

Fighting Covid-19 with Fun: Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Egyptian Coronavirus Webcomics

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Introduction

Egyptians are well known among the Arab societies as being a comic people who always laugh, and distinctively mock every single aspect in their life. They are even called "أولاد نكتة" (jokesters). Despite that fact, comics in Egyptian society is not generally regarded as a serious form of art. This was clear during the coronavirus crisis when the Egyptians resorted to creative online comics (webcomics) that widely spread and circulated on social media to express their emotions and evaluate the performance of their government in dealing with the crisis. This triggered the criticism of many who claimed that the Egyptians are immature in their reaction, and even accused them of belittling the crisis.

The phenomenon of webcomics in Egyptian society is a recent occurrence and is an emerging media form. As admitted by Høigilt (2017,4), comics is generally an art form that receives "little academic attention," and little "scholarly exploration" in Egypt, as well as in all Arab countries despite the fact that Egyptian comic magazines and comic strips in newspapers have been a long tradition before the Egyptian uprising in 2011. Furthermore, it is only since the January 25 Revolution that young Egyptian comic writers and amateurs have begun to use creative forms of satire, including webcomics, among other satirical tools (Mehrez 2012; Høigilt 2017). Following the January 25 Revolution, online comic strips have attracted much attention. However, very few attempts have been made to theorize upon the issue, and there is no intensive scholarly discussion in the field of webcomics studies. There is no accessible literature on the topic.

The present research paper attempts to explore the online comics, associated with the pandemic age in Egyptian society. The aim is to identify the complexity of their nature, and therefore prove their status as being a unique means of creative expression worthy of scholarly discussion. The study aims at

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Cairo Studies in English – 2021(2): 4-24. <https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/>
DOI: 10.21608/cse.2022.48096.1074

highlighting the massive effect of webcomics in creating stereotypical knowledge without verbalizing any word.

The study concerns itself with answering the following interrelated questions: how do the Egyptians linguistically construct their social position towards a certain political decision, such as lockdown and curfew rules in general and what are the typical techniques used in their webcomics? What are the pragmatic features underlying Egyptian webcomics? Do webcomics trigger a discourse of inclusion and exclusion? To what extent can webcomics be considered an effective medium of expression and an instance of cultural production in Egyptian society?

The present research paper analyzes samples of Egyptian webcomics from the period between March 2020 and July 2020. The samples have been collected from various Facebook pages which are not categorized as political pages; rather they are pages that publish content on current social issues. This type of webcomics of laypeople is particularly chosen because they reflect the thoughts, emotions, fears, dreams, and aspirations of the people. The samples collected are grouped thematically based on a number of topics which were politically significant at that time. These include: (i) the Egyptians under the quarantine and their reaction to the government decisions of imposing the lockdown and curfew; (ii) the crisis of the doctors with the Egyptian government (following the Egyptian Prime Minister's public criticism of doctors and his claim of their responsibility for the rise in the death toll of coronavirus victims in Egypt). Accordingly, the data is divided into two groups, tackling these two thematic topics, respectively. They are more specifically chosen among many others because at the time of their publication, they were widely spread and circulated, in addition to the large number of *likes* they received. Some of them have the signature of their author or their webpage on them, but others do not. Among fifty collected webcomics, the study focuses on a total of nineteen.

The present study adopts a multidisciplinary approach, including a framework of *social semiotic analysis* (in terms of visual discourse analysis and grammar of visual design), *pragmatic analysis* (in terms of speech acts, implicature, politeness), *critical discourse analysis* (in terms of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and the perspective of ideology), *sociolinguistic exploration* (in terms of intertextuality), and with special glimpses to *narrativity*. An eclectic approach is the most appropriate technique for tackling such a hybrid medium, especially, because there are differences between printed comics and webcomics, though they are both subcategories of comics.

A Brief History of the Development of the Medium of Comics

The first manifestation of the art of comics was in a pure form of graphic and textual cultural productions. The first form of the art of telling visual stories accompanied with words appeared in cave paintings, in the Egyptian wall paintings which combined images with inscriptions. It appeared also in the medieval church wall paintings as an important “narrative art,” during the eighteenth century (Ryan 2008, 4). Later, sketches and caricature art appeared, and they were characterized by exaggerating physical appearance. Speech balloons and bubbles were hence used, and the sketch was sometimes followed by a commentary or caption accompanying the sketched image (17). However, the first appearance of a series of “framed images,” linked together and accompanied by words to tell a certain narrative was attributed to the Swiss artist, Rodolphe Topffer, with his first published picture story, “*Les amours de M. Vieux Bois*” (20).

