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Looking beneath the surface of  
multimodal documents – why and how?

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Humanities and social sciences often draw on multimodal documents for data, examining one or more modes of communication from a variety of perspectives. Newspapers, advertisements, picture books and many other page-based multimodal documents are commonly studied from both qualitative and quantitative viewpoints. Regardless of the field and viewpoint, understanding multimodality is becoming increasingly desirable and appears to hold the promise of opening up many new paths for research. However, treading carefully is crucial when entering this new territory, as common assumptions about the visual/verbal divide are often misleading, particularly when attempting to make sense of entire documents.

In this presentation, I argue for the need to generalise about multimodal documents before engaging in a closer examination of their content and structure. Using a multimodal corpus, I show how superficially dissimilar documents can have considerable similarities in their underlying discourse structure. Finally, I discuss the investment in corpus-based investigations, which demand extensive time and resources, and their relevance to multimodal research at large.

