

# Social Semiotic Multimodal Analysis of a German as a Foreign Language Textbook: Unpacking Cultural Representations

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This study conducted a social semiotic multimodal analysis to determine *Schritte International*'s cultural representations of the people living in Germany. *Schritte International* has been a longstanding German as a foreign language textbook used in Maltese state schools. This analysis was performed using the original MIRROR framework, with emphasis placed on modes incorporated in the textbook as well as its social references. The primary findings of this study revealed how *Schritte International* predominantly depicts certain characteristics of people living in Germany. Specifically, the study determined that *Schritte International* provides a selective portrayal that reflects dominant essentialist ideologies.

Keywords: textbook analysis, multimodality, German as a foreign language, culture, foreign language teaching and learning

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# 德語作為外語教科書的 社會符號學多模態解釋 ——基於所包含的文化表徵的視角

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本文作者採用社會符號學多模態解釋方法，對*Schritte International*中德國居民的文化表徵進行了解釋。長期以來，該教材一直是馬爾他公立學校德語外語教學的主要教材。過程中作者採用了原始的鏡像框架，既關注教材中包含的組合模式，也關注教材中提到的社會特徵。主要的研究結果從社會符號學多模態解釋中總結出了該教材中關於德國居民最顯著、最突出的特徵。主要的結論顯示，該教材有選擇性的以主流的本質主義意識呈現德國居民的特徵。

關鍵詞：教材分析、多模態、德語作為外語、文化、外語教學和學習

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## 1. Introduction

According to Risager (2018), textbooks present students with “perspectival” representations of the world and a selected type of knowledge that is “socially situated and embedded in discourses, always seen and represented from somewhere and by some people with specific life histories, experiences and power positions” (p. 2). Fabbian et al. (2019) assert that textbooks serve as mediators of cultural representations because they “circulate and generate identities, teaching us about what other people are like,” simultaneously reinforcing appropriate rules of conduct and framing “how others see us” (Kidd, 2016, p. 11).

Textbooks used within foreign language (FL) classrooms, when compared with those used in other contexts, often present essentialist cultural representations of unfamiliar foreign cultures, namely, that of the country or countries in which the target language is used as a native language (Kramsch, 1988). Students receive these representations of foreign cultures through textbooks and complementary materials used in class.

In an era in which contemporary culture is based on a phenomenon of global hybridization (Pieterse, 2004), this paper contends that textbooks frequently portray cultures through homogenizing, modernizing, and/or westernizing lenses. These views align with Appadurai’s (1996) discussion of global cultural flows. That study identifies five scapes (i.e., dimensions with fluid elements depending on how they are interpreted and who interprets them) that are defined as the “building blocks of...imagined worlds, that is, the multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 329).

The five scapes are defined as follows:

1. *Ethnoscap*es: the ever-shifting “landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers, and other moving groups and persons” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 329);
2. *Technoscap*es: “the global configuration, also ever-fluid, of technology, and of the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries” driven

by “increasingly complex relationships between money flows, political possibilities, and the availability of both unskilled and highly skilled labor” (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 329-330);

3. *Financescapes*: the flow of capital: “currency markets, national stock exchanges, and commodity speculations move mega-monies through national turnstiles at blinding speed” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 330);
4. *Mediascapes*: “the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film production studios) which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 330). Mediascapes “tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 331);
5. *Ideoscapes*: “concatenations of images...(that are nonetheless) often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 331).

O'Regan (2014) theorized two additional scapes that range over critical texts. O'Regan describes the *linguascape*, or flows of languages around the world, and the *semioscape*, which he defines as flows of signs and meanings around the world.

Therefore, in the context of globalization, textbook publishers are encouraged to prioritize concepts such as a global society and cross-border interactions when presenting cultural representations. These concepts are driven by “globalization, which involves the compression of time and space, the increased interconnectivity of human groups, the increased values of the exchange of commodities, people and ideas and, finally, the emergence of various forms of global consciousness” (Turner, 2010, p. 5).

### 1.1 Effects of Textbook Production Stage

These essentialist dominant discourses may seem “hidden” or deliberately included in textbooks by manipulative publishers and authors. However, the

reasons behind the content in these texts vary, and a deeper understanding can be gained by examining the details of the publishing process. First, the publishing process is prominent, often globally recognized, publishing houses is complex. This process involves content editing, copyediting, design, production, and proofreading (Harper Collins Publishing House, n.d.), which can lead to dominant essentialist discourses seeping into a particular text. Ravitch (2003) suggests that throughout this process, authors and publishers often engage in self-censorship, leading to the omission of certain taboo content in final publications. Specifically, they note the following.

Either way, educational publishing is subject to massive self-censorship, due to a combination of left-wing political correctness and right-wing religious fundamentalism...by the end of the 1980s, every publisher had complied with the demands of the critics, both from left and right. Publishers had imposed self-censorship to head off the outside censors, as well as to satisfy state adoption reviews. Achieving demographic balance and excluding sensitive topics had become more important to their success than teaching children to read or to appreciate good literature. (Ravitch, 2003, p. 96)

Thornbury (2006) similarly describes the “verbal hygiene” that publishers impose on themselves. The author suggests that publishers are often motivated to avoid offending potential markets rather than to assert multicultural values.

Gray (2002) discusses a proscribed list of “sensitive” topics that are omitted by authors and publishers of global textbooks because of the aforementioned marketing imperative. Authors and publishers frequently sanitize their content by omitting all topics related to politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, -isms, or pork (i.e., PARSNIP).

