

Stefania Consonni  
*University of Bergamo, Italy*

## PLAY!

### Fun, facts, and the construction of engagement in the LEGOLAND theme parks website

#### Abstract

As digital communication has been challenging traditional monomodality, and as tourist offer has been increasing over the last decades, the language of tourist promotion in the Web has progressively been evolving into a multilayered and multiliteracy model, bridging verbal and visual language in a new semiotic integration code, which includes impactful, highly persuasive mass and multimedia products, such as tourist promotion websites. As a consequence, LSP students are nowadays confronted with increasingly complex semiotic artefacts. The pedagogical significance of multimodal analysis to the work/practice of learners/teachers of LSP, tourism discourse and Web communication thus comes into focus. This paper addresses the mixed-media strategies constructing the LEGOLAND theme park website as a recreational destination on the Web as a significant case study for multiliteracy communication. Drawing from the metafunctions (i.e., ideational, interactional, textual) of Systemic Functional Grammar, from socio-semiotic multiliteracy analysis, and from multimodal genre analysis of tourism and communication discourse, the paper will investigate the textual/visual strategies through which audience engagement is created in the LEGOLAND website. In particular, at the ideational level, the paper will analyse the key role played by the representation of informative meanings in the website's promotional purposes; at the interactional level, the metadiscursive strategies maximizing audience involvement will be investigated; and at the textual level, the thematic structure and Information Unit patterning of the LEGOLAND website will be explored, in order to examine the specialized meaning-making resources which should be made accessible to tourism and communication discourse learners.

**Keywords:** theme parks; multiliteracy; multimodal/semiotic analysis; SFG metafunctions; word-image interactions; Web 2.0; engagement strategies

## 1. Introduction: I-do vs. I-see entertainment

This paper addresses the multimodal strategies constructing the LEGOLAND theme park chain as a recreational attraction on the Web (Cohen, 1984), by designing its audience as a transgenerational community of building brick lovers and potential tourists,<sup>1</sup> as well as the educational significance of such visual/textual strategies in the context of LSP studies. As digitisation has been increasingly challenging monomodality in many cultural practices, a semiotic revolution – first introduced by Avantgarde experiments in word-image interaction, and, later on, accomplished by multimedia products and events such as cinema, videoclips, videogames, etc. – has eventually led to Web 2.0 communication as an integration code among different semiotic modes (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). By bridging verbal and visual language, along with spatial and temporal paradigms, digital communication has given birth to a multilayered and multiliteracy discourse model, especially in the tourism domain (Francesconi, 2014, 2017). As LSP students are nowadays faced with more and more complex artefacts, bridging and confronting different sign systems, the pedagogical significance of multimodal analysis, with respect to both LSP theory and practice, increasingly comes into focus. This paper aims to offer insights into such perspective by means of a significant case study for multiliteracy communication, i.e., the LEGOLAND theme park website. As the showcase of a manifold semiotic experience, the LEGOLAND website provides both visual and textual interpretation patterns,<sup>2</sup> stimulating in particular the following research questions:

(a) To what extent and with what persuasive/promotional effects do the website's different semiotic features interact to generate a multimodal profile of LEGOLAND's target consumer?

(b) What pedagogical implications do such dynamics have with respect to the study of Web 2.0 tourism discourse as global communication practice for LSP learners?

Since tourist offer has dramatically increased over the last decades, linguistic/semiotic analysis has been focussing on potential clients' decision-making processes (Cho & Fesenmaier, 2001; Hudson, Snaith, Miller, & Hudson, 2001), and on the changes in genre triggered by Web 2.0 resources, which have proved a crucial tool for clients who may use the Internet to gather

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1 Founded in Billund (Denmark) in 1932 by carpenter Ole Kirk Christiansen, LEGO has become over the decades the world's top brand in toy and family entertainment products. From the first wooden version to the 1949 prototypical "automatic binding brick", to the 1963 ultimate impact-, heat- and ultraviolet-resistant ABS plastic brick, different generations of consumers have indeed identified LEGO with more than a commercial brand. The brightly coloured plastic LEGO brick has become the symbol of the world's largest toy company by revenue: with over \$2 billion sales in 2015, LEGO has eventually beaten former market leaders such as US Barbie and Hot Wheels producer, Mattel. It is estimated that 20 billion bricks are produced every year, which makes an average production rate of over 2 million pieces an hour. Books and magazines, short and feature films, music videos, videogames, design and animation softwares, amusement parks, and an increasing number of art works are produced each year as both LEGO merchandise and the result of the brand's influence on popular culture and lifestyle, in what may be considered as a process of corporate cannibalisation of contemporary culture. In January 2017 a new social network was launched, LEGO Life, providing an Instagram-inspired, parent-invigilated digital environment where children can exchange LEGO-related pictures and experiences.

2 Run by the British Merlin Entertainment group, and marketed to families with children aged 2-12, LEGOLAND parks offer attractions of different sorts, including themed areas such as LEGO Miniland, where models of international tourist landmarks, made from millions of bricks, are displayed. Other facilities include water parks, aquariums, restaurants, shops, 4D theatres, videogame and laboratory spaces, and family hotels.

information on products unavailable for scrutiny before the actual experience occurs (Maci, 2013; O' Connor, Buhalis, & Frew, 2001; Osti & Pechlaner, 2001). Tourism discourse has for this reason elicited a number of cross-disciplinary studies that examine multiple aspects of its significance. Although it is beyond the scope of this work to account for critical literature on tourism discourse, this paper draws from studies investigating its convergence with marketing (Giordana, 2004), advertising (Cogno & Dall'Ara, 1994), anthropology (Leed, 1991), socio-cultural processes (Van den Abbeele & Fodde, 2012), the cultural industry (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010), and multimodality (Francesconi, 2014, 2017; Maci, 2010, 2013).

However, the specificity of family amusement parks seems to deserve further investigation, especially when LEGOLAND's marketed originality comes into focus. LEGOLAND's recreational philosophy challenges the stereotypical unreality of destinations such as Disneyland, which are openly marketed to a different kind of family tourism, pivoting on young children and possibly infantilised grown-ups. While the inspiring principle of traditional parks seems to be 'imagination roaming free' – which makes them a world of pure wonder, cartoon characters and fanciful settings – LEGOLAND resorts are presented as an intellectually stimulating destination, where the key tourist experiences are education-related pleasures such as the popularisation of scientific and technological knowledge and the importance of fun-based learning interactivity.<sup>3</sup> LEGOLAND's key promotional strategy lies in the construction of a self-conscious, receptive audience, extending across different age cohorts and ready to respond in a creative, personal way to the stimuli provided by the park's structure and attractions. The purely visual experience of traditional entertainment seems to be integrated by LEGOLAND with intellectual engagement, as if mixing Bruno Munari's pedagogy of creativity ("If I see, I learn. If I do, I understand", 1992, p. 36) with a pinch of thought-provoking, MIT-inspired innovation discourse.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Materials and Method

As all LEGOLAND parks bear resemblance to one another,<sup>5</sup> regardless of local infrastructure and culture, they present themselves as tourist "non-places" (Augé, 1992), that is, places which are not endowed with either anthropological or historical meaning, offering transnational/transcultural/transgenerational fun in the form of creative entertainment. The main showcase for such issues is therefore not to be identified with a particular physical location, but with a digital one: the LEGOLAND website is in fact a complex multimodal device, where texts and visuals work as parallel and yet intertwined semiotic systems, carrying two different and complementary sets of meanings. Perusing the website's general structure and appearance

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3 For instance, visitors are encouraged to build dams in water flow channels using bricks, and thus to learn about turbulent fluid flows; they are invited to play LEGO-themed interactive musical instruments, such as musical fountains or a hydraulophone, and are thus exposed to rudimentary laws of physics.

