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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Multimodal Semiotics of Protests and Political Movements in Pakistan (2022-2024)****Alina Gul**

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Email: nimraimranhabib@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Despite the increasing frequency and impact of political protests in Pakistan from 2022 to 2024, limited academic attention has been given to their analysis through a multimodal semiotic lens, revealing a critical gap in political discourse and communication studies. This research seeks to investigate how various modes—verbal, gestural, postural, spatial, interactional, and visual—are strategically employed in political protests and movements to construct meaning, convey resistance, and mobilize public sentiment. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, grounded in Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). Data was collected from protest speeches, placards, video footage, and social media posts, particularly focusing on selected political figures and events between 2022 to 2024. The analysis examines how these materials utilize different semiotic resources and interact across modes through Resemiotization. Key contributions of this research include offering a comprehensive multimodal framework for analyzing political protests in Pakistan and demonstrating how protest leaders employ mode-specific strategies to shape ideological narratives. Additionally, the study enriches the existing body of knowledge by illustrating the dynamic role of multimodal communication in contemporary political activism within the Pakistani context.

Keywords: Multimodal Discourse, Semiotic resources, Political protests.

INTRODUCTION

Social semiotics also called Social Semantics is a field of Semiotics is an interdisciplinary field that explores how signs and symbols used in social contexts to create meaning. It is opposite to traditional semiotics, which focuses on the static relationship between a signifier (the form) and a signified (the meaning), social semiotics emphasizes on dynamic and context-dependent relationship in meaning-making. It represents that communication occurs through various

modes, such as language, visuals, gestures and sounds, which interact in complex ways to convey meaning. Furthermore, social semiotics examines how people use available semiotic resources such as; words, images, and sounds, to make meaning, negotiate identities, and exercise power in specific social settings. Social semiotics has its roots in semiotic theory, originally which was developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce in 1998 (the late 19th and early 20th centuries). Saussure viewed signs as arbitrary and structured within a system, while Peirce introduced a triadic model of the sign that included the interpretant, emphasizes the role of interpretation in meaning-making. In the middle of 20th century, Roland Barthes expanded semiotics into cultural analysis, exploring how signs operate within broader social and ideological frameworks. Barthes' concept of "myth" illustrated how cultural texts (e.g. advertisements or media) carry connotative meanings (context-dependent) that reflect dominant ideologies. Michael Halliday's theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), Halliday argued that language serves specific social functions, and its structure reflects its use in particular social contexts. On the basis of Halliday's ideas, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen extended social semiotics apart of language, include other modes of communication, such as images and sounds, which explores how different semiotic resources combine to create meaning in different contexts. *Multimodal Semiotics of Protests and Political Movements in Pakistan (2022-2024)*. This study uses the Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's semiotic model, social semiotics, is a theory/model that discuss how different modes of communication are used to create meaning in specific social contexts. The model emphasizes the role of social and cultural factors in shaping meaning. This model posits that meaning is created through the interaction of multiple modes as textual, visual and gestural. The researcher will analyze the speeches of different protesters in the political movements and protests of the recent years (2022-2024). The recent wave of protests and movements (2022-2024): Final Call or Do or Die protest organized by PTI, The Mehangai Mukao March organized by PML-N, The PPP Long March organized by PPP, and The Protest against Inflation organized by JI. People Views: Final Call: Has been seen as a bold move by some, but as a publicity stunt by others. PPP Long March: Some had been viewed it as an attempt to revive the party's fortunes and challenge the PTI's dominance. Mehangai Mukao March: Some viewing it as a legitimate means of holding the government accountable, while others saw it as a destabilizing influence. Protest against Inflation: People view it as a symbol of resistance against the government's policies. Some view these protests as a legitimate means of expressing grievances; others see them as a threat to stability in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the theoretical foundation and analytical foundations that inform the present study on the 'Multimodal Semiotics of Protests and Movements in Pakistan'. It explores key scholarly contributions in the fields of multimodal semiotics, providing a lens through which political protest discourse can be critically examined. This chapter begins with the work of Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, whose social semiotic approach laid the background or foundation for understanding how multiple semiotic modes: text, images, gestures, postures, verbal, non-verbal and other available semiotic resources met to convey the speaker's original