According to Lähdesmäki (2009), the genre selected by authors or publishers that serve as a vehicle through which dominant essentialist discourses are presented is an additional contributing factor. Through an investigation of textbooks used in Finland, that study reveals how genres affect the affinity or truth-value attributed to the presented material. For example, students tend to believe claims regarding culture more easily and passively when presented through advertisements rather than through narratives or literary works.

Therefore, the norms of the “politics of textbooks” affect publishers’ and authors’ decisions regarding the content of a particular textbook as early as the production stage of publishing (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991). These politics also influence the presentation and choice of the dominant essentialist discourses included in the final published material.

### *1.2 Foreign Language Textbooks*

Various studies have investigated textbooks produced for FL teaching. These studies frequently conclude that dominant essentialist discourses are evident in how FL textbooks present the foreign culture in question. Heinrich (2005) argues that teaching materials on Japanese as a FL helped propagate and legitimize dominant socially accepted middle-class and urban essentialist discourses. Another study reveals how textbooks used to teach French in Hong Kong present female characters as “positively unsympathetic” (Goff, 1978). Male characters, however, are presented as more attractive and agreeable (Equal Opportunity Commission of Hong Kong, 2001). A quantitative analysis of Russian as a FL textbooks published after 1996 suggests that textbook designers are more aware of gender imbalances; however, a qualitative analysis of other FL textbooks for Russian reveals that men are overrepresented in sections related to the topic of sports (Rifkin, 1998). The findings of Shardakova and Pavlenko align with those of Rifkin. The authors highlight several ethnicity-, race-, age- and class-related stereotypes frequently featured in textbooks for the teaching of Russian as a FL (Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004).

Despite increasing cultural sensitivity and awareness, FL textbooks often present stereotypes linked to a particular country and its people (Rus, 1998). The literature distinguishes between positive and negative national stereotypes (Byram & Zarate, 1995). Research has investigated both autostereotypes (i.e., the self-concept of a country’s citizens) and heterostereotypes (i.e., stereotypes about other countries or people; Barbour & Stevenson, 1999).

Molinari (2008) investigated texts used by teachers of Italian as a FL in the United States. That study concludes that the two most frequent stereotypes about Italians in textbooks are their involvement in the Mafia and their love of food. The stereotype of Italians as lovers of food also appears in the text

produced by Mason (1998) as a resource for teachers of Italian as a FL. Mason reinforces the perception that Italians are synonymous with a love of eating and presents pasta as the main ingredient in Italian cuisine (i.e., not including other types of food). Furthermore, Mason only incorporates recipes from southern Italian regions, excluding all other regions with unique pasta dishes. Hermen (2007) similarly observes that stereotypes persist in textbooks used to teach Spanish as a FL, such as the centuries-old stereotype of a monocultural and monolingual Spain populated by indolent and fun-loving individuals.

### *1.3 German as a Foreign Language Textbooks*

In her research on German as a FL (GFL) textbooks, Maijala (2008) describes trends similar to those observed in textbooks designed to teach other FLs. The author asserts that in these textbooks, Germany is often reduced to punctuality, feasts, drunk Bavarians, and strict environmental awareness (Maijala, 2006). In an analysis of GFL textbooks in Finland and Sweden, the author describes the increasing prevalence of topics like globalization and migration in newly published series; however, multiculturalism remains rare (Maijala, 2008). That study highlights that attempts at political correctness, particularly in sections or chapters comparing the target culture and the native culture of students, can reinforce these homogeneous stereotypes.

In an earlier analysis of 38 textbooks used to teach GFL in various countries, including France, Estonia, the United Kingdom, Finland, and Norway, Maijala asserts that the history of the country in which the textbook is used strongly influences how cultural representations are perceived (Maijala, 2004). In another study (Maijala, 2009), the author examines gender-oriented stereotypes. The author asserts that textbooks frequently associate men in Germany with leading roles in prominent companies, whereas women in Germany are often subtly presented as inferior to men, simply obeying the wishes of men.

These stereotypes (and therefore the dominant essentialist discourses) may be reinforced not only through sections of FL textbooks specifically designed to present and discuss culture but also through other sections that may not appear to be culture-related. These sections include those related

to grammar and grammatical exercises. Such exercises frequently include stereotyped sentences such as “Mary likes cooking;” “John likes football;” “The French like...;” “German people are...;” and “Older people...”. These sentences are intended to teach a particular grammatical concept and are common in FL textbooks. Although they may initially appear to be neutral, such sentences may serve as channels through which ideology is perpetuated (Byram et al., 2002, p. 21).

Other than Maijala, few scholars have examined cultural representations in GFL textbooks. An extensive literature review reveals a gap in the literature that must be addressed. Therefore, this study centers on one research question:

What cultural representations of German people are presented in the GFL textbook *Schritte International, Volume 1*, a textbook that has been widely used in state schools in Malta (i.e., during the time of the data collection exercise) as a primary resource for teaching first-year students of GFL?

The studies in this literature review examine cultural representations both of countries and of their people, aiming for depth rather than breadth. However, as evident from the research question, this paper only examines cultural representations of German people.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a social semiotic multimodal approach to investigate this research question. The present study contributes to the literature because relevant studies have generally adopted a thematic approach (Creswell, 2013). Despite its validity, the thematic approach frequently limits the focus of interpretations to words and visuals. Moreover, to implement a comprehensive analysis, this study adopts the original social semiotic multimodal MIRROR framework outlined in Figure 1 below (Cremona, 2017).