4 MIT is in fact behind LEGO Mindstorms Robotics Invention System, which integrates traditional Technics building brick sets with modular sensors and motors and a software, which allows users to create computerized robots.

5 Since the first park opened in Billund (Denmark) in 1968, six other resorts have been created in Europe (Windsor, UK, 1996; Günzburg, Germany, 2002), the United States (California, 1999; Florida, 2011), the Middle East (Dubai, 2016) and Asia (Malaysia, 2012). More destinations are currently under construction – China, India, Japan and South Korea, scheduled to open 2017-2022 – adding up to LEGO's leading global chain of amusement structures.

– where a brightly coloured general homepage<sup>6</sup> works as a gateway to seven twin websites, each devoted to one of the parks – it is immediately noticeable that conspicuous verbal text is only to be found in third-level webpages (only reachable via sub-menu links). Here, parents can find practical information on ticket prices, discount and other policies, available facilities, opening hours, FAQs, and other know-before-you-go details. While such texts are addressed to an adult audience, visuals produce a wider transgenerational appeal. The upbeat colours, captivating pictures and LEGO-themed graphics stimulate the pleasure of not only the main audience segment, but that of parents, too, who may enjoy the website as they perform their parental mediatory function. The instantaneous apprehension of wonder typical of childhood, along with a reiterated invitation to visit the parks and have fun, seems to be the communicative and promotional purpose of the website’s engaging visuals throughout first- and second-level pages.

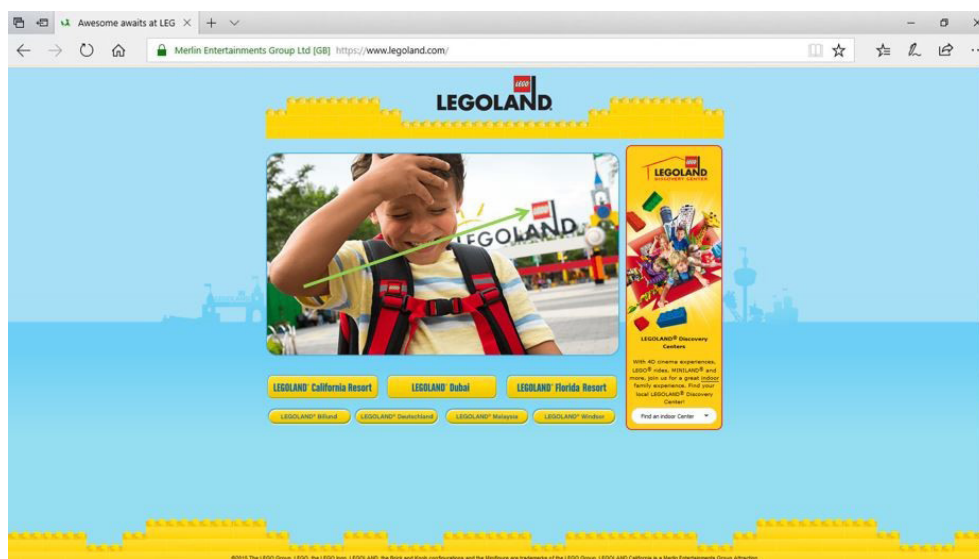


Figure 1: The LEGOLAND website homepage, <http://www.legoland-com> (accessed 01/02/2017)

This may be further evidenced by a closer inspection of the general LEGOLAND homepage, which is almost entirely taken up by the picture of a young boy (aged 8-10), whose gesture of surprise and amusement – he touches his forehead and smiles to himself, eyes shut, as if he could not believe his senses – creates an oblique visual vector pointing to the brand name of the park, depicted (albeit with maximum salience) in the background (Figure 1). A double literacy process takes place in the LEGOLAND website, as two semiotic modes are simultaneously activated in an engagement-oriented meaning-making process that encodes a complex, multifaceted, global tourist audience. Far from being apart, as the infantilised rhetorics of traditional recreation would have it, fun and facts, entertainment and information, creativity and directions contribute to a semiotic interplay in which the verbal and the visual modes are assigned a defined and equal role to play.

On the basis of such observations, this study aims to investigate the multimodal construction of play, fun, and creativity – an aspect advertised as LEGO’s 2.0, cutting-edge, art-as-communication aesthetics – as a key promotional strategy in a particular section of the LEGOLAND website, i.e., the California Resort homepage.<sup>7</sup> This provides an interesting

6 The general LEGOLAND website is available at <https://www.legoland.com/>

7 The LEGOLAND California Resort Homepage is available at <https://www.legoland.com/california/>

case study as concerns the development of innovative, highly impactful, mixed-media visual/verbal languages, thereby offering useful materials to students/teachers of both specialised tourism discourse and Web communication.<sup>8</sup> It is from within the epistemological framework suggested by building-brick language, which highlights the relationship between LEGO's visual entertainment and the functional laws founding its systemic dimension, that the following analysis will be conducted. Stemming from multimodal research on tourism discourse (Francesconi, 2014, 2017; Hiippala, 2007; Kvåle, 2010; Maci, 2010, 2013), which focuses on lexical-grammatical strategies as intertwined with the accompanying images, the theoretical background against which the analysis will be conducted is intended as a conflation of Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday, 2002, 2004) and a socio-semiotically oriented reading of visual grammar (Bowchen, 2012; Elleström, 2010; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996/2004, 2001; Mitchell, 1980).

Against such methodological background, it may not seem unmotivated to notice that the LEGO construction system can, in itself, be taken as a fully accomplished linguistic system. Any brick in the LEGO system is interlockable with any other element, both synchronically and diachronically. Besides providing an example of transgenerational entertainment – i.e., parents and children kneeling down to play together, with ascending levels of intellectual reward –, this aspect suggests LEGO as a language where elements can be mixed-and-matched following construction rules. Which might explain, on the one hand, why LEGO has symbolically evolved into a way of seeing, assembling, and constructing the world, and, on the other hand, LEGOLAND's success, since a total of 5.66 million people visited the Billund, Windsor, California and Deutschland resorts in 2004.<sup>9</sup> Construction toys, as a matter of fact, can be a simplified metaphor of the representative process, that is, of how meaning-making processes are enacted. Each combination may be read as a constellation of form (signifier) and meaning (signified), in which the meanings that the sign-maker conveys are articulated in apt, plausible, motivated configurations – in any medium that is at hand (be it painting, sculpture, architecture, music, or building bricks). There is a clear epistemological stance in playing with building bricks. A full bucket may well be the langue through which the player construes his/her parole, that is, a personal representation of the world, “an individual utterance that is a particular realization of the potential of langue” (O' Sullivan et al., 1983, p. 127). The LEGO system may be said to have a functional grammar of its own: a single brick configuration may be compared to an act of speech, that is, “a simultaneous selection from among a large number of interrelated options”, involving the “creative and[or] repetitive exercise of options in social and personal situations and settings” (Halliday, 2002, p. 174). A full bucket may represent instead the meaning potential of language, “the system of available options [that] is the grammar of language”, which is actualized “in the context of speech situations” (Halliday, 2004, p. 29). Building bricks may turn players of any age into sign-makers acting through the semiotic mode most plausibly suiting their representative ambition in a given context. (Which is why to play with construction toys is to entertain oneself with some kind of epistemological bric(k)olage.)

