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BA English Honours | Semester III | Calicut University

Language in Action

Course Code: ENG3CJ202 • Module 3 Notes

MODULE III: MEDIA AND LANGUAGE

1. The Media Revolution: Extensions, Interfaces, and Mediated Realities

In the contemporary information era, human consciousness and social reality are fundamentally mediated by communication technologies. As early as the 1960s, prophetic media theorist Marshall McLuhan recognized that modern electronic technologies are not merely neutral pipes transporting information; they represent psychological and physical extensions of the human nervous system. In the twenty-first century, digital media, software algorithms, broadcast television, and investigative science journalism have converged into an all-encompassing cognitive environment. This module investigates how media transforms language, visual culture, ecological perception, and cross-cultural performance.

2. The Grammar of Media: Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (Chapter 6: "Media Translators")

In Chapter 6 of his epochal masterwork *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), titled "Media Translators," Marshall McLuhan articulates his revolutionary thesis: **All media are active translators of human experience.**

MEDIA THEORY FOUNDATION **McLuhan: The Translation of Human Experience**

> *"The power of the spoken word in creating unity and evoking emotional response is translated into static, visual form by the alphabet... All media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms. The spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way. Words are a kind of information retrieval system that can range over the total environment and our memory at high speed."*

McLuhan explains that the ancient Greek word *metaphor* means "to carry across" or "translate." Every technological medium carries human experience from one sensory mode into another: the phonetic alphabet translated rich, acoustic tribal speech into silent, visual lines; the printing press mechanized visual reading; and modern electronic media (television, computers) translates our entire central nervous system into an interconnected "global village."

Crucially, McLuhan demonstrates that when technology translates our senses, it fundamentally alters our cognitive architecture. In our digital era, computers and algorithmic networks translate human thoughts, memories, and desires into binary electronic data. Technology does not merely assist humanity; it continually re-translates what it means to be human.

3. The Computational Paradigm: Lev Manovich's *Software Takes Command*

Lev Manovich, leading digital culture theorist and pioneer of the computational humanities, published *Software Takes Command* in 2013, providing the definitive theoretical framework for understanding twenty-first-century visual and cultural media. In the excerpted section "From Documents to Performances" (Pages 33–36), Manovich documents the seismic transition from static print artifacts to dynamic computational software.

Throughout the print era, cultural texts—books, paintings, printed maps, sheet music—were fixed, stable **Documents**. Once published, the physical layout was permanent: black ink on bound paper remained unchanged for centuries. However, Manovich reveals that in the digital era, software (such as web browsers, video editing suites, word processors, and media players) has converted documents into **Performances**.

A digital media file (whether a PDF, web page, or 3D model) is not a fixed physical object; it is an underlying database of mathematical code that is executed and performed dynamically by software algorithms in real time. The user interacts with the software interface: resizing text, toggling hyperlinks, altering color palettes, searching keywords, and embedding multimedia overlays. Manovich demonstrates that the software interface itself has become the central cultural medium of our time, collapsing the boundary between author, text, and user.

4. Communicating Planetary Crisis: *How Close Are We to a Climate Change Tipping Point?*

The contemporary environmental crisis represents the most profound existential challenge confronting human civilization. The scientific documentary *How Close Are We to a Climate Change Tipping Point?* investigates the critical intersection between scientific data, media rhetoric, and public climate literacy.

In complex earth systems science, a **Tipping Point** is a critical ecological threshold that, when crossed, triggers large-scale, irreversible, and self-accelerating transformations in the planetary biosphere—such as the collapse of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet, the dieback of the Amazon Rainforest, or the thawing of the Arctic permafrost releasing catastrophic gigatons of methane gas. The documentary illustrates the formidable linguistic and rhetorical challenges confronting science communicators:

- **Translating Non-Linear Systems into Public Discourse:** Human intuition is linear, but climate tipping points operate on exponential, feedback-loop dynamics. Media narratives must develop compelling visual metaphors and documentary pacing to explain invisible, delayed ecological catastrophes without triggering fatalistic despair.
- **Combating Corporate Disinformation:** Exposing how fossil-fuel public relations lobbies deploy manipulative rhetorical strategies—manufacturing artificial scientific controversy, using deceptive "clean coal" euphemisms, and shifting ecological accountability onto individual consumer guilt.

5. Cross-Cultural Kinship: Ujwal Bommakanti's *Journey of a Kuchipudi Dancer from Pakistan to India*

Published in *The Times of India*, Ujwal Bommakanti's journalistic feature documents the extraordinary cross-border artistic odyssey of Syed Sajjad, a Muslim classical dancer from Pakistan who crossed international frontiers to study the sacred, ancient South Indian temple dance tradition of **Kuchipudi** in India.