Therefore, after the texts are monitored and initially interpreted, the third and fourth steps of the MIRROR framework involve a deeper level of textbook analysis.

The third level of the MIRROR framework involves a multimodal analysis of the selected texts. Multimodality can be defined as “the use of several *semiotic modes* in the design of a semiotic product or event, together



### Overview of MIRROR Framework

Monitoring of available texts and selecting texts for analysis:

- What sources are readily available?
- Which readily available texts are the most quoted (i.e., the most popular)?
- How are the texts similar?
- How do the texts differ?
- Do any of the available texts possess a particular or special feature that merits attention? Why?

Initial descriptive interpretation (per individual text):

- Which topic(s) are being presented and/or discussed?
- Who is the target reader of the text? For whom was the text originally designed?
- What genres are used to present the text? What implications are linked to these genres and how do they contribute to or affect the representations of German people in the text?
- What representations of German people are implied by the text after the first reading (i.e., the preferred reading)?

Representational multimodal semiotic interpretation (per individual text):

- Which sections of the text appear to be sequential (i.e., not as separate entities)?
- Identify all the modes used in the text, both embodied and disembodied.
- What representations of German people do the reader perceive through the embodied modes in the text?
- What representations of German people do the reader perceive through the disembodied modes in the text?

Represented social interpretation (per individual text):

- Does the text present any preferences or disfavor toward particular social features and practices associated with German people?
- Does the text present any preferences or disfavor toward particular discourses associated with German people?

Overview of the observed representations of German people:

presenting a detailed write-up of the representations of German people obtained per individual text. Individual trends are then compared with overall trends (where possible).

- Amalgamating parts of the text: which representations of German people are featured throughout the series?
- Are any contradicting representations of German people featured in the series?

Reorganizing the representations of German people derived from the MIRROR framework (i.e., those presented in the aforementioned steps) under the nine categories of the Maltese syllabus for GFL learning contexts.

Figure 1. Overview of MIRROR Framework

with the particular way in which these modes are combined” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 20).

Therefore, the aim of the third level of interpretation is to identify and highlight representations of Germany perceived through the manner in which *semiotic modes* are combined in the design of semiotic products (i.e., the *Schritte International 1* series) or events (i.e., the situations presented in *Schritte International 1*). This interpretation involves identifying the modes used in the text. Stein (2008) defines a *mode* as a culturally-shaped semiotic resource that possesses a specific potential for producing certain communicative effects and not others. The multimodal approach challenges the traditional distinction between verbal and nonverbal modes and avoids treating language as a superior mode. Instead, this interpretation adopts Norris’ (2004) distinction and examines both *embodied* and *disembodied* modes. In accordance with Norris’ definition, *embodied modes* encompass language and other modes such as gesture, gaze, or posture, which “can play a *superordinate* or an *equal* role to the mode of language in interaction, and, therefore, these modes are not merely embellishments to language” (Norris, 2004, p. x). Furthermore, *disembodied modes* “include... music, print, layout, color, clothes and any other mode deriving from the setting or material world where the interaction is happening. These too can take a superordinate role in interaction and at times even ‘overrule’ embodied modes” (Norris, 2004, p. x).

In the second step, the identified modes are interpreted in accordance with Kress’ (2010) socio-semiotic approach and Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) multimodal text analysis model, as proposed by Halliday (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 15). In the first stage, *ideational* (within image) features and their effects are identified. Then, *interpersonal* features are examined. This stage highlights the interaction between image and reader (i.e., the author of the present study). In the third stage, the textual and layout characteristics are interpreted, and the influence of layout on the reader or learner is examined. The amalgamation of these three steps leads to the identification of various representations of Germany and its people as perceived from each text.

The focus of the third level of interpretation of the MIRROR framework (Cremona, 2017) is to identify and interpret representations of Germany as perceived through *semiotic modes*, with social aspects remaining in the

background. The focus of the fourth level is shifted to *social features and practices* and the representations of Germany as seen in Table 1, with *semiotic modes* remaining in the background. This social level poses one primary question.

In the last two levels of the MIRROR framework, the obtained representations are organized, and their contradiction or concurrence with each other are evaluated. Therefore, the final interpretation is organized in a presentable and reader-friendly format.

**Table 1.** Checklist Applied During Social Interpretation of Representations Formed About Germany

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Does the text present any preferences or disfavor toward particular social features or practices associated with Germany?

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This question is answered with respect to the following social features and practices:

Social identity and social groups

- Social interaction
- Belief and behavior
- Social and political institutions
- Socialization and life cycle
- National history
- National geography

Adopted from Byram (1993, pp. 36-37)



This question is designed to highlight possible types of discourse, which may include the following:

- Class
  - Race
  - Gender
  - Media language, advertisements, and promotional culture
  - Institutional discourse: in institutional practices and communications
  - Education: an area for reproduction of social relations, representation, and identity formation (Blommaert, 2005, pp. 26-27)
-

## 2.1 Sample Selection

The *Schritte International 1* series (Hueber, 2007) comprises six volumes, and each volume comprises seven chapters. The first two books cover material at the A1 level (i.e., basic level for GFL beginners). Each chapter in the series has a fixed structure and addresses a specific topic.