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8 It should however be kept in mind that such strategy is accompanied by a whole set of instructions and regulations, addressing an adult-only audience, to be found in less visible, third-level webpages.

9 Attendance statistics retrieved from <http://cache.lego.com/upload/contentTemplating/LEGOAboutUs-PressReleases/otherfiles/download81656C799226F7BB7E042D0E589A526E.pdf> on 01/02/2017.

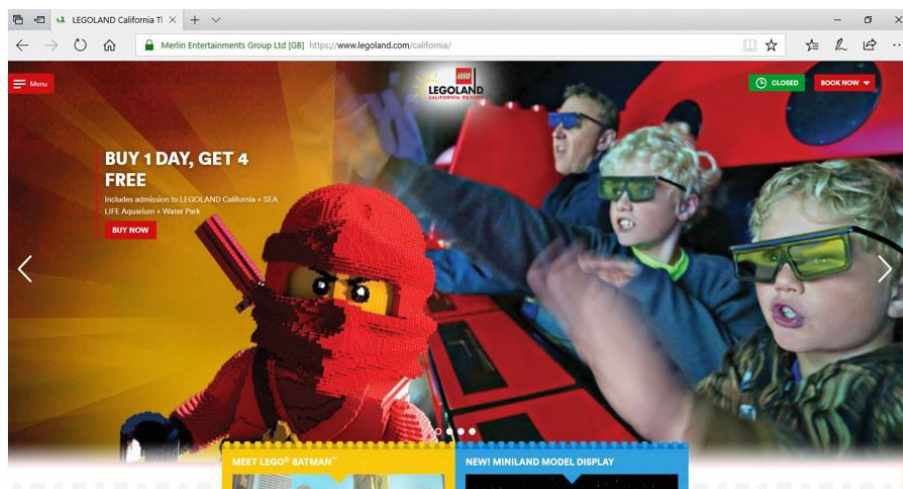


Figure 2: The LEGOLAND California homepage, <https://www.legoland.com/california/> (accessed 01/02/2017)

As mentioned above, although the LEGOLAND general homepage leads to seven twin websites, each devoted to one of the parks, for the purpose of the present analysis the California website has been taken in consideration, as it provides the most extensive contents, in terms of both visuals and written texts. The California homepage can be seen in Figure 2: it displays a mix of real and imaginary represented participants, engaged in an interactive play context. Adopting the theoretical framework of M.A.K. Halliday's metafunctions (2002, 2004), and following multimodal/intermedial modelizations (Bowchen 2012; Elleström 2010; Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996/2004, 2001; Mitchell 1980), a multimodal analysis of this digital artefact will be carried out on three different and intertwined levels:

(a) The ideational level, dealing with how a visual (and partially textual) construct can represent the 'real' world, that is, the one which stands outside of sign systems, thus structuring a model of human experience (Halliday, 2004). The analysis will take into consideration three different Narrative processes (Transactional vs. Reactional vs. Mental), along with three different Representative processes (Classificational vs. Analytical vs. Symbolic), which would allow the viewer to perceive the page's impact in terms of representative contents.

(b) The interpersonal level, accounting for any social relation of contact and/or engagement between the homepage's participants (not only the represented ones, but the producer and viewer as well). The specific term 'interactional' (Hyland, 2005) will be employed to describe the processes performed by language in terms of social relationships (Halliday, 2004, p. 29). The homepage's patterning along different markers will be analysed to account for its interactional significance: Contact (Demand vs. Offer), Size of frame (Close-up vs. Medium- and Long-shot), Perspective (Frontal vs. Oblique horizontal angle, Low vs. Eye-level vertical angle), and Modality (Colour saturation, differentiation, modulation; Contextualization and Representation; Illumination and Brightness).

(c) The textual level, describing the compositional arrangements which structure meaning-making processes in the homepage, i.e., the “enabling and facilitating function” whose purpose is to “build up sequences of discourse organizing the discursive flow and creating cohesion and continuity as it moves along” (Halliday, 2004, p. 30), as well as providing discourse – be it verbal or visual in nature – with a situationally relevant and consistent texture. The following markers will be taken into consideration to investigate textual patterning: Information value (Left vs. Right, Top vs. Bottom), Salience, and Framing.

The present analysis is an attempt at showing how a multimodal artefact such as a webpage can be read in systemic functional terms, investigating how it visually/verbally realizes “a number of meanings, or semantic options, related to the interpersonal, ideational and textual functions of language; and how these are expressed through various configurations of structural roles” (Halliday, 2002, p. 178). Intertwining both visual and verbal language, the California LEGOLAND homepage may represent a useful stimulus for those studying/teaching both the linguistic and the communicative specificity of tourism language as specialised discourse.

### 3. Results: A multimodal/functional analysis of the LEGOLAND California homepage

#### 3.1. Ideational level: The narrative/conceptual promotion of *I-do* entertainment

There are four represented participants (henceforth RPs) in Fig. 2. Three of them are people: two children (boys, aged 6-8, with blond hair and fair complexion) and a grown-up. The boys’ physical resemblance may suggest they are brothers, and that the man in the background may be their father. The three RPs plausibly form a family group. There is a fourth, solo RP: the anthropomorphized, high-modality, 3D sculpture of a LEGO Ninjago warrior minifigure, made from a large number of bricks.<sup>10</sup> A number of intertwined visual dynamics, both narrative and conceptual in nature, link the four RPs in a chain of multidimensional meaning-making processes that constructs both LEGOLAND’s identity as a 2.0 tourist destination and its ideal/potential audience’s identity in terms of *I-do* creative engagement.

##### 3.1.1. Narrative representations

As clarified by visual narratology (Mitchell, 1980; Bal, 1991), action (both doings and happenings; Halliday, 2004: 42) can easily be represented by images. Three narrative processes can be detected in the California homepage (Figure 3).

(i) A Transactional process builds a major visual narrative proposition across the picture, similar to the linguistic expression of action inside a transitive clause, which

<sup>10</sup> It is in fact a meta-LEGO figure, as the representative and representational levels coincide (Dällenbach 1977).

is made up of a Process (usually a verbal group) and structural roles, i.e., Actors and Goals, generally represented by noun groups (Halliday, 2002). The RPs are connected by way of a diagonal vector (the Process), corresponding to the boys' waving arms and hands, as they seem to be playing some interactive game inside a 4D theatre. (The latter elements correspond to the "circumstantial functions" usually expressed by way of adverbial groups of time, place and manner; Halliday, 2002, p. 180). The vector points in the direction of the Ninja (and is also emphasised by the diagonal pattern of his *katana*). The boys are the picture's Actors, for they instigate the vectorial pattern which brings out the Ninja (the Goal), who in turn looks directly at the picture's viewer. What is the narrative meaning of such representation? It is the foregrounding of an ultimate entertainment experience: the boys are experiencing interactive fun, and their lively body configuration appears to link such experience to the Ninja.