meaning. Their concept of “reading images” and the “grammar of visual design” provides tools for interpreting protests. This chapter also considers the contributions of Kay O’Halloran, whose work of “multimodal cohesion and systematic Functional Linguistics” extends this theory to dynamic communicative events, such as political rallies and speeches. Further, the chapter includes insights from one another key scholar, Machin, who explore how digital and audiovisual modalities have transformed protest rhetoric in temporary media environment. These perspectives are analyze to build a theoretical foundation for analyzing the semiotic construction of identities, power, resistance, and collective action across various protests. By taking these foundational studies into considerations, this literature review establishes the analytical relevance of multimodal semiotics to protest discourse and highlight how political meaning is constructed through a blend of language, visuals, gestures etc.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996/2006) laid the groundwork for *Multimodal Semiotics* through their influential text *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, where they argue that images, like language, follow a structured “visual grammar”. Drawing on Halliday’s Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL), they identify three metafunctions in visual communication: Representational (how images depict reality), interpersonal (how viewers are positioned through gaze, angle, and framing), and compositional (how elements like salience, layout, and positioning guide interpretation). They emphasize that visual elements are not neutral but ideologically driven, and their work give rise to *Mutimodal Discourse Analysis* (MDA), influencing diverse fields like education, media, design, and linguistics.

Kress (2010), in his landmark work *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*, advances the idea that communication extends beyond language to include multiple semiotic modes—visual, gestural, spatial, auditory—each shaped by social and cultural contexts. Grounded in social semiotics, Kress introduces design as the central organization principle of communication, positioning the communicator as an active designer who selects modes based on their modal affordances—the specific potentials and constraints of each mode. Van Leeuwen (2005), in *Introducing Social Semiotics*, extends the scope of multimodal analysis by exploring how meaning is constructed through non-linguistic semiotic resources such as image, sound, typography, color, music, and layout. He argues that these resources are socially and culturally shaped, ideologically embedded, and subject to historical influences. Meaning in his view, is not fixed by structure but is socially negotiated through shared conventions. Van Leeuwen introduces key analytical tools—such as *visual modality* (realism in visuals), *framing* (connection or separation of elements), and *salience* (visual prominence of elements)—to examine how modes communicate power, symbolism, and social values. His work is foundational in critical analysis of multimodal texts across media, education, advertising, and popular culture, emphasizing that all communicative choices reflect broader ideological and cultural practices.

Jewitt (2006; 2009; 2014) has played a key role in advancing the theory and application of Multimodal Semiotics, particularly in education, digital literacy, and communication studies. Building on the work of Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, she conceptualizes multimodality as a dynamic theory of communication, emphasizing that meaning is constructed through the

interaction of multiple socially and contextually shaped modes—including image, gesture, gaze, spatial arrangement, and sound. In *the Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis* (2009, 2014), she presents multimodality as an interdisciplinary and evolving framework. Methodologically, Jewitt has developed empirical tools such as video-based ethnography, multimodal transcription, and frame-by-frame analysis to examine real-time multimodal interactions.

O'Halloran (2005; 2011) is a leading figure in the development of *Multimodal Discourse Analysis*, known for integrating systematic functional theory with computational and empirical methods. Expanding on Halliday's SFL and the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen, she applies multimodal theory to domain-specific contexts such as mathematics, where symbols, diagrams, and spatial layout play key roles in meaning-making. In *Mathematical Discourse* (2005), she introduces the concept of intersemiotic complementarity, illustrating how language, visuals, and symbols work together to construct disciplinary knowledge. Technologically, she has advanced the field by developing digital tools (e.g., Multimodal Analysis Video software) to annotate and analyze multimodal data across time and modes. O'Halloran work not only refines multimodal theory by proposing mode-specific systematic semantics but also provides practical tools for analyzing communication in education, media, and digital environment.

Machin (2007; Machin and Mayr, 2012) is a key figure in *Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Studies*, known for developing accessible, practical methods for analyzing how meaning is constructed through visual and multimodal resources—such as typography, gaze, color, posture and layout—particularly in media, politics, and advertising. Building on the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen, Machin demonstrates how these elements encode ideologies, shape perception, and naturalize power relations. In works like *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis* (2007) and *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis* (2012), he provides systematic tools for identifying how visual and linguistic modes interact to frame narratives, convey identity, and influence public opinion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative methodology approach to analyze the semiotics of protests and political movements of recent years (2022-2024) in Pakistan. This study analyzes how different politicians use different modes of communication such as language, text, images, gestures and symbols in their speeches to convey their intended meanings. This study adopts a qualitative research design, which aims to describe the multimodal elements or semiotic resources used in political protests and movements in Pakistan of the recent years. This descriptive qualitative does not test a hypothesis but rather explains how communication occurs through multiple modes in real-life protest events. The rationale for using a qualitative research design includes: It allows the researcher to present rich, detailed, and contextualized descriptions of the multimodal strategies used in protests. The Population of this study is the analysis of the speeches of political movements and protests in Pakistan, includes the Pakistani citizens, including: general public, protesters, activists, Politicians, government officials, media personnel, journalists and representatives from various backgrounds. The Sample of this study is to analyze the speeches of protesters of political protests and movements in Pakistan of the recent years (2022-2024). A