### 2.1.1 Description of Chapter Structure

As presented in Figure 2, a photo story introduces the topic of each chapter. The photo stories, which create a sense of continuity between chapters, feature narrations of events from the lives of characters that students have encountered in earlier chapters. The main protagonists are Timo, a Finn, and his German and Austrian friends. Several other minor characters occasionally appear as part of the photo story.

1 Guten Tag. Mein Name ist ...

1 Sehen Sie die Fotos an. Was meinen Sie? Was passiert? Sprechen Sie in Ihrer Sprache.

2 Sehen Sie die Fotos an und hören Sie.

3 Wer ist das?

Anton, Koko, Timo

Das ist ... Das ist ... Das ist ...

acht 8 LEKTION 1

4 Wer sagt das? Ordnen Sie zu.

Guten Tag.  
Ich heiße Timo.  
Ich komme aus Finnland.  
Ich spreche Englisch und Englisch und ein bisschen Deutsch.  
Sprechen Sie Deutsch?

neun 9 LEKTION 1

Figure 2. Photo Story Layout

Note. From *Schritte International 1*, ISBN: 978-3-19-001851-2, Pages 8-9, © Hueber Verlag, Munich

Each photo story is then followed by learning steps A to C, which are related to the content of the photo story. These steps present grammar, writing, and reading exercises linked to the same topic. Steps D and E are designed to further develop listening, speaking, writing, and reading skills and offer opportunities for additional practice. Each chapter concludes with an overview of the essential grammatical structures and vocabulary.

The overview is followed by a concluding section called *Zwischenspiel*. This section (Figure 3) features a reading or listening text about Germany, Austria, or Switzerland. Activities are linked to the text to conclude each lesson in a playful and motivating manner.

### 2.1.2 General Description of Selected Texts: Rationale Behind Choices

One crucial but challenging question faced by text analysts is determining which sections of text should be examined (Zierer, 2007). The texts selected

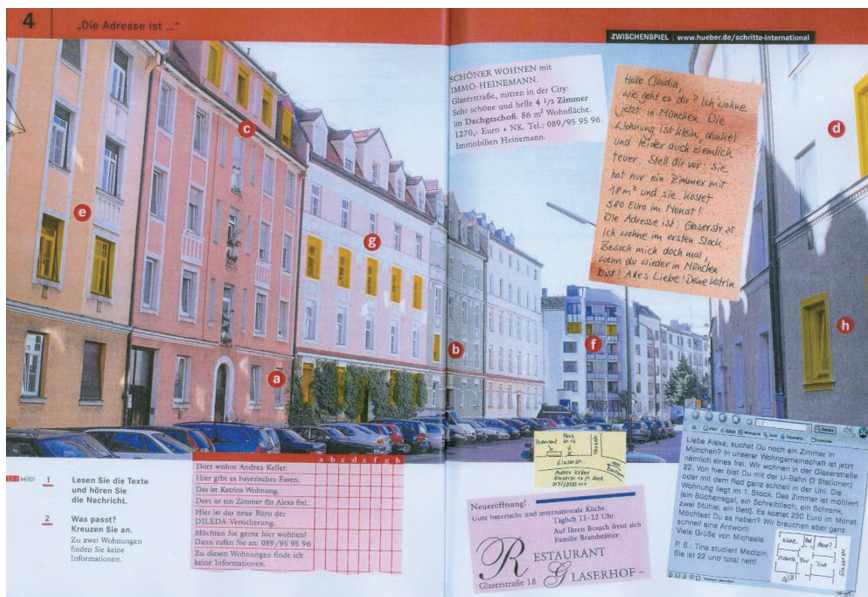


Figure 3. *Zwischenspiel* Layout 4

Note. From *Schritte International* 1, ISBN: 978-3-19-001851-2, Pages 46-47, © Hueber Verlag, Munich

for analysis from *Schritte International 1* in this study are the photo story beginning each chapter and the *Zwischenspiel* concluding each chapter.

These texts were selected because of several factors. Each photo story not only creates the environment of the chapter but also serves as the reference text for later exercises and material. Photos from a chapter's photo story are sometimes reproduced in exercises of the same chapter.

Furthermore, the primary reason for selecting the two particular texts was their relation to the multimodal orientation of text analysis, which emphasizes the understanding of the full environment within which the text is situated (Norris, 2004). Compared with the other dialogue and texts included in each chapter, the photo story and the *Zwischenspiele* in the *Schritte International 1* series are the only two texts presenting “fuller” and more complete details of depicted scenarios. By contrast, the other texts appear to limit the *frame* to *minimal excerpts* of a scenario, keeping the full content hidden from the reader.

Additionally, the photo stories and the *Zwischenspiele* are the only texts in the series presenting *syntagmatic* and detailed authentic photos. Thus, these photos “do not express [themselves] by using single...signs, but [use] groups of signs, organized in complexes which themselves are signs” (de Saussure, 1916/1974). By contrast, the other images included in the textbook series are often one-off photos lacking detail, which present a limited and non-*contextualized* situation. The series also includes several cartoons. According to van Leeuwen (1992), cartoons replace the reality of naturalism and individualism. Thus, cartoons and photos lacking detail are not beneficial in the scope of this multimodal investigation.

With respect to naturalism and authenticity, these texts feature several professional actors following pre-written scripts, offering the reader visuals based on prepared performances. This study contends that such texts still present authentic representations of Germany because “authenticity can either be taken from the target language use situation or [from situations having] the characteristics of target language use” (Buck, 2001, p. 85). Therefore, these “replicas” of real situations in German societies still present accurate—albeit acted—representations of various authentic situations (Moreno & Pérez, 2009) and thus suit the aims of this study.

