

Interpreting Visual Images :
A Socio-Semiotic Approach to Facebook Images

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Abstract

People use various semiotic resources to make meaning. Among semiotic modes, language has been considered as the dominant mode of communication; however, visuals offer broad range of potentials and resources for meaning making. In order to have full understanding of meaning, readers need to enlighten themselves with new different ways to interpret visual images. The guiding impetus for this paper is to present Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework of interpretive strategies to analyze and comprehend the visuals as a significant mode of non verbal communication, in order to extend the readers' interpretive techniques and enhance their ability in constructing and interpreting images. The notion of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) takes up different visual representations, ranging from children's drawings, school textbooks, traditional art works, photos and advertisements for the analysis of sign systems from a syntactical perspective. The power of their work lies in the fact that their framework is based on Halliday's three Meta functions which can be applied to various visual images. Kress and van Leeuwen 'visual grammar' enables the readers to look at visuals in a systematic way. The purpose is to introduce a shift from the conventional study of visuals in consonance with the semantic indicators to a study of visuals in isolation. The study brought to the conclusion that the visual images with its elements such as gesture, posture, signs, color, distance and symbols go a long way to convey meaning in social media especially when it is used in a political platform.

Keywords: Kress and van Leeuwen -Semiotics- Visual grammar- Images

1.Introduction

With the accelerated progress of science and technology, the methods of human communication have changed dramatically. We live in an increasingly visual culture, images, and other non-verbal methods of communication such as images, colors, music, etc, are no longer used as a kind of entertainment; rather, they have a significant role in communication and meaning-making. Nowadays people see huge number of texts that include deliberate visual images, unconventional narrative structures, and exceptional formats. People communicate in different ways using various modes of communication in which language is the most dominant one, but meaning is perceived not only through language but also through the comprehensive use of a broad range of semiotic resources involving dynamic and static resources.

Moreover, the extensive use of visual images in textbooks, advertisements, magazines, children's picture books, graphic novels and computer interface, expect readers to use written text in addition to the visual elements to make meaning. In fact, people do not pay much attention to the non-linguistic resources. Thus, for a complete understanding of meaning making, the visual mode has to be considered in a more systematic way. Images and texts are integrated in unique ways, and today readers need to acquire new skills and techniques for constructing and interpreting meaning.

Kress and van Leeuwen understood the need for providing a method for analyzing and understanding images, so they introduced a theory for analyzing visuals in a systematic way. Kress and van Leeuwen are aware that "visual language is not transparent and universally understood, but culturally specific"(1996, p.3). They took the Hallidayan three metafunctions (Halliday, 1978, 1985) as one of their basic premises.

2.Kress and Van Leeuwen’s Model

Kress and Van Leeuwen emphasize that an image is a social process which does not result from a single or isolated action. The meaning of an image is a communication between the viewer and the producer that reflects their individual cultural, social, political attitudes and beliefs. They present the principles of the first social and visual framework for interpreting images, stating that it is a resource intended to: “make inroads into understanding the visual as representation and communication – in a semiotic fashion – and also as a resource in the development of theories and ‘grammars’ of visual communication.” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.vii).

All semiotic models focus on the significance of the sign itself, but Kress and Van Leeuwen’s model studies the process of sign making. They explain forms (signifiers) such as frames, lines and colors in addition to the way in which these elements are used to create meanings (signifieds) in the process of sign making. Their framework explains that an image has three types of metafunctions or metasemiotic tasks make meanings. These tasks are: the representational, interpersonal and compositional metafunctions. Hereinafter, the three metafunctions are described in detail.

2.1Kress and Van Leeuwen’s three metafunctions

2.1.1Representational Meta-function:

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), representation is a process in which signs makers’, whether adult or child, make representation of an entity or object. The representation of a sign depends on the sign makers’ social, cultural and psychological background in addition to the context in which the sign makers perform the sign. Therefore, this metafunction is concerned with people, objects and places within an image. These particular elements are called “the represented participants”. The representational metafunction answers the question “what does the image present?” or “what is the picture about?”

Processes of the Representational Metafunction:

Narrative Processes:

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) mention that these processes take place when the participants are linked by a vector; they are presented as performing something to or for one another. These vectorial patterns are named 'narrative', the narrative patterns usually present events, actions, transitory spatial arrangements and processes of change.

