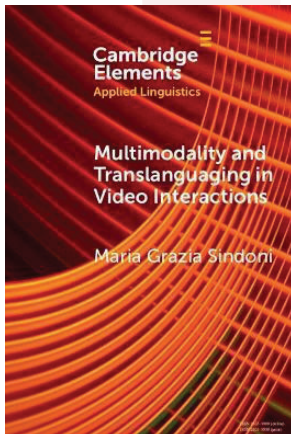


# What's gained and lost in video-mediated communication

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## Multimodality and Translanguaging in Video Interactions

Cambridge University Press, 2023, 94 pages, \$24.95 (pbk), ISBN 9781009286923

Video-mediated communication (VMC) has become ubiquitous since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the height of the lockdown period, the use of platforms like Zoom, Teams, and Discord grew significantly, enabling us to continue teaching, learning, and staying connected to friends and family. While VMC technology and scholarship pre-dates the pandemic by decades (Isaacs & Tang 1994; Finn et al. 1997; Sindoni 2014), the need to maintain physical distance from each other spurred a massive shift in how we communicate, a shift that has remained post-lockdown. Amidst this backdrop, Maria Sindoni writes *Multimodality and Translanguaging in Video Interactions* (2023), part of the Cambridge Elements series, which publishes short books/long journal articles. It is a timely, thoughtful, and theoretically rich account of VMC, supplemented by close analyses of interactions in multiple contexts. Throughout the book, Sindoni recounts the results of a series of studies over a decade, which drew from over 900 video hours of conversation across communicative contexts – primarily educational settings and personal conversations – and on different VMC platforms. These conversations thoroughly ground the theoretical insights in the book and resonated very much with my own experiences using VMC.

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The book applies two distinct but – as Sindoni demonstrates – related semiotic theories to VMC: multimodality and translanguaging. Multimodality is the use of multiple semiotic modes (like writing, speech, and image) in a communicative event (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, Jewitt 2009, Forceville 2021), while translanguaging describes how multilingual individuals draw on multiple languages to communicate (Lu 2009, Garcia and Kleifgren 2019). In addition to its excellent contributions as a scholarly text, the book also includes several freely available resources for researchers and educators interested in VMC. The book is divided into six sections, each with its unique focus. Keeping in line with the series format, each section is more in-depth than the content under a typical article subheading but less discrete than a typical book chapter. This division works well, giving the *Element* a logical flow and making it very readable. In addition, the sections typically list their central research questions at their outset, which orients the reader to the subsequent discussions.

The first section serves as the introduction, setting the stage, providing a literature review, and defining key terms. It astutely draws parallels between multimodality and translanguaging, which, although having different origins, share a core value, i.e., they both understand meaning-making “as a semiotic act and choice” (9). In other words, both multimodality and translanguaging take as their starting points that communicators actively select from a pre-existing pool of resources (words, images, gestures, languages, etc.) within particular socio-cultural contexts, and it is in this selection that meaning is conveyed.

Section 2 looks at how VMC platforms allow users to switch modes and languages in ways distinct from face-to-face (F2F) communication. It notes that while synchronous VMC shares several communicative affordances with F2F communication (real-time speech, facial expressions, etc.), it differs in meaningful ways, such as adding a chat box for writing. The chat box is a key area of focus in much of the *Element* as it provides additional semiotic resources compared to typical F2F communication (e.g., writing, emojis, GIFs, etc.). These additional resources grant users increased freedom to communicate based on the context. For example, an interviewee mentioned they felt more comfortable contributing to a class discussion via chat than sharing something on camera within a large group. This likely resonates with any educator who has led a class via VMC. The section also describes how communicative choices differ depending on the context: communication within educational settings tends to be more ‘neutral,’ while personal conversations tend to be more free-flowing and emotive. While this is not surprising, it nevertheless foregrounds the importance of social norms and contextual factors when drawing from pools of semiotic resources. The section includes a close analysis of a VMC on the platform Camfrog. Before reading the book, I was unaware of this platform so I would have appreciated an image of the entire user interface (UI). We get a picture of the chat box, but it would have been helpful to see how the platform configures its components, given the attention to UI.