Following is a social semiotic multimodal analysis of the representations

of German people as derived from the photo stories and the *Zwischenspiele* of *Schritte International 1*. The multimodal terms used in the Results section are presented in italics. Fuller explanations of these multimodal terms are provided in the *Glossary of Multimodal Terms* at [www.mode.ioe.uk](http://www.mode.ioe.uk).

## 2.2 Outcomes at Third Level of MIRROR Framework

Each photo story episode (i.e., seven in each volume) comprises a *modal ensemble*. Photo stories are accompanied by dialogues on audio CDs, and their design presents speech as the mode with the *highest intensity*. The other modes serve to *ratify* speech and extend its message. The *modal ensemble* in each episode includes *embodied* modes, such as gaze, gestures, proxemics, and body posture. Several *disembodied* modes are also featured, such as print, layout, colors, and music. Through the *modal ensemble* and *arrangement* of each photo story, the eight pictures presented per photo story *frame* and *fix* a moment in time that is complemented by accompanying speech. This combination produces *orchestrated* representations of the German people and, by extension, Germany. The same principle applies to the *Zwischenspiele* that conclude each chapter in *Schritte International 1*. However, audio is not part of the text in certain *Zwischenspiele*. The *high-intensity mode* role is assumed by print rather than speech.

This paper only presents the multimodal interpretation and the social reasoning (in accordance with the levels) leading to this representation of German people. However, this study implemented an initial descriptive interpretation (i.e., level 2 of the MIRROR framework). Because of word count limitations, the details of this interpretation are not included in the paper but served as background data that informed the outcomes presented in the Results section.

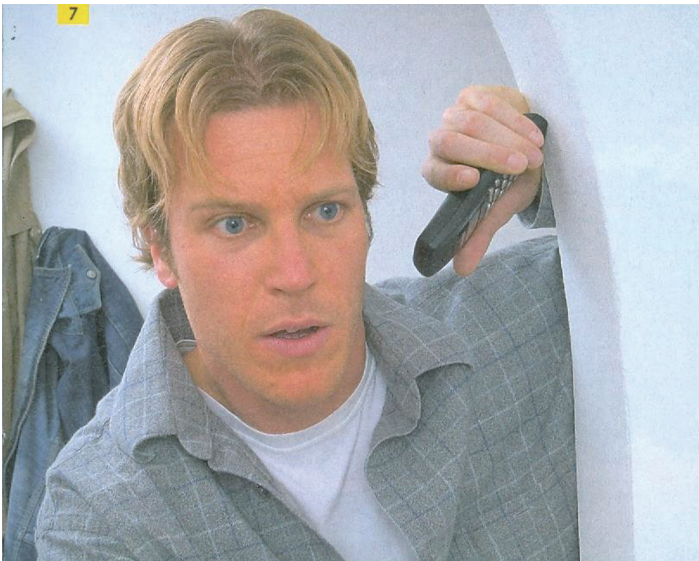
Furthermore, as in all multimodal research, this study provides one possible interpretation. The validity of this interpretation—and thus the validity of the whole multimodal exercise presented in this paper—can only be strengthened through the consideration of alternative interpretations (Lim et al., 2022). Alternative interpretations, which may provide different representations of German people as portrayed in *Schritte International 1*, are encouraged to ensure full methodological validity.

### 3. Results

This section presents a *detailed multimodal semiotic interpretation* (i.e., derived from the third step of the MIRROR framework) of the representations of German people as presented in the *Schritte International 1* textbook.

#### 3.1 Appearance of German People

German people are portrayed in the textbook as blond-haired and blue-eyed. These characteristics are evident in the *close shots* of Anton (photo story 1, picture 7; Figure 4) and Anja (photo story 5, Figure 5 and photo story 6) make. The *mode* of color highlights the distinction between the darker hair and complexion of Finnish Timo and Austrian Corinna and the blond hair of German people. This idea is reinforced through other secondary characters featured in *Schritte International 1*, including the Bavarian vegetable vendor (photo story 3; Figure 7) and Eva Maria Berthold (Zwischenspiel 2).



**Figure 4.** Representation of “Blond-Haired, Blue-Eyed” German Characteristics  
*Note.* *Schritte International 1*, ISBN: 978-3-19-001851-2, Page 9, © Hueber Verlag, Munich





Figure 5. Representation of German People as Sociable (Photo Story 5)

Note. *Schritte International 1*, ISBN: 978-3-19-001851-2, Pages 48-49, © Hueber Verlag, Munich

German people are also portrayed as tall and slim. These features are reinforced through *posture* (including an upper tilt of the head, as in *Zwischenspiel 1*), *proxemics*, and *high-angle photos* (photo story 1, picture 1; Figure 2) German people appear taller than other non-German *participants* (including inanimate objects) in the same image.

### 3.2 Character of German People

German people are presented as sociable. Anton and Anja are never featured alone in photos. They appear *connected* to other protagonists featured in the same pictures. This presentation gives the impression that German people create a sense of community (*Zwischenspiel 4*; Figure 3 and photo story 5; Figure 5) and are welcoming to both German people and non-German people (photo stories 1, 2, 3, and 6).