Thus, the presence of a narrative visual preposition is distinguished by the existence of vectors. These vectors are created in a picture by the depicted elements that create an apparent line. The vectors (lines of energy and direction) may be formed by "eye-lines, bodies, limbs, or gestures indicating a line force in a particular direction" (Kordjazi, 2012, p.62). In fact, there are two participants in the narrative process; the "actor" and the "goal". According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the vector departs from the "actor", it is the element in the image that forms the action on the other object within the image. As for the "goal", it is defined as the participant at whom the vector is directed. There are two narrative processes: action and reactional.

a-Action Processes: This kind of narrative processes is related to the processes in which the actor is the participant which forms the vector or from which the vector departs. Kress and Van Leeuwen state that when there is only one participant in an image, that participant can be considered as the actor (2006, p.63). The following image presents an example of the narrative image:



Fig 2.3 New York, 1955 (Robert Frank) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.64)

As the viewer can see in this image the old man does not look at anyone or anything, but his gesture forms a vector. Therefore, the viewer of the image is left to wonder what or who he may be communicating with. Is he thinking about what lies beyond life? Is that the main reason why the boy looks at him with such fascination?

b-Reactional Processes: this process takes place when the vectors in the image are formed by eye line, for instance the glance, by one or more of the participants. The main difference between the 'Action process' and the 'Reaction process' is that in the 'Reactional' process the vectors are formed only by a gaze on the objects in the image. The participant who looks at the object is called a 'Reacter' instead of an actor and the passive participant is called the 'Phenomena' not the 'Goal'. The 'Reacter' forms the vector with his eyes and the 'Phenomena' receives this looking. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 64-67).

Speech/Mental Processes: This kind of process refers to the vectors used to link thinkers or speakers to their dialogues or thoughts. These processes link a human being with 'content'. In fact, there is no direct representation for the 'Phenomenon' of the transactional Reaction and the 'content' of the dialogue balloon or thought balloon, but mediated through a 'Reacter', such as a 'Senser' or a 'Speaker'.

Geometrical Symbolism: This kind of narrative process does not include any participants. There is a single vector that indicates action. Communication is presented as a dynamic action or as a process.

Circumstances Processes: This process takes place when the narrative images include secondary participants, participants that are connected to the main participants, not by vectors, but in other ways.

Conceptual Processes: Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) mentioned that in conceptual processes participants are represented as steady items that do not make action or reaction. The conceptual processes differ from the narrative processes as they do not have vectors which mark as an essential element of narrative representations; it present their participants in a generalized way.

2.1.2 Interpersonal Meta-function:

According to Kress and Leeuwen the interpersonal metafunction is concerned with the interaction between the viewer and the producer of the image. In other words, Images include two types of participants, represented participants and interactive participants and three types of relations: (1) relations among represented participants; (2) relations between represented and interactive participants; and (3) relations between interactive participants (2006, p.114).

Thus, the interaction between the represented participants and the viewer can be examined in the image by figuring out some specific elements, for example the gaze of the participants, the distance between them and the angle from which viewers see the represented participants. As for the social distance, it is considered as an another indicator of the relation between the represented participants and the viewer . An image can be taken in a scale running from extreme close-up to a very long shot; the closer the shot is, the more intimate, and the longer the shot is, the more impersonal and personal distanced it will appear to the viewer(Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, pp.114-140).

Processes of the Interpersonal Metafunction:

The Image Act and The Gaze:

The image act and gaze include the eyeline (the vector which departs from the eyes) of the represented participants in relation to the viewer. There are two types of processes that exist in the image: demand and offer processes.

Demand Process: This process takes place when the represented participant in the image is looking directly at the viewer. These kinds of image imply a clear and direct demand that makes the viewer feel strongly engaged with the represented participants. In fact, producers use the image to do something to the viewer. The participant's gesture and gaze is demanding something from the viewer.

Offer Processes: This process takes place when the represented participant is looking outside the image or at something or someone within the image. In this situation, the viewer is motivated to think about represented participant and what the image is offering, as this kind of image addresses the viewer indirectly.

Intimate or Social Distance:

Kress and Leeuwen (2006) state that there is another aspect to the interactive meanings of images, related to the size of the frame and the selection between close-up, medium shot and long shot. Social distance is decided by how close the represented participant appear to the viewer of the image, and how this closeness influences the viewer's feelings of intimacy or distance. The viewer can see the represented participants in the following positions or ways:

Intimate Distance: In this distance, the viewer can see only the head or the face of the represented participants. Spatial distances are related to emotions of intimacy and distance.

