dolores Porto model this restraint particularly well in their chapter on news-bites, repeatedly distinguishing persuasive potential from demonstrated persuasive effect. Their framework links newsmakers, multimodal framing, intertextual sequences, and audiences' cognitive environments, while avoiding claims that the degree of persuasion can be read directly from the artefact.

Organization is one of the book's strongest features. The three-part division is congruent with its purpose, and the introduction provides a detailed map of how chapters address theory, reconstruction, evaluation, genre, and context. The diversity of cases prevents multimodality from becoming a synonym for visual communication. Moving images, vocal qualities, bodily action, colour, layout, metaphor, symbols, and smell all receive attention. Marko Novak's highly original discussion of olfactory evidence and trademarks in legal argument exposes the legal system's dependence on verbal description when the relevant evidence is sensory and difficult to reproduce. Even where smell may not satisfy every definition of a fully organised mode, the chapter usefully reveals that legal reasoning is already multimodal whenever courts translate sensory experience into testimony and doctrine. Eveline Feteris, on the other hand, highlights how the editorial cartoonists' multimodal metaphors 'strategically manoeuvre' their way through the genre's conventions and political opinions.

At times, however, the collection's conceptual density impedes accessibility. Readers must navigate informal logic, pragma-dialectics, the Argumentum Model

of Topics, social semiotics, rhetorical theory, discourse semantics, and cognitive approaches. Individual chapters generally define their terms, yet the same phenomena are represented through different diagrams and terminologies. The absence of a comparative glossary, synthesis table, or final editorial conclusion make it harder to determine where the models genuinely conflict, where they are complementary, and which method suits a particular research question. The introduction performs some comparative work, but an ending chapter could have assessed the volume's findings after the empirical analyses rather than leaving the synthesis to the reader.

The scholarship is rigorous within the conventions of a state-of-the-field edited volume. Chapters engage extensively with prior research, explain their analytical procedures, reproduce relevant artefacts, and acknowledge evidential limits. The strongest contributions make explicit why a selected mode matters to the argument rather than merely describing its presence. Hartmut Stöckl's emphasis on nonredundancy and coherence, for example, provides a criterion for showing that an image contributes information unavailable in the words. Lotte Van Poppel's treatment of climate activists' bodily movements similarly demonstrates that gluing a hand to a wall does not simply attract attention; it performs commitment, sacrifice, and witness within the protest's argumentative event. These analyses advance the field beyond impressionistic claims that multimodal texts are persuasive because they are vivid or emotional.

Nevertheless, evaluation remains less developed than reconstruction. The volume repeatedly succeeds in showing how an argument may be distributed across modes, but it is less consistent in determining whether the reconstructed argument is logically strong, ethically acceptable, or effective for audiences. Jan Albert Van Laar's chapter on manipulation and the discussions of rainbow washing, media framing, and *ad hominem* sound directly address normative questions. Elsewhere, evaluation often stops after the analyst has assigned claims, premises, warrants, or contextual assumptions. This imbalance reflects a broader difficulty: once nonverbal signs are translated into argumentative roles, the richness of their affective, aesthetic, and embodied force may be subordinated to a verbal diagram. The collection recognises this danger but does not fully solve it. Ji's chapter is a significant partial exception: its use of qualifiers and rebuttals turns audience objections and the defensibility of warrants into explicit components of reconstruction rather than leaving evaluation entirely outside the diagram.

Gender, sexuality, race, class, and other dimensions of difference receive uneven attention. The Pride advertising chapter by Emma van Bijnen and Menno H. Reijven offers a careful distinction between symbolic affiliation and materially supported LGBTQ+ advocacy, showing that a rainbow symbol alone cannot protect a brand from accusations of opportunism. The news chapter analyses ideological framing around Giorgia Meloni, abortion, Catholicism, and the European far right. Arlene Archer and Chen-Wen Huang's study of a student-produced comic at a South African university

is the collection's strongest engagement with educational inequality. It argues that conventional essay literacy can reproduce unequal access and that alternative genres may recognise students' existing semiotic resources.

These chapters make difference relevant to argumentation rather than adding it as a supplementary theme. Yet race and class do not organise the volume's central theoretical discussion, and questions of access to technology, platform labour, algorithmic visibility, language hierarchy, and sensory disability remain largely peripheral. This omission matters because semiotic resources are not equally available or equally valued. A learner with limited bandwidth, a visually impaired audience member, or a multilingual adult may encounter a multimodal argument differently from the idealised interpreter presumed by a model. Incorporating accessibility and political economy would strengthen the claim that context determines argumentative meaning.

3. Contribution to multimodal literacy

Arguing with Multiple Semiotic Modes is recommended for advanced students, researchers, and educators in argumentation, applied linguistics, rhetoric, media studies, communication, law, digital literacy, and higher or adult education. This is not an introductory textbook: its theoretical range and specialised diagrams require prior familiarity with discourse analysis or argumentation. It would work best on a graduate level, where selected chapters could be paired with practical analysis of advertisements, news posts, political videos, public-health messages, or learner-produced media. In this sense, the book offers an advanced manual for critical literacy in the new age of multimodal public communication.

We increasingly encounter public arguments through interfaces that combine headlines, images, music, gesture, editing, typography, and platform conventions. Critical literacy therefore requires more than checking verbal claims. Learners must recognise how modes divide persuasive labour, how implicit premises are cued, how emotion and salience guide inference, and how genre expectations make some interpretations appear natural. The editors' call for "argument checking" alongside fact checking provides a useful educational objective: adults should be able to examine not only whether information is true, but also whether the multimodal pathway from evidence to conclusion is warranted.

At the same time, the volume can support productive practice. Adult learners can redesign a written argument as a comic, short video, infographic, or presentation, then explain what each mode contributes and what may be lost. Educators can use the manipulation framework to analyse political advertising, the newsbite framework to study cumulative framing, and the Pride chapter to discuss the difference between symbolic inclusion and accountable institutional action. Archer and Huang's chapter

is valuable for inclusive pedagogy because it treats multimodal composition as intellectually rigorous knowledge production rather than a simplified alternative to writing. Ji's Toulmin-based analysis is especially adaptable to teaching: learners can map claims, data, warrants, backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals across image and text, then distinguish what is explicitly represented from what must be inferred through genre, field knowledge, and audience assumptions.

Overall, the editors accomplish their principal objective: they demonstrate that argumentation studies must engage seriously with multimodality and that multimodality studies need explicit accounts of inference, standpoint, and evaluation. The book's methodological plurality, empirical originality, and candid account of unfinished work make it a substantial contribution. Its main weaknesses – small samples, terminological multilingualism, limited audience research, and uneven attention to structural differences – are significant but generative. They define the next phase of inquiry rather than invalidating the project which is nothing less than cultivating effective literacy skills for the whole wide range of contemporary multimodal public communication.

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