(ii) A second process, Reactional in nature, takes place within the picture's dynamics of gaze, as the Ninja's (the Reactor's) eyeline shapes a second vector, pointing at the picture's viewer (the Phenomenon). This is a visual marker of audience engagement: whoever comes across this picture on the Web is turned into the *you* the Ninja is addressing his vector to. The potential visitor is what is being looked at by the Ninja, who in turn is being pointed at by a family having fun. An interactional second-person viewer pronoun is created by the Ninja's gaze, as we will see in 3.1.2 below.

(iii) A third, Mental process can be identified, similar to a clause where the inherent roles are an animate being "whose consciousness is impinged upon" and "some phenomenon which impinges upon it" (Halliday, 2004, p. 198). A textual protrusion, in fact producing a third vectorial pattern in the image, can be spotted to the left of the Ninja. Similar to the thought balloons in comic strips, as suggested by a vertical red line looking like a stylised box, it encloses a verbalization which the viewer/reader must immediately connect to both previous (Transactional and Reactional) processes. This Mental process device links the Ninja (the Processer, or, better still, Sensor) to a projective structure which conveys – as in some kind of reported mental process – the promotional message of the whole homepage:

BUY 1 DAY, GET 4 FREE

Includes admission to LEGOLAND California + SEA LIFE Aquarium + Water park

BUY NOW

From a lexical, syntactic and textual point of view, the contents of this message obey the linguistic features of tourism specialized discourse (Gotti, 2006; Maci, 2013), mainly conciseness (ellipsis of definite articles and the sentence's subject, use of the graphic device + instead of the lexical item *and*), premodification (also emphasised by the use of block capitals for nouns conveying the most relevant pieces of information), the use of present tense and the imperative mood, and the use of repetitions (*BUY*).



Considering the California homepage as a whole, it can be observed that the narrative processes just described – a Transactional, a Reactional and a Mental process – actually build a chain of transactional processes. This may be labelled a Conversion process, and it is interesting to notice that the Ninja performs a multiple Relay role, as the Goal in process (i), the Reactor in process (ii) and the Senser in process (iii). From the point of view of narrative significance, the Ninja thus presents himself as the ideational core of the picture.

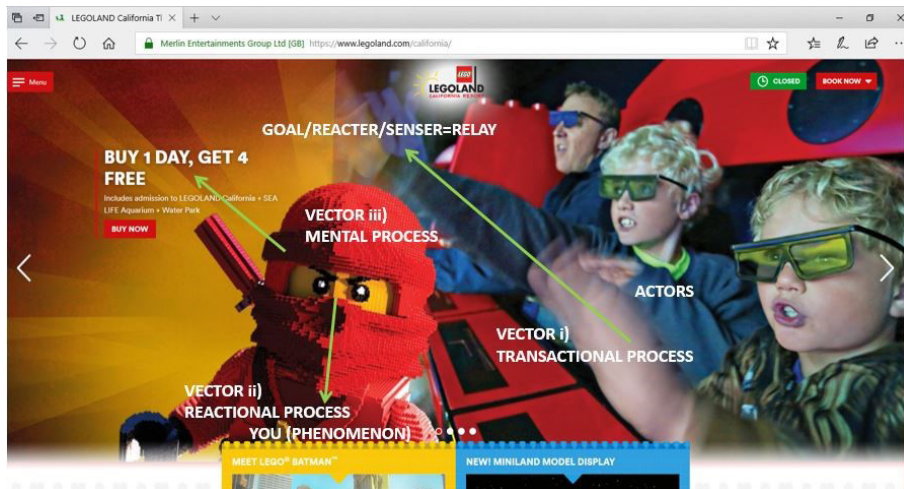


Figure 3: Ideational processes in the California homepage: narrative processes

### 3.1.2. Relational representations

Embedded in such Conversion process are three supplementary Relational representations, that is, conceptual processes conveying the equivalent of relational clauses, where “the process is a form of relation between two roles” (Halliday, 2002, p. 211). The semiotic purpose of a conceptual process is to define the picture’s RPs in terms of their generalised essence, i.e., in terms of respectively class, structure and meaning, as shown in Figure 4.

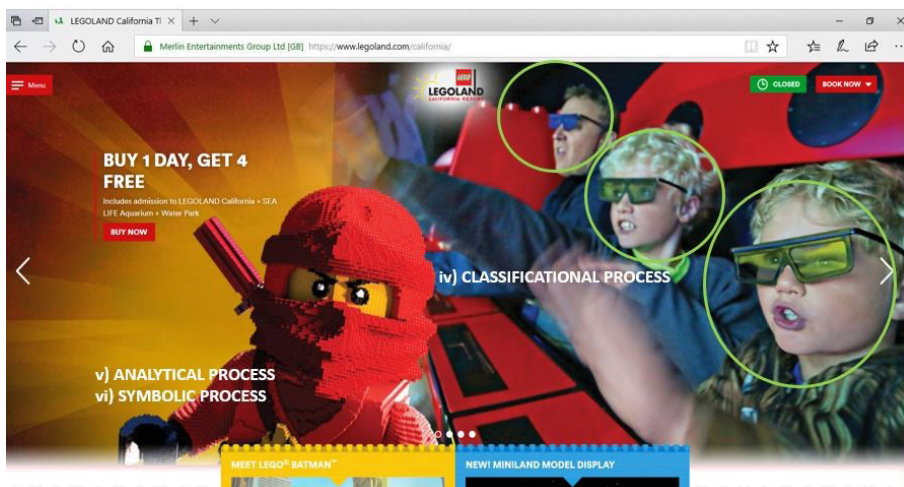


Figure 4: Ideational processes in the California homepage: conceptual processes

(iv) A Classificational process, similar to the structure of attributive clauses (Halliday, 2002), is to be detected in the representation of the boys-and-dad group. They are related to one another in taxonomical terms. More precisely, they form a Covert taxonomy (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996/2004): in the absence of a superordinate figure as overarching category, the three figures obey symmetrical composition, are placed at the same distance from one another, share the same orientation along the picture's diagonal pattern, are all given the same perspectival size, and all fall within the same colour palette. The purpose of such an attributive process is to express class inclusion by way of a Role attribute (Halliday, 2004). In terms of semiotic class, this taxonomy may obviously be labelled "a family" – albeit a modern, non-conventional family, given the absence of an adult female figure. As this conceptual representation is associated with the narrative process described in (i) above, a clear socio-semiotic message is conveyed, playing a key role in the promotional construction of both tourist destination and expected audience: this is a portrait of "family fun".

(v) A multilayered Analytical process emerges, triggered once again by the Ninja.<sup>11</sup> From a structural point of view, he presents himself as the Carrier of a number of Possessive attributes (Halliday, 2004: 223), which obey criterial representation, i.e., are singled out as contextually relevant, while others are ignored as non-essential. This figure may be labelled "a Ninja" because its attribute system simultaneously presents us with a *katana* and some guerrilla gear, including a belt going across the shoulders and a *tenugui* fabric mask. The semiotic purpose of such configuration is to allow scrutiny of the Carrier's possessive attributes, so as to identify it. On the one hand, the Ninja presents the viewer with some degree of low modality, that is, lesser credibility as socially shareable truth: he is not a real creature, for he is made of rectangular building bricks, in what appears as a striking attempt at curvilinear biomorphism. On the other hand, however, the purpose of the image is far more interactional than representational; the Ninja's somewhat low modality is outbalanced by the high modality conveyed by his direct gaze at the viewer (similar to the use of second-person pronouns in advertising copy). The Ninja's efficacy as a conceptual system has thus more to do with persuasion than with information/instruction.