Close Personal Distance: In this distance, the viewer can see the head and the shoulders of the represented participants. Kress and Leeuwen mention that this distance enables the person to "hold or grasp the other person" (2006, p.124).

Far Personal Distance: It is the distance that enables two people to touch fingers if they both extend their arms, the distance at which “subjects of personal interests and involvements are discussed”. (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p. 124)

Close Social Distance: It is the distance in which the whole body of the represented participant is presented and the viewer can see it completely. Kress and Leeuwen say that it is the distance at which “impersonal business occurs”. (2006, p.124)

Far Social Distance: It is the distance which enables the viewer to see the whole figure of the represented participants with space around it.

Public Distance: It is the distance between people who are suggested to be strangers. This distance can be noticed in an image in which the bodies of several people (four or five) appear.

2.1.3 Compositional Meta-function:

The compositional metafunction basically answers the question how do the representational and interpersonal metafunctions relate to each other and unite into a meaningful whole. The Composition metafunction in an image is the equivalent of syntax in language. According Kress and Leeuwen (2006), the composition relates the interpersonal and representational meanings of the image to each other through three systems that complete each other. The three systems are:

1- Information Value: This value refers to the placement of elements (represented participants that relate them to each other and to the viewer) which empowers them with the specific informational values attached to the various ‘zones’ of the image: left and right, top and bottom, centre and margin.

- **Positions of the information Value:**

Left/Right: As for the right, it is the side of the key information, of what the viewer or the reader must pay particular attention to, the message. On the other

hand, the left is the side of the ‘already given’, something the reader is expected to know already, as part of the culture, or at least as part of the culture of the magazine.

Top/ Bottom: When something is placed on the top, it is presented as the Ideal, and when it is placed at the bottom it is put forward as the Real. Ideal means that it is represented as the generalized or idealized essence of the information, hence also as it is, apparently, the most salient part. In contrast, Real presents more detailed information, more ‘down-to-earth’ information such as maps or charts or photographs as documentary evidence, or more practical information (e.g. practical consequences, directions for action). The ideal-real structure can be used in both single images and in composite texts such as layouts.

Center/ Margin: Visual composition can also be depicted along the dimensions of centre and margin. The represented participants that are positioned in the center present the central or major information. The elements located in the margin present minor information.

2- **Salience:** Is one of the techniques used to draw the attention of the viewer to certain elements in an image. According to Kress and Leeuwen it is used to “attract the viewer’s attention to different degrees, as realized by such factors as placement in the foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in tonal value (or color), differences in sharpness, etc.” (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177).

3- **Framing:** Kress and Leeuwen state that framing has the power to connect or disconnect elements of the image, signifying that they belong or do not belong to each other in some sense.

Modality: In language, the concept modality is used to refer to the degree of truth and certainty of statements about the world, that can be realized by the auxiliary verbs as may, will and must and their adjectives such as possible

probable and certain. Kress and Leeuwen differentiate between naturalistic modality and scientific modality based on the social group which produces the image. The former indicates how the representation is ‘close to’ or ‘true’ in representing the reality and the photos taken by the camera are considered good examples. As for the scientific or abstract modality, it represents the reality in abstract mode such as diagrams or geometric shapes. Modality refers to the process of redefining reality and how the viewer feels about the message and reliability of the image. (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 155-158).

Color as a Semiotic Tool:

Kress and Leeuwen (2001) mention that colors are signifiers that carry a set of signifieds from which interpreters and sign-makers select depending on their communicative interests and needs in a given context. They referred to two sources used for making meaning with colors: “association” and “distinctive features”. Association relates to the question of “where the color comes from” or “where viewers have seen it before”. Moreover, the second factor of meaning making with colors is “distinctive features” as it refers to a quality which is visual rather than audible. This feature refers to the materiality of color itself as something that can be perceived by the viewer.

3. Methodology

3.1 Type of Photos used in this Research

The researcher deals exclusively with photos from Facebook , that are analyzed using Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) visual tenets represented in the three metafunctions: representational, interpersonal and compositional.

The data collected from President Barack Obama official Facebook page with Focus on the photos used in 2012 presidential Campaign. The researcher provides a comprehensive analysis for three photos from President Obama’s official Facebook page.

4. Application

4.1 Obama with Citizens

Obama as a president states that people do different jobs and wear various uniforms, and have different views but as Americans, all people share the same proud title which is American citizen. The president always affirms that all the Americans are treated equally without any kind of discrimination. The following photos display the respectful relationship between the president and the citizens.