German people maintain a certain *distance* from visitors or guests who are welcomed into “their (German) private territory.” A clear difference is observed between Anton’s behavior in the first photo story (i.e., Timo’s arrival in Germany) and his behavior in subsequent photo stories. In accordance with Hall’s (1963) *proxemic* terms, Anton maintains a *social distance* from his Finnish guest in photo story 1 and uses *gestures* to communicate with him. The only shared communication is Anton’s *deictic gesture* indicating where Timo will live (Figure 2). Although *semiotic reach* is present between both cultures and the *reach of modes* varies by culture, Timo can still understand this gesture used in Germany.

Furthermore, the *subordinate use of speech* indicates that the *high-level action* for Anton throughout photo story 1 is not his communication with Timo. Instead, Anton’s *main focus* is to answer a telephone call from a friend. When Anton answers this phone call, he keeps a socially acceptable distance as a joint occupant of *public space* (Hall, 1963) with his guest. Norris (2002) describes this *focus shift* as “*anwesenheit*,” wherein Anton requests that Timo respect his privacy. The cordless phone in Anton’s hands (Figure 4) suggests that he could have easily answered the phone call in the same *space* and *layout* in which he left Timo.

This representation of German people as maintaining a distance from newcomers can be observed by comparing the three people visible in *Zwischenspiel 1*. Both Swiss Frau Magdalena Bärtschi and Austrian Alexandra Pörtl have a *demand gaze* and make direct eye contact with the reader. By contrast, the German character (i.e., Herr Hans Joachim Meier) is the only individual in the image with an *offer gaze*. This representation creates a distance between him and the individuals he is meeting for the first time (i.e., the learners of German).

German people readily but gradually warm up to guests and visitors. This change is evident in photo story 2, in which Timo becomes Anton’s *main focus*. According to Goffman (1981), Anton is *with* Timo. Anton talks with Timo about Corrina, his Austrian girlfriend, and serves Timo breakfast. This interaction contrasts starkly with Anton’s *anwesenheit* observed in photo story 1. However, when Timo later moves freely around the house to retrieve his photo album (photo story 2, picture 3; Figure 6), Anton’s *gaze* and *posture* (similar to those observed in photo story 1; Figure 2) suggest that he still feels



**Figure 6.** Anton’s Gaze and Posture When Timo Roams Freely Around His House  
*Note.* Schritte International 1, ISBN: 978-3-19-001851-2, Page 19 © Hueber Verlag, Munich

uncomfortable with Timo’s actions. Similarly, Anton appears to be the one who decides the sequential order of speech, which suggests that he would like to maintain the “ownership” of his house.

The use of *color* as a mode could also imply Anton’s openness to Timo. In photo story 1 (Figure 2), Anton’s flat appears almost in *monochrome*. Pale white dominates the surroundings. *Light unsaturated color affordances* help the reader to sense the distance and coldness between Timo and Anton. This color scheme contrasts strongly with that in photo story 2 (even if the host is still not completely open to his guest), in which more *saturated bright colors*, such as yellow, green, and orange, are seen in the flat.

The use of *proxemics* also suggests that Anton and Timo grow closer as time passes. When comparing the initial photo story episodes with later episodes, the learner observes a clear shift in proxemics from the initial *far public space* distance to a later shared *intimate distance*.

Moreover, German people appear to be less distant when meeting guests in “safe” social spaces (i.e., not at their home). Therefore, the *layout*

in which encounters occur tends to affect the behavior of German people. Anja's behavior when first meeting Timo at a picnic in an open public garden (photo story 5; Figure 5) differs greatly from that of Anton when Timo visits his home.

### 3.3 German Sense of Humor

German people are depicted as having a good sense of humor through various modes in photo stories. For example, this sense of humor is evident through Anja's *gestures*. Anja does not mind that her clothes are stained with "Kartoffelsalat" (i.e., traditional potato salad; photo story 5; Figure 5) or that she is soaked by rain (photo story 6). Through Anja's *speech* and *body posture*, including her frequent smiles and giggles, learners observe that Anja can joke about these mishaps and views them through a positive perspective.

The mode of *music* and its *materiality* also reinforce the presentation of German people as happy and "lustig" (i.e., jolly and merry). This jovial representation of German people is evident in the background music they play and dance to (i.e., *disembodied music mode*; photo story 5; Figure 5). *Gestures* such as clapping and dancing indicate the amusement and happiness of German people, especially when relaxing.

### 3.4 German Service Providers

German service providers are presented as helpful and welcoming to their customers. Various *participants* featured in photo stories reinforce this representation. Photo stories 3 and 6 feature sellers of vegetables and clothes. Similarly, *Zwischenspiel 3* (Figure 7) features a chef offering his clients a variety of dishes. All these *participants* share commonalities. Their *posture* is directed toward the client. Their *body language* is welcoming, with their torso position, hand gestures, and head all tilting toward and visibly open to the client.

Although these texts share similarities, learners may attribute more *modality* (i.e., truth-value and credibility) to the image in *Zwischenspiel 3* (see Figure 7) than to the images of any photo story. Each photo story

involves *transactional actions*, with the vendor maintaining direct eye contact with a client, (i.e., Timo) who is visible in the picture. In the photo story, the vendor maintains an *offer gaze* (i.e., no direct eye contact) with learners. However, the Zwischenspiel image involves a *non-transactional action* that transforms learners into the chef’s clients. The *gaze* of the chef in the Zwischenspiel image *demands* the learner’s *attention* through direct eye contact. Thus, the representation perceived through this Zwischenspiel image may be more credible than that perceived through photo stories, although both are congruent representations of Germany and its people.