The advance of the technological electronic scanning method where the colored paintings could be easily produced, led to the appearance of “electronic comics” where the artist was exempted from acquiring drawing skills with his/her hands, pen and brush (Eisner 1985, 159). Furthermore, with the rapid growth of communication technology, development in the field of comics was achieved in modern times by the appearance of “graphic novels” (141) which became the most popular comic art form.

What are Comics and Webcomics?

Comics is defined by Eisner (1985, 5) as “a means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea.” As traced by Eisner, it first appeared as a form of sequential art that varied from periodical comics, graphic novels, to instructional manuals and storyboards. The function of sequential art has been believed to be both instruction and entertainment. Eisner classifies sequential comics into two types: “instructional comics” and “attitudinal comics” (124).

On the other hand, Webcomics, according to Hicks (2009), are comics published on the World Wide Web. A webcomic consists generally of an image and a commentary that usually relates to current events or personalities. With the creation of the World Wide Web and personal computers, the internet became an amazing world which allowed anyone to participate in its content creation. Webcomics, as a realm, is one of the mediums where internet users can express their personal thoughts and ideas. Due to limitation of time and speed of the age, nobody is interested in or even has the prosperity of reading a whole sequence

of comics on one page or a number of pages. He or she would rather prefer very short and to the point message delivery, as is the case with webcomics. One of the first advocates of webcomics is Scott McCloud (2000) who believes that webcomics are free expressions of ideas which are not confined to normal print dimensions.

Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the theoretical framework of the study. The analysis of the selected webcomics is based on a combination of tools from the approaches discussed below. Since webcomics consist of an image and a commentary, they are analytically broken into two parts: *visual analysis* and *language analysis*.

I. Visual Analysis

1.1. Multimodality (MDA).

Webcomics include some characteristics of comic books and new media. Accordingly, they are “multimodal” in the sense that they involve a shift from mode (image) to another (language) (Serafini 2010, 95). Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) explain the concept of multimodality as “the use of several semantic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event” (20). Kukkonen (2011) further clarifies multimodality as a notion referring to “combinations of different modes in particular media; intermediality” (35). In agreement with them, O’Halloran (2011) believes that MDA “extends the study of language per se to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, scientific symbolism, gesture, action, music and sound” (120). O’Halloran calls these resources “semiotic resources” (121).

The interest of the present study is not only in the explanation of signs (webcomics), but also in the explanation of the signification underlying the signs. Therefore, webcomics are semiotically analyzed in terms of Kress and van Leeuwen’s *grammar of visual design* and Albers’ *model of visual discourse analysis*.

1.1.1 Kress and van Leeuwen’s Grammar of Visual Design

Interested in social semiotics, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) refer to three metafunctions of the structural design of an image, “representational, interpersonal and compositional” (6–7). Firstly, their “representation” refers simply to the way a certain semiotic act (an image) is presented. They stress the importance of socio-cultural context as an important element of “representation” which affects the reception and interpretation of any semiotic act.

Secondly, Kress and van Leeuwen's "interpersonal metafunction" is the interactive relations between the depicted participants (i.e., people and places) and interactive participants (i.e., producers and viewers). Interestingly enough, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) think that any semiotic act involves an interesting sort of mediated communication where "the power of an image-producer must be transferred on to one or more represented participants" (136). However silent and static an image is, they believe that it "allows the viewer to scrutinize the represented characters as though they were specimens in a display case" (43).

Thirdly, "composition" has to do with relating the representational and interactive meanings of the image to each other. This relation depends on three interrelated systems: (i) information value, defined as "the placement of elements (participants and syntagms that relate them to each other and to the viewer)," (ii) salience, defined as "the elements made 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 colour), etc.;" and (iii) framing, defined as "the presence or absence of framing devices (realized by elements which create dividing lines, or by actual frame lines)" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 177).

1.1.2. Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA)

An important study located within social semiotics today is what is called *visual discourse studies* (VDA). VDA is "a general term for an approach to analyzing art as a language and its use" (Albers, 2007, 83). It is concerned with studying structures and conventions within visual texts and how they are received. It is a sort of a descriptive study of images, addressing "the discourses that emerge within the visual text" (84) with the aim of investigating the intention of the image creator and its impact on the emotions and thoughts of the receiver (viewer)/ how meaning is mediated and represented.