1- Obama with a pizza man

The following photo is for president Obama and a pizza man posted on the Facebook on 10th of September 2012. This is one of the rare photos that became a "hallmark" of President Obama's nonchalant behavior in public. The center idea of the photo is that President Obama go to places where ordinary citizens like to have fun, not being afraid or held-back to have a more friendly and unorthodox contact with the crowd .



Fig.1 Pizza man lifts the President

Representational metafunction:

-The human represented participants in the image are: President Obama, the man who picked him up, the secondary human participants. Non-human represented participants- the surrounding furniture (bar, stools, tables, beverages, sports-themed signs on the wall and chandeliers etc.).

-This photo displays a narrative process represented in a very energetic and dynamic combination of actions. The first, most obvious one is the vector departing from the man (the actor) towards Obama (the Goal), the action represented is him lifting the President in a moment of exulted emotion, most likely due to his encounter with the Head of State. The second vector is departing from all of the other human represented participants. It is assumed that the president is surprised from the situation but it is not clear as his face is not visible.

Interpersonal metafunction:

- The photo type is an offer; all the human represented participants are not directly looking at the viewer. This photo is offering a piece of information which is how close the president is to the citizens and how the citizens love him back.

- The relation of Obama with his exulted fan is most definitely close personal nature, and logically public relation with all the rest of the human represented participants (because they are standing aside, not included in this contact). On the other hand, the relation with the viewer is far social relation as more than five people are depicted in the image with their full body.

-The general tone of the photo is very light-hearted, unpretended and friendly. The reactions are genuine and spontaneous. The setting (a restaurant, a pizza place, a bar) is slightly untypical for a regular presidential visit, but this hints in the viewer a sense of modernism and innovative thinking of the president.

Compositional metafunction:

-The two main human represented participants (Obama and his fan) are in the center and usually the most important figures are placed in the center, while Obama is on the right side as he is the key information.

-The salience is ordered as follows, first mostly the hug between Obama and his fan, after which the viewer will notice the elderly couple, third comes the setting, and lastly are the human represented participants in the background.

-The colors are not altered for the image. It was intended for the setting primarily, which is of great importance for the effect of the image. The colors are not very bright yet warm, giving the sense of friendliness and welcoming. The image presents a great deal of colors and lights and pictures on the wall.

-All together the elements embedded in the image from all three metafunctions serve to represent a photo of vibrant colors and of great dynamics. The photo of the president, casting aside the socially expected behavior, implies that he is human in the first place and he has a sense of humor.

2- Obama with a janitor

This photo was posted on the Facebook on 5th of March 2012, it is for president Obama giving an employee (a janitor) a fist bump. The viewer will appreciate a President who appears to have walked casually in the corridor, as he sees the janitor he gave him a friendly fist bump. The expression on Obama's face is not only showing respect for the man standing in front of him, but also showing appreciation. The photo is intended to tell the viewer that Obama really treats all citizens equally.



Fig.2 Obama with a janitor

Representational metafunction:

- The human represented participants are: Obama, the janitor, the two men in the background. Non-human represented participants: the corridor, the floor, columns and lights. In this frame the human represented participants will be segregated into two categories based on their function and importance, the primary people (will be executing the main and most prominent actions) and secondary people (they will

be executing the supportive actions). In the photo, Obama and janitor are the primary human represented participants.

- The process depicted in the photo is a narrative action; Obama is in the role of the actor who is performing the main action which is a fist bump, illustrated with a vector departing from him to the janitor. The janitor in this case is acting as a goal, receiving the vector. Both Obama and the janitor are sending eye vectors towards the action they share.

Interpersonal metafunction:

-The photo type is an offer as all the human represented participants are not directly looking at the viewer. This photo is offering a piece of information which is the president is down to earth and respects all the citizens.

-Obama and the janitor are in a far personal relation, but still very close given their status and the spontaneous nature of the action they share. They are also in a close social relation to the viewer- the participants were positioned at a small distance from the viewer's eye, so the action itself could be more prominent and details could be seen.

-Obama has one hand in his pocket, which signifies a relaxed manner he was walking in. The message intended for the viewer is that of a president who is not looking to his people from the height of his status.

Compositional metafunction:

-The primary human represented participants are in the center position and they are the most salient figures as they send a socio-political message to the viewer , the secondary participants are in the margin position.

-Colors used in the photo are not modified by any frames of effects, they are genuine and representing the reality. The viewer will identify that apart from the janitor everybody is dressed in strict formal outfits - the colors are dark grey, dark blue and possibly black; a very typical dress code for official venues. The janitor is

dressed in a work uniform- beige cap, dark apron and a light blue t-shirt. The selection of colors brings diversity to the overall formal undertone of the photo.