representative group of individuals, including: A diverse range of ages, genders, occupations, participants from urban and rural areas, individuals with varying levels of education and socioeconomic status, mixing of protesters, supporters and observers. This study follows a descriptive research type, which aims to describe a clear and accurate description of the study, in this way the multimodal semiotics are used to convey the intended messages in political speeches and movements. It seeks to answer the “what” aspect of a research problem. The emphasis is on what types of semiotic resources (visuals, texts, gestures, and so on). This study does not involve any manipulation of variables but relies on naturally existing data, like slogans, videos, texts etc. This study uses primary data sources for the collection and transcription of data related to political speeches and movements. The sources of primary data in this research include: documented protest speeches and their transcription available on different websites, and academic platforms, Visual materials (posters, banners, photographs), Social media posts (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter). This study supports the rich, detailed and accurate data for interpretation. The data has been transcribed from source language to target language which is in English. The transcribed data is included in the appendices. This study uses multimodal data analysis technique, which involves interpreting and analyzing how meaning is constructed through a combination of different modes. This technique provides a framework to examine how to communicate complex messages, particularly in protest contexts. The analysis process involves two key stages: i) Coding: The collected –transcribed data (e.g., transcribed data, images, social media content) is critically and carefully examined and individual elements (such as signs, colors, symbols, gestures) are identified and marked as in meaningful units. ii) Categorizing: These coded units are then grouped into thematic categories based on their function, communicative role etc. By applying multimodal semiotic/strategies approach, the study goes beyond the surface-level observation and helps in to explore hoe how deep communicative strategies used in political speeches and movements to convey ideologies, guided by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen theoretical frameworks.

Data Analysis

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of political protest speeches using a multimodal semiotic framework. The aim of this analysis is to find out how meaning is constructed through the combined use of linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and other semiotic resources in political discourse. The mentioned transcribed speeches delivered during four significant protest movements in Pakistan between 2022-2024, named: PTI’s Do or Die call, PML-N’s Mehangai Mukao March, PPP’s Long March, and the JI March against inflation. Each speech has analyzed qualitatively with the help of multimodal semiotics, coding, categorizing, and thematic analysis techniques; identifying power dynamics, political identities, political leadership, political resistance, and political positioning. Attention is given to the various modes of communication such as language, audience interaction, and symbolic elements like Slogans: ‘do or die’ references to democracy. These elements examined not only as verbal utterances but also as multimodal signs which contributes to the speaker’s persuasive and ideological goals. The

following sections present these analyses speech by speech, **each with its transcription excerpts, description, and semiotic interpretation.**

Protest No. 1

Do or Die Call:

Introduction:

Concept: The Do or Die Call was started in November 2024, by aiming the 24 November Call, at D-Chowk, Islamabad. **Who Gave the Call:** The Call was given by Imran Khan, PTI's Founder Imran and Former Prime Minister of Pakistan, via sisters and layers. **What the Phrase "Do or Die" Meant:** PTI gave this protest names like this which refers to a real freedom, final decision, and struggle. **Reaction from Public:** During those days the internet service was suspended, roads were blocked, routes were closed.

1. Banners: (Visuals)



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)

Features: (a)

- Text like Release Imran Khan
- Text like "24 November".
- Text like "Final Call".
- Picture of "Imran Khan" in the background.
- Mentioned "Peaceful Protest" line in the image.

Purpose:

- To Persuade audience for attendance in protest.
- To pressurize followers, workers to gain attention.

1ST Speech:

Speaker: Ali Amin Gandapur.

Date: 22nd October, 2024.

Event: PTI Protest Announcement, Media Talk.

Location: Press briefing in Peshawar, KPK.

1. Multimodal Semiotic

i) Use of Various Modes:

A) Verbal Mode: (what is said (words, phrases, slogans))

Language:

- This speech uses very emotional language like;;
- “Judicial system is now prisoned”.
- Challenge: “We will run our own court”
- “Peaceful Protest”: highlights non-violence.