(vi) A third process, Symbolic in nature, is once again to be detected in the Ninja's figure. A persuasive figure, he is endowed with symbolic meaning provided by Suggestive mood markers (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996/2004): he is foregrounded and exaggeratedly sized, represented in extreme detail (single bricks can be spotted, in almost hyperrealistic fashion) and in very sharp focus, and through conspicuous primary colours like red and yellow. Everything – including the suggestive golden beams of light which provide a stylised, energetic mood to the background motif – identifies the Ninja as the picture's central symbolic figure.

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11 Due to its clearly anthropomorphised distinctive features, the Ninja will be referred throughout this paper by way of masculine pronouns.

As the viewer gradually proceeds in decoding the six ideational processes, which are embedded in one another, and as s/he becomes gradually aware of their intertwined relationship in terms of Actions, Relations and Symbolic meanings, s/he will work out the overall ideational significance of the California homepage. A combined reading of the chained narrative processes, along with a scrutiny of the further embedded conceptual representations, clarifies that the Ninja and the boys-and-dad group are linked by a semiotic bond stronger than expected: as the 3D glasses they are wearing reveal, the family members are taking part in some interactive experience; the vehemence of their movements suggests that such interactive experience is not simply watching a film, for this would not elicit any emphasized motion response. It may be instead an interactive game they are enjoying; a fight-themed one, as the lively waving of their arms and hands suggests. While the boys-and-dad group are engaged with some digital interactant, the sharp focus and conspicuous colours of the Ninja's figure clarifies that what they are looking at and reacting to is exactly him: the Ninja. The somewhat lowered modality of his figure, standing out of the picture as hyperrealistic, is a consequence of him being a digital character perceived through the enhanced vision of 3D lenses.

### 3.2. Interactional level: The visual construction of the second-person viewer pronoun

On the interactional level, as Figure 5 shows, a whole set of attitudinal meanings can be inferred from the picture's structural pattern, the purpose of which is to encode specific social relations between three different categories of actors, i.e., between RPs, between RPs and IPs (interactional participants, including the figures in the picture and both the picture's producer and viewer), and between IPs (the producers and viewers, who interact by means of the picture itself). Such relations are embedded by way of engagement markers, such as the RPs' gaze, size of frame, perspective, and modality, which all concur in a picture's social/psychological significance in the same way that a clause's interpersonal patterning

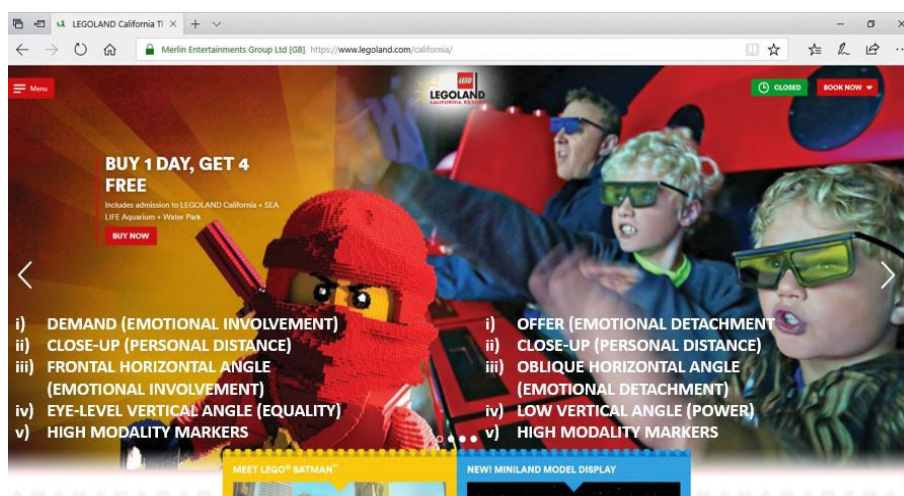


Figure 5: Contrasting interactional configurations in the California homepage

may express a whole world of attitudinal meanings (Halliday, 2002). For the purpose of the present analysis, the term 'interactional' will be used to label the encoded ways in which texts – regardless of their verbal or visual nature – conduct a dialogue with their recipients, “allowing them to respond to the unfolding text” (Hyland, 2005, p. 49) and producing conjoint meaning-making strategies. As can be easily imagined, the interactional level plays a prominent role in deploying the California homepage’s promotional purposes.

### 3.2.1. Contact: Demand vs. Offer

Two opposed – and yet intertwined – interactional configurations are displayed, depending on the degree of contact established between the IPs encoded in the image. This in turn depends on the dynamics of the RPs’ gaze, which works as an attitudinization device (Halliday, 2002).

(i) The Ninja is looking directly at the viewer. His is a Demand image. His anthropomorphised gaze builds an interactional vector establishing contact between the inside and the outside of the picture. A form of address towards a visual *you* is created, pulling the viewer into the discourse in the same way that engagement markers in verbal communication “explicitly address readers, either to focus their attention or include them as discourse participants” (Hyland, 2005, p. 53). The picture’s producer is engaging the viewer by means of an encoded second-person viewer pronoun. As a consequence, the recipient’s presence and function in the text is highlighted. The image’s producers are using the Ninja’s visual attitude to demand that the viewer build a social relationship with them. What kind of relationship is exactly elicited? One that matches LEGO’s global self-image. The Ninja is not smiling at the viewer, which would suggest social affinity or amiable paternalism, i.e., a strategy compatible with traditional amusement parks, where Disneyesque characters invariably smile at visitors. The Ninja is staring at the viewer instead, with air of defiance: some emotional response is commanded from the viewer. Also, the Ninja’s stare helps define LEGOLAND’s understanding of its target audience: while a big, open smile would imply an infantile recipient, one that would maybe be intimidated by a less-than-friendly attitude, a defying gaze entails a more sophisticated interlocutor, one who is able to decrypt the ironical stance encoded in self-conscious coolness, and who enjoys being metadiscursively represented in the text. The Ninja’s stare is meant to reach an intergenerational audience, his message probably sounding like: “HEY YOU! I mean, you! I am now summoning you to some serious fun”. While a Mickey-Mousey figure would be in contrast with LEGOLAND’s promotional identity, the overall effect of the Ninja’s gaze is one of emotional (if second-degree) involvement – intellectual engagement being the key to this prominent aspect of the picture.

(ii) The boys-and-dad figures address the viewer in a different, indirect manner. They form an Offer image, that is, an image without direct contact between the RPs and the viewer, who is thus free – as an invisible onlooker – to scrutinise the RPs at leisure. What such a seemingly engagement-free image does from a pragmatic

point of view is to generate emotional detachment (absorbed in their fun world, the RPs seem to ignore the viewer), which in turn produces an illusion of spontaneity, as if the RPs did not know that they are being looked at, and were caught in a casual moment of their intense experience. The psychological effect of such an image is however to instigate the viewer to want the same experience, producing a persuasive 'ethnographic' effect, i.e., the illusion of unmediated, genuine observation of real human experience. In promotional contexts, alleged real-life authenticity, devoid of any clearly visible engagement markers, can perform an even deeper persuasive function – as is testified by the success of user-generated contents and pictures in TripAdvisor or other tourism-oriented applications.