The present study adopts Albers' (2007) model of analyzing visual texts. It is more specifically chosen because it is a functional model that explores the inner nature of image production and helps in highlighting its complexity and, consequently, discrediting any claims of triviality. In an attempt to answer the questions: "What does the speaker intend to say to the viewer? How is the viewer implicated in the visual message (s)?"

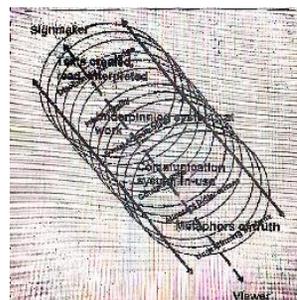


Figure 1. Albers' model of visual discourse analysis (Visual Discourse Analysis, 2007, 87).

What does the speaker want the viewer to think or believe from the viewing of this text?" (87), Albers identifies a six-dimension model.

At one end of Albers' model, there is the dimension, *underpinning systems* which has to do with identifying the interpreting systems through which the visual texts are read, interpreted, and created, and how identity is shaped by these systems. Within these systems, visual texts usually have certain metaphorical messages about reality to convey (*metaphor*). At the other end, it contains the dimension of *disciplinary knowledge* which includes all features related to works of art, in particular, and art in general, namely enclosure, sequences, the existing language in the text, and the ideological signification that these features may have. The concept of *intertextuality* is also there to set the relation between the visual text and any other system of communication.

Another dimension underlined by Albers is the *social acceptability* through which artists (writers/speakers) display different styles and techniques that are accepted by society. More interesting is the dimension of *apparent discourses* which assumes that creators of visual texts always do so to have a conversation with the viewers and to transmit a certain identity to them.

2. Language Analysis

This section briefly highlights the main linguistic concepts in terms of which the comments associated with the webcomic are analyzed.

2.1. Pragmatics

As pointed out by Leech (1983) pragmatics is a branch of linguistic research concerned with *language use* and aims at helping understand how the user uses language in text and how the receiver interacts with language used in a text to interpret it. It has to do with meaning *in relation to* the speaker, hearer, or particular situation. Its domain involves the study of speech acts, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and the theory of politeness (11).

2.1.1. Speech Acts and Implicatures

Under speech act analysis, utterances are not just described in terms of form or meaning, but rather the social act accomplished by them is described. According to Austin (1975), to consider an utterance as a speech act is to acknowledge that the speaker, in uttering words and sentences, not only *says* something but also *does* something. The thing done by the utterance is called by Austin the "illocutionary force" through which language users make promises, requests, issue commands, etc. Any utterance is composed of a "**locutionary act**" (the *utterance* of the sentence with a certain specific sense and reference),

an “**illocutionary force**” (the real intention behind the utterance), and a “**perlocutionary act**” (the *effect* or *consequence* of the utterance on its recipient) (109). Austin calls such utterances that perform actions, **performatives** (4).

Austin observes that it is not always the case that the illocutionary force of an utterance is *explicitly* indicated through performative verbs as 'bet' or 'promise'. but it is sometimes *implicit* in the utterance (32). For instance, “There is a bull in the field” may be used as a kind of 'warning', and not just for giving information about the scenery. A similar observation concerning utterances with implicit illocutionary forces has been later made by Searle (1979), but in terms of “**direct**” and “**indirect**” speech acts. Whereas the direct speech act is that which has only one explicit illocutionary force, the indirect one is that which has an implicit illocutionary force in addition to an explicit one (31).

Indirectness results in what Grice (1975) refers to as ‘implied meanings’ (‘implicatures’) which stands in contrast to what the speaker says in any utterance. He believes that these implied meanings result from flouting the maxims of the Cooperative Principle.

2.1.2. Grice’s Cooperative Principle

To account for how interpersonal communication takes place, Grice (1975) formulates a Cooperative Principle stating, “Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (45). For the sake of guaranteeing effective communication, Grice identifies four guiding principles (maxims) governing cooperative talk: maxims of Quality (don’t say that which is false), Quantity (don’t say that which is less or more informative than what is required), Relevance (be relevant), and Manner (avoid ambiguity) (45-6). Since there is no deviation without reason, politeness is one of the reasons for deviating from Grice’s maxims and flouting them (Grice 1975). The same observation is asserted by Searle (1979) who is of the opinion that the motivation behind most indirect speech acts is politeness.

