

PLM PROPOSAL

Pragmatics, visual discourse and pre-modern texts: on context and co-text in Middle English manuscripts

This paper is a work-in-progress report on a research project devoted to the multimodality of premodern texts and pragmatic aspects of visual communication in medieval English manuscripts. Focused on a balanced corpus of 'visual texts' (cf. Machan 2011) in late Middle English literary manuscripts, the study demonstrates how pragmatic framework, supported by multimodality theory and visual rhetoric, can be extrapolated backwards to account for the meaning-making properties of non-linguistic elements in historical texts. While historical pragmatics has long been established as a framework in diachronically-motivated analyses of context-dependent language use (e.g. Jucker 1995; Jucker and Taavitsainen 2010), little research has been done in the field of visual pragmatics (Machan 2011; Carroll et al. 2013) of historical texts, even though pragmatic approach seems best suited to analyses of "anything on the page that adds meaning to the linguistic message" (Carroll et al. 2013: 56). The aim of the project, as reported in this paper, is to close the gap between historical pragmatics, visual discourse analysis and manuscript studies by developing an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural descriptive-explanatory framework which would help explain how manipulating the semiotic resources on the page of a historical text impacted on medieval readers' construal of meaning(s) of the text before their eyes. Adding historical depth to the study of visual discourse is also crucial for understanding the mechanisms behind the creation and transmission of meanings in modern digital communication, which shares the emphasis on visibility with manuscript culture. This paper discusses the applications and limitations of the pragmatic framework to the analysis of visual discourse of historical texts and presents findings of a pilot study of visual pragmatic elements in a small sample of the collected corpus.

References:

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