Section 3 looks specifically at translanguaging, providing a more in-depth overview of the concept than in Section 1. Rather than viewing translanguaging as a binary “switching” between languages, Sindoni notes that it is a fluid, dynamic process, “a more complex and finely interwoven orchestration” (33). Using one language over another can be due to a particular language’s affordances, audience, or simply because one feels right to use it. Like Section 2, Sindoni draws on several captured conversations and transcription tables to demonstrate how multilingual users seamlessly move from one language to another and why they choose to communicate in one language over another. Much of the research into translanguaging

Section 4 looks at how gaze is navigated in VMC. I found this section especially compelling as eye contact, gestures, and other components of body language are essential aspects of meaning-making (Rossano 2013, Aiello 2020) but difficult to navigate in VMC. For example, deciding where to direct one’s gaze is often awkward and has significant implications for meaning-making. By looking directly at a camera – typically located above the monitor – we give the illusion of eye contact, which usually signifies attentiveness to a conversation (among other things). However, looking directly into the camera also means we are not looking at the screen, which can be uncomfortable for several reasons: we are not seeing the other individual(s) on screen, we may feel we are missing information (e.g., chat, emojis, a raised hand, etc.), and as Sindoni recounts in her interview data, we can become self-conscious since we can look at ourselves in a way that is not typically available in F2F communication (i.e., “self-looking”). This section does an excellent job of describing the importance of non-linguistic signifiers and how interviewees navigate them in VMC. In turn, it highlights how vital these semiotic resources are in F2F communication, which we often take for granted and employ without much thought.

Section 5 flows seamlessly from Section 4, also focusing on non-verbal cues, i.e., gesture and proximity, or “kinesics and proxemics.” Like gaze, these semiotic resources must be handled differently in VMC than in F2F communication. For starters, only a portion of an individual is typically available in VMC (usually from the shoulders up). This means we do not have access to the information we would F2F, leading to a “contrived sense of fragmentation” and what one interview participant called “obstructed visibility” (71). Furthermore, the very act of being in close, physical proximity to another person is, of course, lost in VMC; this can lead to feelings of “scarce attention or detachment” (74), which again were identified by interview participants. Taken together, Sections 4 and 5 constitute the strongest portion of the book in my view, as they provide an excellent mix of theoretical grounding and empirical data to demonstrate what is a) lost in VMC, b) how communicators attempt to compensate for this loss, and c) just how vital non-linguistic, unconscious signifiers are in communication.

Section 6 is the concluding chapter and neatly summarizes the preceding content. That said, it felt much more like a recount than something more forward-looking, and it was a bit abrupt. It could have been an opportunity to note what might be included in a longer work on the subject or propose directions this research could lead to; it certainly gave me ideas for my own work. This, I suspect, is primarily due to the format of the Cambridge Elements series. At around 80 pages, it is not possible to include everything. In the case of this book, the condensed format is at once a strength and weakness. On the one hand, the format offers a theoretically rich treatment of its subject matter in an easy-to-digest package; Sindoni's prose is also to be commended, as she expertly breaks down semiotic and linguistic terms with ease, making the book useful to scholars working in multiple disciplines. Its length, educational resources, and straightforward research questions make this ideal for an upper-year or graduate-level course.

On the other hand, my most significant complaint about the book is simply that I wanted more of it. Applying either multimodality or translanguaging to VMC could warrant its own Element, if not a full-length monograph. For example, the "staging" of one's background is semiotically rich, and we only get a few mentions. Likewise, a key advantage of VMC is accessibility: its multimodal affordances (like chat) can help individuals with a wide range of disabilities communicate more readily. These are core aspects of VMC, and it would have been nice to have seen them discussed in detail here. Again, this is part of the give-and-take of the format rather than a critique of the author, and ultimately it is a minor complaint. The book is an excellent contribution to an increasingly important part of our contemporary communication landscape. VMC is here to stay, and Sindoni's book achieves its goal of helping us better understand its role in communication.

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