Purpose:

- To gain trust among supporters.
- To ensure that we run a peaceful protest.
- To Usage of such language; meant to ensure unity among audience vs. them.

B) Aural Mode: (how it is said (tone, pitch, volume, emotion))

- **Tone:** The tone was soft during delivering normal language.
- **Intonation:** A continuous rise and fall were in speech.

Purpose:

- To give stress on important things/words.
- To energize attendees.

C) Interactional Mode: (engagement with audience (audience-response, eye contact))

- Repetition of “personal pronoun: we” again and again.
- Questions: “Like, Are you Ready?”

Purpose:

- To engage the crowd.
- To gain the attention by using such things.

D) Gesture:



Gestural Features:

- 2nd finger rose.
- Focused facial expression.
- Aggressive mood.

Purpose:

- Highlight authority, leadership.
- Refers to a critical point.
- To show anger.

E) Posture:



Postural Feature:

- Both hands are raised.
- Open chest.
- Focused eyes expression.
- Full body involvement.

Purpose:

- Demonstrate leadership.
- To give visible mode to verbal language.
- Demonstrate political experience.

F) Spatial Mode:

Features:

- Camera's usage.
- Formal Setting.
- Attentiveness.
- Question-answer session.

Purpose:

- To give audience the Physical message to join the protest.
- Shows sincerity.
- Shows confidence.

G) Resemiotization:

- **Verbal to Gestural:** Ali Amin's speech transformation from verbal to gestural, highlights political experience.
- He shifts his message to other mode to give physical shape to his words.

Purpose:

- To transform ideas from abstract to concrete mode.
- Shows authenticity.
- To give visibility.

2. Coding:

i) Description: Bullets, straight firing, rubber bullets.

Code: Violence, Unlawfully.

ii) Description: We will go again, we will go again..

Code: A Mandatory Call.

iii) Description: We will run our own court.

Code: Symbolize Resistance.

iv) Description: We were forced, forced.

Code: Persuasive Language.

3. Categorization and Themes:

i) Category: State Violence.

Included Codes: Persuasive Language + Unlawfully.

Theme: Demonstrate that State is suppressed by corrupt rulers

ii) Category: Protest Planning.

Included Code: Resistance.

Theme: Demonstrates that protest is a legal right with one.

iv) Category: Faith in Justice.

Included Code: Ethical Positioning.

Theme: Frames the protest within a moral and just framework.

Protest No. 2**Mehangai Mukao March****Introduction:**

Start Date: The Protest was start on March 26, 2022. **Origin:** It was originates from Lahore's Model Town area. **Who Led the March:** This protest was led by Maryam Nawaz (PML-N Vice President), Hamza Shahbaz (Opposition Leader, Punjab Assembly). **Aims/Goals:** To overcome inflation, unemployment, and economic hardships in Pakistan.

Banners: (Visuals)

(a)



(b)



(c)

Features: (a)

- Right hand is raised.
- Complete body posture.
- Text like “Mehangai Mukao March”.
- Text like “26th March”.

Purpose:

- Shows authority, leadership.
- Shows confidence.
- Shows a warm welcome towards attendees.

1st Speech:

Speaker: Maryam Nawaz.

Date: 26th March, 2022.

Location: Model Town, Lahore.

Event: Live speech from March.

1. Multimodal Semiotic Analysis**i) Use of Various Modes:****A) Verbal Mode:****Features:**

- **Sarcastic Tone:** Usage of words like “letter” and “injustice”.
- **Proverbs and Metaphors:** Using of proverbs, idioms, and metaphors.
- Usage of rhetorical questions.

Purpose:

- Use humor as a persuasive language.
- To criticize PTI’s Chairman, Imran Khan.

B) Aural Mode:**Features:**

- Usage of Repetition, “if, if, if”.
- Usage of pauses while speaking.
- Usage of Mimicry while speaking.

Purpose:

- To show confidence.
- To Criticize Khan.
- To deliver an emotional appeal.

C) Interactional Mode:

Features:

- **Language:** Repetitive use of personal pronouns “we” and “us”.
- **Idioms:** Frequent use of such language.
- **Style:** She using the verbal style in such a way which attracts audience/crowd.

Purpose:

- For building solidarity.
- For building group identity.
- For showing multiple experience.

D) Gestures



(a)



(b)



(c)

Features: (a)

- Index finger of left hand rose.
- Crowd behind her.
- Taking microphone in one hand.
- Aggressive facial expression.

Purpose:

- Highlight critical/ important point.
- Shows leadership.
- Shows unity among themselves.