This representation of friendly German vendors is also evident through *speech*. The type of language used by vendors supports their friendliness and openness. They use the German language in a musical manner to effectively attract customers. A fish vendor in Zwischenspiel 5 attracts potential customers by using a German tongue twister (Fischers Fritz fischt frische Fische, frische Fische fischt Fischers Fritz). Similarly, the vegetable vendor

**3** Brotzeit, Vesper, Jause ... Wir machen (kleine) Pause.  
Wir machen Kartoffelsalat.

ZWISCHENSPIEL [www.hueber.de/schritte-international](http://www.hueber.de/schritte-international)

**Kartoffelsalat mit Gurke**

Sie brauchen:  
 3 Pfunde Saiskartoffeln  
 1 Salatgurke  
 2 Zwiebeln  
 4 EL Pflanzenöl  
 4 EL Apfelessig  
 etwa 1 l Wasser  
 1 EL Senf, Salz, Pfeffer

Die Kartoffeln weich kochen, kalt werden lassen, schälen und in Scheiben schneiden. Die Gurke in feine Scheiben schneiden. Die Zwiebeln in sehr feine Würfel schneiden. Kartoffeln, Gurke und Zwiebeln zusammen mit den anderen Zutaten in einer Schüssel sehr gut mischen. Das Salat eine Stunde stehen lassen. Dann noch einmal mischen und servieren. Guten Appetit!

Sie möchten Kartoffelsalat machen. Was brauchen Sie? Hören Sie und ergänzen Sie die Liste.

A _____ Pfund	A _____ Thunfisch
A _____	A _____ Apfelsauce
A _____	A _____ Jello
A _____	A _____ Saft

So heißt das...		...in der Schweiz	
in Norddeutschland	in Süddeutschland	in Österreich	in der Schweiz
Wiener Würstchen	Wienerli, Wiener	Frankfurter	Wienerli
Tomate	Tomate	Paradeiser, Tomate	Tomate
Kartoffel, Trüffel, Erdapfel	Kartoffel, Erdapfel, Krumbübel	Zetapfel, Ganscheer	Kartoffel, Herdöpfel, Quansli, Grumpose
Präzelle, Bolente	Pfandspüche, Pfandspüesche	Fachbieren Laibchen, Fachbieren Label	Hackbraten, Hackbrändel
Brötchen, Bunsenbrück, Schrippe	Semmel, Wecken, Laib, Barmse	Semmel, Wickel	Semmel, Weggel
Kaniwki, Nipschen	Nippel, Nippel	Schikaree, Schiltspeel	gaischeren Käppel

Figure 7. Zwischenspiel 3: Representation of “Friendly Chef”

Note. Schritte International 1, ISBN: 978-3-19-001851-2, Pages 36-37, © Hueber Verlag, Munich

in photo story 3 calls Timo “Junger Mann” (i.e., young man), a friendly address that still maintains distance between her and her client.

### 3.5 Daily Routine of German People

German people are portrayed as hard workers. The *modal ensemble* of *speech, gaze, and layout* of the working environments in photo story 4 and Zwischenspiel 6 all indicate that German people (from manual workers to professionals) work with great precision and attention to detail, allowing nothing to hinder their concentration.

According to the textbook, German people have a busy work week and look forward to the weekend. However, instead of having a relaxed weekend, many German people experience “freizeitsstress” (i.e., free-time stress) caused by their busy weekend schedule. The busyness of Monica and Michael Müller is represented through *print* and *image* (in Figure 8). During the

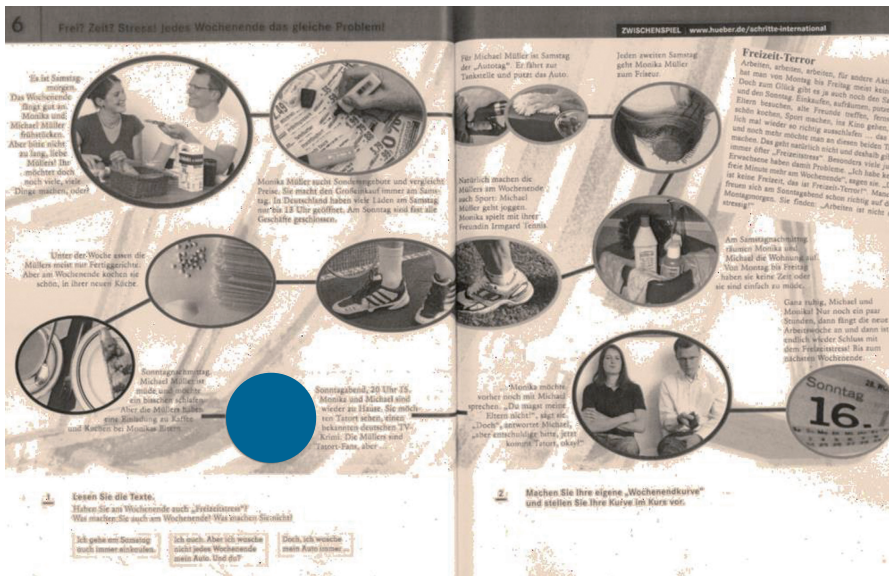


Figure 8. Zwischenspiel 6: Representations of Hectic German Weekend  
Note. Schritte International 1, ISBN: 978-3-19-001851-2, Pages 66-67, © Hueber Verlag, Munich

weekend, the couple must complete the weekly Saturday “Einkauf” (i.e., food shopping), thoroughly clean the flat, cook, and participate in their favorite sports. Furthermore, the *double-spread layout* reinforces the representation of a typically stressful weekend because the manner in which activities are *presented* makes them appear *connected* on the *site of appearance* (i.e., the page). This connection is physically represented by a red line linking the pictures together. The red line is only cut off in depictions of a Sunday evening when the couple relaxes in front of the TV for a short period.