As the viewer eventually connects the Ninja's Demand image with the family's Offer image, and finds him/herself being the interactional pivot of such visual triangulation, an articulate promotional message emerges:

(a) Potential visitors are metadiscursively invited to join in an ultimate entertainment experience by a cool, charismatic, ironical LEGO spokesfigure;

(b) At LEGOLAND fun is so real and intense, so concrete and tangible, that visitors become fully absorbed in their experience, so as to forget about anything and anyone else. As the history of Western tourism illustrates, from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Grand Tour on (Brilli, 1995), the escapist motif is always lurking behind the promise of happiness being there, just waiting to be discovered.

### **3.2.2. Size of frame: Social distance**

Both the Ninja and the boys-and-dad group are portrayed in close-up shots. As the implied social meaning of close-up images is one of contact and proximity – the “close personal distance” at which one can hold or grasp another person or object, the distance of personal relationships, of ‘being in touch’ with someone (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996/2004, p. 130) – both groups are presented so that the viewer may feel engaged, either from a demand or an offer perspective. From a promotional point of view, the encoded message implies that both the family's entertainment experience and the Ninja's cool charisma are just a few clicks away, which is again related to the link built on the ideational level between actual and potential LEGOLAND visitors (as seen in 3.1.2 above).

### **3.2.3. Perspective: Emotional and social engagement**

The selection of an angle, or point of view, from which to depict the RPs is another interactional feature that contributes to the images' attitudinization: it may express different degrees of subjectivity vs. objectivity of the represented situation, and/or elicit different emotional responses from the viewer. In functional terms, perspective seems to work in visuals as attitude markers do in verbal communication, revealing the producer's affective attitude to propositions (Hyland, 2005), as well as the encoded viewer's elicited response.

### Horizontal angle: Emotion vs. detachment

The horizontal angle corresponds to a visual stance on the ideal viewer's emotional involvement with the world of the RPs. It may be direct (frontal) or indirect (oblique), depending on whether or not the RPs' vanishing points fall within the vertical boundary of the image. Two contrasting angles, along with two opposed affective attitudes, are displayed in the California homepage:

(i) The Ninja is depicted from a frontal angle. Frontal is the angle of involvement (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996/2004), objectivity, transitiveness, conveying the viewer's maximum engagement, as if the RP said, "What you see here is part of *your* world, something *you* are involved with". Once again, the Ninja is the pivot of visual engagement.

(ii) The boys-and-dad group is portrayed from an oblique angle, as the vanishing points of their figures converge outside the picture's frame. Oblique is the angle of detachment (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996/2004). The image seems to suggest to the viewer that the world of ultimate entertainment is still "*their* world", something s/he is not yet affectively involved in. (But may be just a few clicks away.) The pragmatic effect of an oblique angle is to instigate the viewer to come closer to an as-of-yet-unknown entertainment experience, that is, to enter the picture as the refracting vertex of a triangular, mimetic desire structure (Girard, 1961). From a promotional point of view, this appears as yet another – albeit *ex negativo* – call for engagement.

### Vertical angle: Equality vs. power

Depending on whether the RPs are portrayed from a high, low or eye-level angle, different sets of social relations are encoded in the image, and different degrees of audience engagement are produced. Two opposite stances are conveyed in the California homepage:

(i) The Ninja is displayed at eye level, i.e., at neither higher nor lower level than the viewer's eyeline. The point of view is one of equality with the viewer; the suggested social relationship between the Ninja and the potential visitor implies no power difference between IPs. This counterbalances the Ninja's severe and yet ironical stare at the viewer (as seen in 3.2.1): the selected vertical angle clarifies that the Ninja is not actually supposed to be a frightening or dominating figure, but a dialogical one, with whom the viewer is fully entitled to interact. From a psychological point of view, this can produce a reassuring, flattering – that is, even more engaging – effect on the potential visitor.

(ii) The boys-and-dad group is portrayed from a low angle. This codifies lack of reciprocity, which goes in concert with the detached attitude conveyed by oblique horizontal angle. It may be tagged as the angle of power, i.e., power of the RPs over the viewer: a possible, near equivalent of low angle in verbal communication would be the use of stance markers, providing "an attitudinal or evaluative frame for an entire proposition" (Hyland, 2005, p. 31), whereby emotional states and reactions referring to the world are encoded.

### 3.2.4. Modality: The construction of epistemic credibility

From a socio-semiotic point of view, modality markers are visual cues that encode the credibility of an image, as established by the social and cultural milieu where the image is produced and consumed. As the grammar of modality pivots on a number of epistemic markers which accord specific degrees of modality to statements – such as auxiliaries and related nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, which Hyland (2005) divides into hedges (i.e., downtoners), and boosters (i.e., emphatics) – visual modality can be measured along a set of markers which contribute to produce shared truths between an image’s producer and its viewer, aligning (or distancing) the viewer with the truth statements encoded in the image. A community-shared belief (or disbelief) in the social/cultural credibility of the image is thus established. In Western aesthetics, high modality – that is, epistemic credibility – is associated with the standard 35mm photographic naturalism, suggesting in turn a correspondence between the visual representation of an object and what we normally see of it with the naked eye. High modality is usually associated with the perception of concrete, detailed, naturalistic, thought-of-as uncoded, unmediated representation. This is the culture-biased rhetoric of standard holiday catalogues, which are produced in order to “persuade, lure, woo and seduce millions of human beings, and, in doing so, convert them from potential into actual clients” (Dann, 1996, p. 2). Low modality, i.e., hedged credibility, can instead be suggested by any significant distancing – either up or down – the perceived balance of visual modality markers, which include colour, background, representation, depth, illumination and brightness.

#### Colour saturation, differentiation, modulation

As concerns colour parameters, both the Ninja and the family are portrayed in high modality. They all fall within credible degrees of colour saturation (the scale running from full colour to black and white). On the one hand, the boys-and-dad group matches perfect standard-naturalism saturation, which is neither too low nor too high, and allows strong identification on the part of the potential visitor, who is encouraged to subscribe to the veracity and desirability of the depicted experience. On the other hand, the Ninja is depicted with higher saturation, as it happens with typical tourist images, where the sea is deep blue, the sky is strikingly cloudless and the sand is white or golden, as the whole landscape has to provide the viewer with a sense of spectacle (Urry, 1990). This, however, does not convey low modality, as it obeys sensory coding orientation (Bernstein, 1981): in contexts where visual pleasure is dominant, such as advertising, fashion, cooking, tourism and the toy industry, higher saturation is perceived as a source of emotional meaning – hence performing a boosting function. Vibrant colours, such as the Ninja’s red and yellow, are therefore to be read as markers of high modality.<sup>12</sup>

Colour differentiation (the scale running from maximally diversified colour range to monochrome) also denotes high modality, as the somewhat cold palette of the family group (mainly green, brown and grey) is balanced off by the Ninja’s warm palette (red and yellow). Colour modulation (the scale running from fully modulated to flat colour) also suggests high modality, as both the Ninja and the family group display the uneven colour modulation of naturalistic representation.

12 Interestingly, in 2004 LEGO introduced a colour palette cleanup, deleting low-use brick colours, which nevertheless built the original palette – like light grey, brown and light purple – and adding new statement colours, like ‘bley’ (a greyish hue of blue) and reddish brown.