E) Postural Mode:



Features:

- Eyes downward.
- Both hands placed on dice.
- Stands with confidence.
- Crowd in the background.

Purpose:

- Shows authority.
- Shows seriousness.
- Shows sincerity.
- Shows shockingness.

F) Spatial Mode:

- Camera's usage.
- Party members' attendance.
- Stage, mic, podiums...
- Banners, slogans, audience chanting...

Purpose:

- Refers to emotional attachment.
- Refers to legal work.
- Refers to feelings, sincerity, and unity.

G) Resemiotization:

- Criticism from Verbal into Digital Mode: Different words like "secret letter" are turned into memes from verbal mode.
- Verbal to Social Media Posts: Different words are turned into funniest clips on social media.

Purpose:

- To give visible shape to her messages.
- To show performance from competence.

2. Coding

i) Description: "If, if, if, if, if".

Code: Sarcastic Tone/Criticism.

ii) Description: "Dear Mr. Imran Khan, we are fine..."

Code: Reading from Letter.

iii) Description: “Jab Bandar ke pair jalte hain, phir woh bache pe rakh deta hai”.

Code: Usage of Cultural Proverb.

3. Categorization Plus Themes

i) Category: Mockery of opposition.

Included Code: Criticism.

Theme: To mimic Imran Khan in public, also to give a point to public to laugh on Khan.

ii) Category: Sarcastic Tone.

Included Code: Reading of letter.

Theme: To expose Imran Khan.

iii) Category: Ethical Challenging.

Included Code: Imposed question on Imran Khan.

Theme: Challenge Imran Khan as how to rule.

Protest No. 03

Long March by PPP

Introduction:

Organizer: It was organized by Pakistan Peoples’ Party. **Led by:** It was led by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. **Starting Date Was:** 27th February, 2022. **Objectives:** To end Imran Khan Government. Also to build voters attention for upcoming elections.

Banners: (Visuals)



Features: (a)

- Like “27 Long March”.
- Pictured different party members.

Purpose:

- To highlight the date of protest to supporters.
- To show sincerity.
- To grab attention.

Protest No. 4**Protest against Inflation****Introduction:**

Initiated by: It was initiated by Hafiz Naeem Ur Rehman. **Who Led It:** Hafiz Naeem Ur Rehman.

Objectives: i) To reduce electricity bills. ii) To reject IMF-Imposed policies. iii) To pressurize government to cut ruling class privileges. iv) Demand transparent governance.

Banners: (Visuals)**Features: (b)**

- A banner holds by group of people.
- Text on that banner: “berozgari barhne se bchao”.
- People who are pictured here are very helpless, poor, and needy.

Purpose:

- To show the real picture of poor public, suffering people.
- To show the real picture of public who are suffering.

CONCLUSION:

This research concludes that political protests in Pakistan from 2022 to 2024 were deeply multimodal, with protesters using a combination of verbal, gestural, postural, spatial, and other modes to construct powerful political messages. This study makes several significant contributions to the fields of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), Political Communication, and Semiotics, especially in Pakistani context. It advances the application of multimodal semiotics to real-world political events in Pakistan, showcasing how different semiotic resources (language, space, body, visuals) are used in such ways to express political ideologies and resistance. Each mode contributed uniquely: Banners acted as mobile, multimodal texts that visually summarized complex political stances. Gestures and postures portray power and urgency. Interactional Strategies: Chanting and feedback from crowd converted speeches into collective, emotionally charged acts. Verbal slogans “Mehangai Mukao March” re-articulated across banners, social media posts, physical gestures, and public spaces. This shifting of meaning across modes amplified their emotional intensity, visibility, and memorability. The analysis shows that each mode played a distinct role in shaping meaning to political narratives. After the analysis of the recent waves of protest: PTI Final Call, PML-N Mehangai Mukao March, PPP Long March, and JI March against inflation shows and reveals that semiotics was key in helping each protest construct credibility, authority, , authority, and emotional appeal—all of which contributed to their success in capturing public attention and shaping national discourse. Overall, this research

reaffirms that protest communication is not linear or solely linguistic—it is a layered multimodal process that requires reading beyond words. By decoding the interplay of semiotic modes, this study deepens our understanding of how protesters in Pakistan effectively achieved emotional influence, via powerful semiotic way. The study emphasizes the significance of multimodal discourse in political movements, offering insights into how protesters in Pakistan effectively mobilize meaning beyond words to assert identity, change, and challenge authority.

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