2.1.3 Politeness

Brown and Levinson (1987) have introduced a theory of politeness based on the assumption that all language users have what they call “**face**”. That is, a kind of 'self-esteem' or public 'self-image' that everyone wants to maintain (13). This face is of two kinds: first, *positive face* which has to do with a person's need to have a positive self-image and the desire to maintain this positive image, and second, *negative face* which has to do with a person's need to have freedom of

action as well as freedom from the imposition of any action. That is, one's desire not to be ordered by others or required to do something, etc.

The actions which may threaten one's positive or negative face are regarded by Brown and Levinson as **Face Threatening Acts (FTA)** (14). Whenever a speaker has to perform a face-threatening act, he/she attempts to minimize the face-threat to his/her hearer unless there is a certain reason to threaten the hearer's face.

2.2. Critical Study of Language: Systemic Functional Linguistics

An important approach in critical studies of language is Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL is a framework used for highlighting power and ideology through detailed analysis of texts in contexts of language use. Halliday (1978) suggests that every choice of meaning is ideologically motivated. He attempts to link language function with linguistic structure (form) by relating the networks of choices to three metafunctions which he believes to be "inherently involved in all uses of language" (47): the ideational/experiential, interpersonal and textual functions. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) represent them as follows:

(i) Ideational/experiential metafunction which has to do with the way language users' experience of the world and its phenomena is represented and referred to in the text (their reactions, cognitions, perceptions, etc....).

(ii) Interpersonal metafunction which has to do with the speaker's attitudes, evaluations, and commitments towards a certain phenomenon, together with his/her interaction with others (relations of power, solidarity, degree of intimacy and familiarity).

(iii) Textual metafunction which has to do with the way a text is organized and presented as a message. It has to do with the internal organization of the text and its relation to context (29-30).

2.3. Ideology

Ideology, as defined by Eggins (2004) is "the values we hold (consciously or unconsciously)" (10). A related definition is provided by Van Dijk (1996) who considers ideology as a kind of "system of beliefs" and a "mental structure" that has to do with "attitudes" and "beliefs in concrete models" (7). Furthermore, van Dijk (1995) relates ideology to "social cognition shared by members of social groups" (248), and, consequently, judges it as a kind of "group self-schema" (249). The same view underlies Fairclough's statement that ideology is "a particular representation of some aspect of the world" (1995, 31). Fairclough believes ideology to be "implicit assumptions" (6) that are "primarily located in

the unsaid” (24) to perform the role of “functioning of power in modern societies” (3). In agreement with these definitions, Kress and Hodge (1979) view ideology as “a systematic body of ideas organized from a particular point of view” (6).

A particular form of ideology is *identity* that has to do with group self-image. The construction of a collective identity in a text is an indication of ingroup solidarity and an implication of outgroup exclusion identity which is generally “a form of overriding ideology” (Krzyzanowski 2005, 150).

2.4 Narrativity and Semiotics

According to Baker (2006), narrative is “a principal and inescapable mode by which we experience the world” (41). It has to do with “public and personal stories that we subscribe to and that guide our behavior” (19). Interestingly enough, Baker (2014) believes that even a semiotic act can be said to underlie a certain narrative because a narrative can underlie a variety of media such as “written and spoken texts, images, diagrams, color, layout, lighting in theatre and film, choice of setting, and style of dressing, among other resources” (159).

2.5 Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a linguistic technique underlying a relation between a text and another one. As explained by Fairclough, intertextuality has to do with “how texts may ‘re-accentuate’ genres, how genres (discourses, narratives, registers) may be mixed in texts” (1992, 195). It is, “the interdependent ways in which texts stand in relation to one another” (Nordquist 2014, n. pag.). As pointed out by Raj (2015), the term was originally coined by the French literary theorist, Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s to refer to any “communicative interconnections between a text and the other and text and context” (77). Therefore, it may be found in a wide variety of fields such as literature, the visual arts, philosophy, politics, sociology, etc.

In terms of the previously reviewed literature, the data collected is analyzed. For facilitating analysis, the collected samples are divided into two groups where group A includes webcomics related to evaluating the Egyptian government performance while group B includes those related to the crisis of the doctors in Egypt and the Egyptian government. The two groups, however, highlight the multimodal and linguistic features of webcomics in general, in addition to aspects related to identity and ideology.

Comic 5

Written at the top: 'The Committee of monitoring and finding out the contacts.

The figure on the right (asking a man selling watermelons in the market): did he drink orange juice here?