### Contextualization and representation

As far as contextualization is concerned (the scale running from the absence of to a fully detailed background), the lack of a recognisable physical setting behind the Ninja somewhat hedges the picture's credibility. Such digitally produced stylized contextualization is however counterbalanced by high-modality representation (the scale running from abstraction to pictorial detail), as the Ninja is portrayed in full detail, with maximum 3D sharpness of focus, so that the viewer is even able to perceive the huge amount of bricks he is made from in full detail. Conversely, the family group shows high modality in contextualization (a theatre is clearly recognisable as the picture's setting) but lower modality in representation, as they are portrayed in blurred focus – their waving arms and hands being completely out of focus.

### Illumination and brightness

As concerns illumination (the scale running from full to null contrast of light and shade), the Ninja appears in somewhat lowered modality, since he is not shown as being affected by any particular source of illumination; his figure shows functional shading – probably digitally created so as to suggest the protruding volumes of his head and shoulders – rather than proper shadow. Regardless of the logic of natural illumination, he is shown as a figure “shining in its own light”, which also connects to his symbolical meaning, as seen in 3.1.2 above. Conversely, the boys-and-dad group is affected by a physically recognisable source of illumination, that is, the light coming from the silver screen they must be looking at. This helps in constructing the IPs' identification chain described in 3.1.2.

## 3.3. Textual level: The construction of multimodal engagement

The ideational and interactional levels are integrated by the textual metafunction, which establishes cohesive and situationally relevant relations “from one sentence to another in a discourse” (Halliday, 2002, p. 175). From a socio-semiotic point of view, the textual level is responsible for the composition of multimodal texts, whose meanings are realised through more than one code, as the whole visual/textual artefact is the result of all the levels interacting with (and affecting) one another (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996/2004). The textual level has to do with the meaning-making processes encoded in the composition patterning of a text, regardless of its visual, textual or visual/textual nature. While in language the textual metafunction is to be identified with both Thematic structure (the distribution of Theme, i.e., the message's point of departure, which in English unmarked clauses is usually put in first position, and Rheme) and Information structure (the distribution of Given, i.e., the point of contact with what the interlocutor knows, and the mandatory New element; Halliday, 2002), in visual grammar it operates on three different and yet interrelated systems, depending on the standard Western visual perception modality, which obeys a specific Z-pattern – from left to right, from top to bottom, from centre to margins (Maci, 2013). As a consequence, different informative values are attached to different positions of any visual/textual element in various ~~zones~~ zones of the picture, in the same way that Theme-Rheme and Information Unit patterning can influence the “clause-as-message” dimension (Halliday, 2004, p. 65). Additional textual value is produced by salience, i.e., the scale against which the RPs' visual impact on the viewer



can be measured (including fore- or backgrounding, relative size, colour or tone contrast, sharpness, etc.), and by framing, i.e., the presence of framing devices inside the picture (such as dividing lines), which connect or disconnect elements of the image, creating or disjoining a whole set of compositional meanings. Such dynamics can be perused in Figure 6.

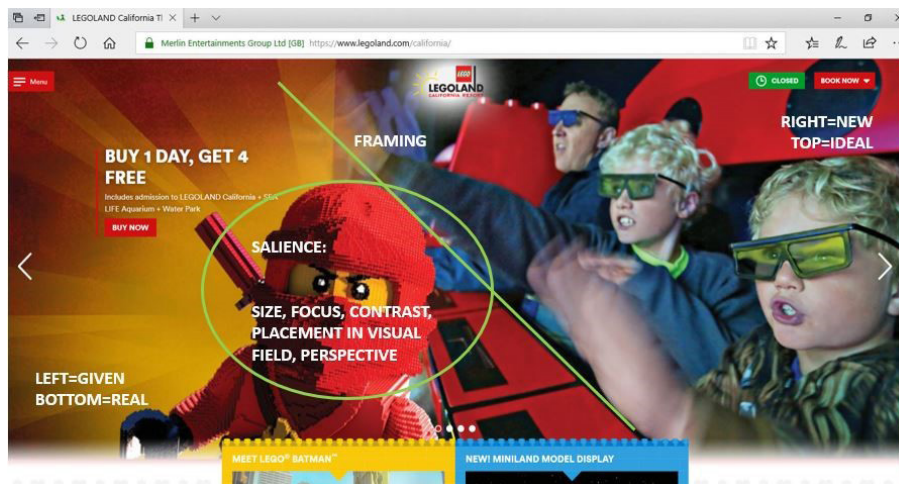


Figure 6: Textual composition patterns in the California homepage

### 3.3.1. Left vs. right, top vs. bottom: Information value

Following the left vs. right and top vs. bottom textual polarization, which conveys specific information values (namely, “Given vs. New” and “Ideal vs. Real”), the RPs in the California homepage follow a precise pattern.

(i) The Ninja is placed to the left of the visual Information Unit, that is, the side of the Given, something that is not at issue in the picture, which the viewer “is not being expected to derive for himself from the text or the situation” (Halliday, 2002, p. 192) but to know beforehand, as part of his/her knowledge background. The encoded viewer of this promotional image is expected to be aware that LEGO is an intellectually stimulating game, where everything is possible, time and again. The Ninja’s cool and engaging stare is construed as the message’s agreed-upon point of departure. The Ninja is also placed at the bottom of the picture, i.e., the side of the Real, the portion of the image which carries practical information and informative/instructive appeal (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996/2004). As an element placed in the Real position, the Ninja seems to show the viewer “what LEGOLAND actually *is*”. It sets the truth standards of the image, by providing a visual statement sounding like “This is fun – *for real*”.

(ii) The boys-and-dad group is placed to the right of the Information Unit, i.e., the side of the New, the mandatory key information, the promotionally relevant part of the message, what the viewer must pay particular attention to. What is at issue here is that real people, including families, can indeed be as cool and adventurous as the Ninja; the conveyed message might be something like “*YOU can be like this, too*” – where the choice of modal would intentionally involve little hedging. The family

group is also placed at the top of the picture, on the Ideal side, the section visualizing the promise of the tourist product, the experiential fulfilment it can provide the visitor with. The top position conveys the picture's emotional appeal, presenting the viewer with "what might be". As a visual/verbal transition between top and bottom, leading from "what might be" to "what is" (if only a few clicks away), is the *BUY NOW* red button in the Ninja's thought balloon, providing the viewer with verbal instructions as to how to achieve an ideal state of things.

### 3.3.2. Saliency

In order to provide coherence among items in a multimodal composition, the textual level also ascribes different degrees of saliency to a picture's various elements. A hierarchy of visual weights is thus created, contributing to the viewer's decoding of the picture's meaning. In the California homepage the Ninja carries maximum saliency, due to the balancing of a number of markers, some of which have already been taken into consideration, such as size (it occupies approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the picture's surface area), sharpness of focus, tonal contrast (his saturated colours are particularly marked off by the softer colours of the boys-and-dad figures; in addition, the red margin on the right handside of his figure is in contrast with the dark blue of the boys' sleeves), heavy placement in the visual field (elements are heavier inasmuch as they are placed towards the left, in standard Theme of Given position, as this emphasizes the Western Z-reading pattern), and perspective (foregrounded objects obviously being more salient). Due to all this, the Ninja presents himself as the balancing textual core of the composition, catalyzing the viewer's attention and providing the whole structure with a coherent meaning texture.