3- A little boy touching the president's hair

This photo is posted on the Facebook on 24th of May 2012, the photo is for President Obama, inside the Oval Office, with visitors. The photo captures a very intriguing event, a little boy touching the president's hair. This undoubtedly sends out a message not just to the American public as an electorate, but also to the American people social units that the president is highly approachable and displays equality to people, regardless of their background and status.



Fig.3 A little boy touching the president's hair

Representational metafunction:

-The human represented participants are the President Obama and the visiting family: a woman, a man and two children. The nonhuman represented participants are the setting and the object, in this case taking a more prominent role are the desk, the photos in the background, the flag in the background.

-The process displayed is a narrative action process, with all of the participants being involved in actions to and from one another. The participants are engaged into an inner circle of vectors. The little boy, which in this case is an actor of the action, sends two vectors towards the goal in this case Obama. The first vector

represents the action of touching Obama's hair; the second one is eye vector-representing looking at Obama's head.

Interpersonal metafunction:

- The photo type is an offer as all the human represented participants are not directly looking at the viewer. This photo is offering a piece of information which is presenting the president as easy going, loving and approachable.

- The little boy and Obama are in a close personal relation to one another and in a closed social relation to the other participants, and lastly a close social relation to the viewer.

Compositional metafunction:

-Obama and the little boy which in this case are involved in the main action are in the center position of photo; however they appeared to be in the background compared to the participants on the left side. The other three participants are in the real given margin position, and one of them appears to be in the foreground, although not on focus.

-The salience as expected is focused on the main action and the participants performing it. It is central piece because of the spontaneous and unexpected nature of the action.

-The colors displayed are unfiltered and they represent the genuine setting without altering it. The people are dressed in formal outfits in the dark register of colors, which is typical for visits of such manner. Dark blue is not only a color used for official event but also happens to be a symbolic color part of the American national flag.

5. Conclusion

According to cultural theorist W.J.T. Mitchell (1995), the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the image. Interpreting visual images in multimodal texts is challenging to nowadays readers as they are required to get familiar with media, art, and semiotic theories. And the readers are supposed to

consider alternative interpretive strategies that involve the descriptions of the world presented, the visual and design elements used, the semiotic resources with meaning momentum or potential in sociocultural contexts, and the ideological influences that may form and alter one's perceptions and interpretations. The photos examined are worth hundreds of words as it reflected the president's good relation with the citizens without writing one word.

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المخلص

يستخدم الناس الوسائل السيميائية المتعددة للتعبير عن المعنى، ويعد استخدام اللغة هو الأكثر شيوعاً من بين تلك الوسائل المختلفة المستخدمة للتواصل. على الرغم من ذلك يمكن استخدام الصور للتعبير عن المعنى لوجود عناصر كثيرة بالصور تساعد على التعبير. من أجل الوصول إلى الفهم الحقيقي للمعنى المقصود، يجب على القارئ تعلم الطرق الجديدة المتاحة التي تستخدم لتفسير المعنى المقصود من الصور. الهدف من هذا البحث هو إلقاء الضوء على نظرية كريس وفان ليوين التي تتعلق بتحليل الصور ودلالاتها لما لها من أثر فعال في التواصل. تستخدم نظرية كريس وفان ليوين (٢٠٠٦) أمثلة لصور تتمثل في رسومات الأطفال والكتب المدرسية والأعمال الفنية التقليدية والصور والإعلانات وتقوم بعرض طريقة تحليل والمعنى المقصود من تلك الصور باستخدام القواعد البصرية. تكمن قوة النظرية في أن إطارها يقوم على وظائف هلايدي الثلاثية التي يمكن تطبيقها على مختلف الصور المرئية. تمكن نظرية كريس وفان ليوين القراء النظر في الصور بطريقة منهجية. والغرض من ذلك هو إدخال طرق غير تقليدية لدراسة المرئيات وقدرتها على التعبير دون اللجوء إلى استخدام النصوص الكتابية لإيصال المعنى. وتوصل البحث إلى أن الصور المرئية بعناصرها مثل الإيماءات والإشارات والألوان والمسافات والرموز لها القدرة على توصيل المعنى وخاصة عندما تستخدم الصور السياسية في مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي.

كلمات البحث: كريس وفان ليوين- صور- السيميائية