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THE LANGUAGES  
OF VIRTUAL MIGRATION  
MUSEUMS

*A Multimodal Perspective*

PAOLO   
LOFFREDO

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## INTRODUCTION

This volume intends to analyse how migration is represented in three virtual museums, carefully selected for the purposes of this investigation: the Virtual Museum of Greek Immigration to Canada, the Virtual Museum of Caribbean Migration and Memory, and the California Migration Museum. By exclusively adopting a linguistic framework, the central aim of this book is to identify and analyse the discursive strategies adopted by the above-mentioned museums to represent the stories and experiences of migrants. In keeping with the idea that museums do not simply exhibit artworks but rather construct identities and values, the focus of this analysis mainly addresses participants' identities and relations as represented in the multimodal texts of the selected virtual museums.

The focus on migration has been chosen because the representation of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in media reports is the focus of several studies (Khosravini 2009; Sindoni 2016). Along with questions of memory and inclusion, migration has also become a crucial topic for museums and cultural institutions (Insulander 2019). The increasing interest in migration has led to various studies on exhibition design strategies, which display personal stories to promote changes in conceptions and new identity formations. However, few studies have used Halliday's metafunctional model and its developments to explore how migration is represented in the museum context. Thus, additional research is essential to examine museums as multimodal texts and provide insights into how meaning is created, including aspects of identity formation and emotional involvement.

Museums are semiotic entities, systems of meaning-making practices that have responsibilities for and with visitors. In recent years, museums have faced a transformation in their relationship with their audiences. This study attempts to contribute to the debate about language and communication in museum contexts, with a specific focus on virtual museums. During the COVID-19 pandemic, museums, like many other sectors, were significantly impacted and struggled to find new ways to accomplish their missions and attract viewers. Museums of all sizes, particularly the larger ones, were forced by pandemic restrictions to transform in-person experiences into digital ones. Even though many initiatives existed before the pandemic, the lockdown compelled audiences to engage exclusively with art and cultural content through a digital medium. Among the various topics, the core values of diversity and heritage can be particularly important for virtual museums, especially considering the common goal of reaching a wider audience online.

## INTRODUCTION

This study intends to explore a group of virtual museums that specifically employ a variety of resources in representing migration experiences and narratives of belonging. Given their specific peculiarities, virtual museums are particularly suitable for conveying the complexity of migration histories and aligning viewers with the position of the represented social actors. The book is organised in three chapters. Chapter One introduces the theoretical and methodological framework for the analysis of multimodal terrains such as museums. It presents Multimodality as a perspective that directly stems from Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). This study combines Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) adoption of the meta-functional system and Machin and Mayr's (2023) Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to explore how identities and relationships are represented in texts. Finally, the chapter touches upon van Leeuwen's analysis of social actors to examine the strategies used to represent the participants involved in museum representations.

Chapter Two deals with more extensive scholarly literature that has investigated the linguistic dimension of the museum, primarily informed by Halliday's theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics. It further expands the social semiotic approach, drawing on the concept of the museum as a "multimodal constellation" (Kress 2015; Ravelli 2024). The chapter finally traces the significant changes that have affected museums over time and contemporary approaches that stress the importance of more interactive forms of interpretation and engagement. However, the focus of this study is on the discursive strategies of virtual museums and the evaluation of their effectiveness with regard to persuasion and affective responses.

Chapter Three is the analytical section, which deals with the linguistic construction of 'departures' and 'arrivals'. Drawing on MCDA, the chapter will analyse the basic semiotic choices found in the selected museum texts to understand the configuration of identities and social roles. These texts discursively construct identities, namely the represented participants (the migrants depicted), the visitors, and the museum. The analysis of lexical choices and visual strategies will reveal that, through language, virtual museums construct visitors' experiences and influence their perceptions. Relational aspects of multimodal texts are also examined with special attention on the role of the gaze of the migrant social actors represented.

The volume concludes with a summary of the findings. The conclusion predominantly explains how the framing of migration can impact the understanding of this phenomenon and how it has been examined in discursive terms.