The journalistic narrative explores how classical art can subvert rigid geopolitical and religious hostilities. Operating in Pakistan, where state-sponsored religious conservatism historically discouraged classical Hindu dance forms, Sajjad was captivated by the divine aesthetic geometry, rhythm, and expressive facial *abhinaya* of Indian classical dance. Overcoming immense bureaucratic visa hurdles, family resistance, and cross-border political suspicions, Sajjad traveled to Andhra Pradesh to train under traditional Hindu gurus.

Bommakanti's feature uses evocative, respectful journalism to demonstrate that human artistic devotion transcends national borders and religious divisions. The sacred mudras (hand gestures) and spiritual narratives of Kuchipudi become an embodied bridge of civilizational kinship, proving that cultural dialogue can triumph over geopolitical hostility.

Advanced Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic Pragmatics & Policy Hermeneutics

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1. Theoretical Foundations of Critical Language Studies

Academic investigation into Media Ecology, Computational Theory, and Science Journalism centers upon three foundational linguistic and sociological paradigms:

- **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Hegemony:** Formulated by Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak, CDA posits that language use (discourse) is dialectically entangled with social structure. Dominant institutions (governments, judiciaries, corporate media) employ specific discursive strategies—nominalization, passive voice deletion of agent, euphemism, and presupposition—to naturalize ideological biases and manufacture public consent. Analyzing Media Ecology, Computational Theory, and Science Journalism requires de-naturalizing linguistic choices to expose the underlying interests they serve.
- **Speech Act Theory and Performative Pragmatics:** J. L. Austin (*How to Do Things with Words*) and John Searle demonstrate that language does not merely describe the world (constative utterances); it performs actions (performative utterances / speech acts). When a judge issues a verdict, an official signs an act, or a protester utters dissent, language produces immediate material, legal, and ontological transformations in reality.
- **Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Violence:** Pierre Bourdieu argues that linguistic exchanges function as economic markets. Standard, elite dialects command high "symbolic capital," while non-standard vernaculars, subaltern dialects, and minority languages are devalued, inflicting "symbolic violence" upon marginalized speakers who are systematically excluded from institutional decision-making.

2. Comparative Analytical Matrix: Discourse Domains

A structured comparative assessment delineates linguistic registers, power dynamics, and interpretive protocols across discursive fields in Language in Action:

Discourse Domain	Primary Pragmatic Function	Key Syntactic & Lexical Hallmarks	Institutional Power Dynamic
Literary Discourse	Aesthetic defamiliarization, emotional subversion & ethical critique.	Metaphor, polysemy, syntactic ellipsis, interior monologue, narrative framing.	Subverts dominant ideological consensus and restores voice to marginalized subjectivities.
Media & Digital Discourse	Information framing, attention capture & ideological positioning.	Sensational hooks, active voice, multimodal convergence, clickbait syntax, algorithmic metadata.	Shapes public mood and reproduces commercial interests under the guise of objectivity.

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Policy & Statutory Acts	Legislative mandate, institutional governance & social engineering.	Terse imperative provisions, definitions clauses, unambiguous penal schedules, exhaustive qualifiers.	Formalizes democratic mandates into legally binding civic obligations and administrative protocols.

3. Glossary of Essential Applied Linguistics and Discourse Terms

Critical Term	Theoretical Origin	Academic Definition & Analytical Context
Performativity	J. L. Austin / Judith Butler	The capacity of language to not merely describe an act, but to actualize that act into existence through its very utterance (e.g., 'I declare you guilty').
Nominalization	Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday)	The grammatical transformation of an active verb or process into a static abstract noun (e.g., 'police shot protesters' becomes 'the shooting of protesters'), frequently deleting responsible agency.
Interdiscursivity	Norman Fairclough	The constitution of a text from diverse discourses and genres (e.g., a modern political speech mixing religious rhetoric, corporate marketing, and street colloquialisms).
Remediation	Bolter & Grusin	The formal logic by which new media technologies refashion and absorb prior media forms, transforming textual documents into dynamic digital performances.
Biopolitics	Michel Foucault	The techniques and rationalities by which modern sovereign states manage and regulate human biological life, health, gender, and populations through legal statutes.
Defamiliarization (Ostranenie)	Viktor Shklovsky	The artistic technique of disrupting habitual, automated perception by rendering familiar reality strange and difficult through unexpected literary language.

4. Four-Phase Critical Discourse Analytical Protocol

Conducting scholarly analysis of Media Ecology, Computational Theory, and Science Journalism adheres to a structured four-phase research methodology:

- **Phase 1: Textual Archaeology and Lexico-Grammatical Mapping:** Meticulously identifying vocabulary registers, passive voice constructions, nominalizations, pronoun dynamics (us vs. them), and rhetorical tropes.
- **Phase 2: Discursive Practice and Production Analysis:** Investigating the conditions of text production, circulation, and institutional consumption—identifying who authored the text, what institutional authority they command, and who the intended target audience is.

- **Phase 3: Socio-Cultural and Ideological Interrogation:** Situating the discourse within broader societal power struggles—analyzing caste hierarchies, heteronormative patriarchy, environmental exploitation, or capitalist market hegemony.
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