### 3.3.4. Framing

As their being weakly or strongly framed influences their textual relevance, elements in a composition may be connected or disconnected, marked off from or neutralized by each other, according to the degree of visual framing they present. In the California homepage, the Ninja carries maximum framing degree, enclosed as he is between a black-and-red diagonal pattern to the right (represented by the game console in front of the boys-and-dad group, which is continued by the middle boy's blue sleeve in the picture's upper section), and a golden-yellow background to the left. The Ninja does not stand isolated in the composition, though, as he reconnects to the rest of the picture by means of the middle boy's waving hand, providing a moving diaphragm which crosses the imaginary dividing line between the dark theatre scene to the right and the luminous scene to the left, protruding into and almost touching the rightmost golden beam of light surrounding the Ninja.

## 4. Concluding remarks

This paper has aimed to present the LEGOLAND family theme park website as a significant case study for multiliteracy communication, and to describe the visual/textual features

that cooperate in structuring a multifaceted semiotic experience from the viewer/reader's (and prospective visitor's) part. Bridging socio-semiotic multimodal analysis with Systemic Functional Grammar, the study has investigated the strategies through which audience engagement is conveyed in the LEGOLAND California homepage, designing both the park's unconventional identity as a tourist destination and its encoded transgenerational audience, and the website's significance as a showcase of multiliteracy in the context of LSP studies. The educational significance of such innovative, highly impactful, mixed-media, visual/verbal languages to the work and practice of learners/teachers of both specialised discourse and Web communication should now come into sharper focus, for the LEGOLAND California homepage provides tourism discourse and Web 2.0 communication specialists with a variety of strategies which can be successfully used to elicit highly structured, persuasive effects. LSP learners and teachers should in particular be aware of the pragmatic role played by Systemic Functional Grammar metafunctions, which interact with one another in the construction of effective promotional meaning-making processes. The resources which are available to tourism experts and which should be made accessible to tourism discourse learners can be realized at different levels.

(i) At the ideational level, the representation of informative meanings plays a key role in the picture's promotional purposes; in the specific case of the LEGOLAND California homepage, for instance, a non-conventional family is playing an interactive game based on the Ninjago-Masters of Spinjitzu theme, and the fun is so real that the interactant literally jumps off the screen and into the real world. The Ninja's figure works as a Relay in a multidimensional process, which finds a departure point in the family group, reaches the pivotal element, and is in turn projected outside the picture's frame, i.e., into reality and onto the viewer. A double semiotic link is thus built:

(a) Between the family group and the viewer, whose predictable reaction will be one of projective identification with the boys-and-dad group, that is, with the non-conventional, anti-Disneyesque representation of actual LEGOLAND visitors – which might actually prompt the potential visitor to “BUY tickets NOW”.

(b) Between the imaginary world of building bricks and the real world, that is, the world outside the sign system, where the prospective visitor is perusing the website in search for motivation to purchase an entertainment experience.

From such an observation it becomes evident that it is not only the interplay between words and visuals – as is often thought in pedagogical contexts – but also the design and articulation of purely visual elements that plays a major role in making promotional texts effective. Students should be made particularly aware of the fact that the most impactful effects are the result of two other metafunctions, entailing a direct emotional/intellectual response from the viewer/reader:

(ii) At the interactional level, viewer involvement can be achieved and maximized by a strategic handling of metadiscursive markers, as we have seen in the LEGOLAND

California homepage, where a whole set of modality markers seem to perform a boosting, rather than hedging function, enhancing the central picture's credibility. Such expression of epistemological certainty, along with the narrowing down of conflicting opinions and/or different views (Hyland, 2005), produces two main promotional effects:

(a) It presents the LEGOLAND tourist experience as indisputably worth the family's attention, trust, and money – ticket pricing ranging from \$87.00 (children 3-12) to \$93.00 (adults).

(b) It creates common knowledge between the whole interactional community (the family group, the Ninja, the picture's producer and viewer), emphasizing the trustworthiness of their mutual experience and attributing shared social authoritativeness to the views encoded in the promotional message.

(iii) At the textual level, several resources are available to construct and emphasize audience engagements, and in the California homepage the different levels of the message are arranged so as to attain this purpose, and, more precisely:

(a) The Theme/Given role visually played by the Ninja (and emphasized by salience and framing parameters) acts as an identity-making strategy with respect to the targeted audience, emphasizing the potential client's feeling of belonging to a recognizable intellectual community: the prospective visitor sees his/her ongoing knowledge of the LEGO language as being topicalized, i.e., foregrounded, as a Real, crucial identity trait.

(b) The Rheme/New role played by the family group acts as a further promotional strategy, by presenting the potential visitor with a further Ideal/New social identity token, i.e., the possibility of physically joining the LEGO international recreational club. (And thus adding their individual, personal salience and framing to the family sample portrayed in the homepage.)

On the basis of these observations it is possible to claim that while suggesting Web 2.0 tourism communication as an interesting example of how complex and self-conscious multimodal artefacts can be, the simultaneous actualization/juxtaposition of the three metafunctions also indicates the LEGOLAND website as an indisputable source of materials for different members of the educational community. On the one hand, it provides a whole catalogue of engagement strategies for those who study/teach how to create impactful promotional materials and/or investigate the pragmatic and promotional implications of tourism language in the context of LSP studies. On the other hand, it shows how the textual/visual fascination of LEGO language can be turned into a multimodal experience, eliciting both sensory and intellectual response from its encoded audience, thus providing a thought-provoking case study in mixed-media and communication discourse. If play is childhood's dream (and adulthood's chimera), LEGOLAND is constructed as the Utopia of play, the Promised Land of fun-based creativity and interactivity; and, in turn, the LEGOLAND website is presented as a catalogue – or better still, a 'building instructions book' – providing both consumers (of all ages) and specialised discourse professionals (at all educational levels) with inspiration as to

where and how to *play* in a creative, that is, rewarding, satisfactory way.

As a matter of fact, the LEGO brand name itself seems to suggest such semiotical ambition. Created from the Danish *leg godt*, a directive meaning “play well”, it is also reminiscent of the Latin verb *ligare* (to ‘bind’, ‘fasten’, ‘unite’), which is often mistakenly thought of as the name’s etymology. It joins the semantic domain of childhood, fun and entertainment – the wonder of *play* as the key experience of creativity – with the imperative mood (which in turn conveys the idea of adulthood, conventions and rules), and with a specific evaluative direction given by the adverb: LEGO players are invited and/or expected to “play well”. LEGO consumership is constructed as a community who is supposed to play in an intellectually correct and pleasurable way, within the representative strategies and boundaries provided by the LEGO functional language. The inspiring principle is one of creative freedom inside the functional rules that shape personal creativity. Players are designed to be playing ‘by the book’ – which from the point of view of the present analysis is doubly interesting, as instructions booklets started to be included in LEGO boxes since 1964, i.e., since the very inception of the passepartout ABS plastic brick, as if to introduce some guidance protocols in the creative revolution of universal mix-and-match possibility. *Langue* and *parole*, meaning potential and speech act, convention and creativity, adulthood and childhood, social repertoire and individual interest: it all seems to be there in the *leg godt* philosophy. And it is there to be purchased and sold – as well as learned and taught – via the LEGOLAND website.

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