In the context of the title “Freizeit Terror” (i.e., free-time terror), red (often associated with strength and force) and its *affordances* creates a sense of uninterrupted activity and lack of rest. The picture *arrangement* flows against the *conventional Western reading directionality*, forcing the reader to read from right to left. Reading in this unconventional direction further conveys a sense of uneasiness and stress frequently experienced by German people on the weekend.

### 3.6 German People and Migrants

Through the mode of *speech* and through other *lower-level actions*, including comfortable *postures* and relaxed *gestures*, the photo story series represents Germany as a country full of opportunities for European Union (EU) migrants who either visit for study purposes (i.e., Timo) or immigration (i.e., Corinna). The *salient* roles of these two protagonists (i.e., Austrian Corinna and Finnish Timo) support this representation of Germany.

German people and European migrants are shown to easily intermingle and coexist with each other. Throughout his experience in Germany, Timo puts his all into interacting with German people despite their initial skepticism toward him. A second linked representation paints a more specific picture of an effortless harmony between people from Austria (i.e., Corinna) and Germany (i.e., Anton).

More generally, an analysis of the *proxemics* of the four major characters in the photo story series hints that close relationships (i.e., deeper than friendly relationships) are common between German people and other European citizens visiting or residing in Germany. Throughout the photo

story series (starting as early as photo story 2), Austrian Corinna and German Anton share either *close personal space* or *intimate space*.

Similar proxemics are observed between German Anja and Finnish Timo. Anja's friendly *gestures*, including amused laughter and the direct *gaze* she maintains with Timo from their first encounter, develop into even closer contact. Timo briefly shares Anja's *intimate space* after their first encounter and shields her from the rain, which threatened to ruin their plans to go jogging (photo story 6).

European migrants who travel to Germany are portrayed as having little difficulty learning German as a FL. This representation is perceived both *spatially* and *temporally* through an analysis of the storyline and the dialogues of the photo story series. Timo manages to communicate well in German as soon as he arrives in Germany.

#### 4. Projective Conclusion

Therefore, as the primary conclusion and response to the main research question, this paper presents the findings of this semiotic multimodal interpretation. As evident from the details in the analysis, the representations derived from this interpretation can be separated into two broad categories:

1. universal representations of Germany and its people (i.e., the appearance, character, sense of humor, and daily routine of German people)
2. less universal representations of Germany and its people (i.e., representations related to German people and European migrants, friendships created between German people and other EU citizens, and the popularity of the German language)

However, this conclusion suggests that two additional follow-up studies are required. One of these studies, which is already complete, reveals that the representations of Germany derived from a social semiotic interpretation of *Schritte International* consist primarily of essentialist representations based on the dominant discourse.<sup>1</sup> Such discourse tends to

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<sup>1</sup> Because of word limit constraints, we refer the reader to Cremona and Arnaouti (2019) for an extensive discussion (i.e., the outcomes of Steps 4, 5, and 6) of the MIRROR framework. This



be characterized by the following traits (based on an adaptation of Saniei, 2012):

1. reductionist: has been selected from all the information available and typically omits information about variation and exceptions;
2. limited: refers to general norms rather than to specific instances;
3. articulated: reduced to what words can express;
4. external: given to the student by someone else;
5. static: not modified from experience.

In addition, this study recommends a complimentary discussion that prioritizes the role of students and their FL teacher using these textbooks as FL pedagogical tools.

Students using a textbook and their teacher are generally regarded as “a crossroad where things happen....the crossroad is purely passive: something happens there” (Lévi-Strauss, 1978, p. 4). Individuals using a textbook are merely viewed as the receiving end, with their fate determined by the contents of the textbook and its dominant essentialist representations of culture. Individuals are often regarded as a collective entity because behavior, norms, and values are defined by the contents of textbooks. This portrayal reinforces the idea that a particular culture can be easily described and its cultural behaviors can be predicted. Depicting individuals as passive consumers, whose behavior is exclusively determined by the textbook used in class, is a common practice. This perspective reduces humans to mere objects, neglecting their unique essence (Holliday, 2011).

Therefore, as a second conclusion, this paper echoes that of Weninger and Kiss (2013) and recognizes that when presented with the aforementioned representations of German people, students and their teachers may assume an active role when using the textbook and when receiving the presented content. Another pertinent question that is raised by these is whether GFL students and their FL teachers are capable of reflection or simply assume passive roles when presented with the essentialist discourses (and therefore ideologies) of German people in the *Schritte International 1* textbook.

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paper offers a detailed presentation of the social semiotic multimodal interpretation of the cultural representations of German people in *Schritte International 1* derived from Step 3 (i.e., the representational multimodal semiotic interpretation) of the MIRROR framework (Cremona, 2017).

This paper provides a projective conclusion because a comprehensive analysis of the benefits and disadvantages of the findings of this social semiotic multimodal interpretation is not optional. It is required.

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