Comic 6

Frame 1 from top to bottom

The figure in the suit on the left: Mr. Qarmooty, we knew that the infected cases in Egypt don't exceed 1000, so what do you do to reach that result?

Frame 2

The figure in orange on the right: We don't conduct tests.



يعني انا انت يا خويا غملت الاجتماع اونلاين وعاليز تنزل الشعب كله الشارع

Comic 7

Hey, you guy, you held your meeting online and want the people to meet in the streets (in reference to the decision of ending shutdown).



Comic 8

It is over. Coronavirus will come to an end on Saturday.



Comic 9

Written at the top: 'the plan of the Ministry of Health to face coronavirus'.

The lamb on the right: 'the people'.

The figure on the right: 'the Ministry of Health'.

Written at the bottom while throwing the lamb: it is left to you immunity system, so don't trouble us anymore.



Comic 10

Year 2040

They say week 600 is the most important one in the virus incubation period. Once it is over, we will be allowed immediately to go out.



Comic 11

The woman on the right (the Minister of Health): can you make the vaccine, General?
 The man on the right: You just move over and prepare ‘Tahini.’



Group B: webcomics related to the crisis of the doctors in Egypt and the Egyptian government

Comic 1

The figure on the right: That means I am not Egypt’s white army!!!
 Figure on the left: You are a negligent, negligent. Do you know the meaning of ‘a negligent’?



Comic 2

Written at the top: ‘a people that is religious by nature’.

Frame 1 from top to bottom

The figure on the right (while saying goodbye to a doctor): May God be with you, the white army. Goodbye and may God bless you.

Frame 2

The same figure on the right to the man next to him: I swear by God he is the only one who will cause us illness.



Frame 3

The woman: What is this nonsense?! Don't doctors go to hospitals or do they go and tell the patients there are no beds?

The man: the doctors are absent in the morning, but they go to hospitals at night to tell the patients there are no beds.

Comic 7

Frame 1 from top to bottom

The figure on the right greeting the figure on the left, saying to him: "Thanks doctors of Egypt. You are in the hearts."

Frame 2

The figure on the left (replying): Sit down, you chap. You are a doctor like us.



Comic 8

Written at the top:

I put a logo for myself, and I thanked me.



1. Webcomics: Multimodality (Symbols and Significations)

According to Kress and van Leeuwen's *Representational metafunction*, the way objects are presented can be a kind of symbolization, especially in case of repeated representational patterns. Applied to webcomics under discussion, significant symbolization reveals itself through the repeated consistent patterns of representation. The characters selected by the webcomics creators as symbols of the government are all naïve stupid ones, which is of course significant. They, hence, convey a certain implicit meaning (i.e., criticizing). In terms of Kress and van Leeuwen's *Representational metafunction*, the main analytical point here is highlighting *the negative presentation* of the government (through the symbolic significant choice of characters) in all the selected webcomics.

As far as symbols are concerned, the choice of the characters is symbolic and has signification. A structural analysis of the selected webcomics in terms of Kress and van Leeuwen's *Representational metafunction* shows the relationship between the involved represented participants (i.e., the Egyptian people and doctors on the one hand, and the government on the other hand). In group A, all the characters chosen to represent the government are idiotic or inefficient persons who are fit for nothing. Thus, the characters chosen to represent the government in comic (1) are a blind man from the famous movie "Al Kit Kat" which revolves around the story of blind man who causes disasters throughout the film due to his insistence on acting as a man who can see. The same symbolic selection underlies comic (11) where a blind General is riding his motorbike and is talking to the Minister of Health about preparing "Tihina" (i.e., vaccine). In comic (2), an upper Egyptian (a stereotype of naivety and simplicity in the Egyptian movies) is selected. In a similar manner, an idiot from a movie entitled "Ghabi Minnu Feeh (Too Stupid)" which revolves around the life of a stupid man who always puts himself in silly situations resulting from his stupidity is symbolically selected in comics (3, 4). Another famous idiotic character from a famous series entitled "Al-Karmooti" which revolves around the life of a naive upper Egyptian is selected in comics (5, 6).

Even with comics clipped from scenes involving one single character as in the case of comics (7, 8), the choice of the represented participants is significant. Thus, comic 7 selects an addict and comic 8 a wanton woman. The addict is chosen to comment on the Prime Minister's decision to end the precautionary measures and the imposed curfew on Saturday. The addict in the comic states, "It's over. The Coronavirus will come to an end on Saturday". This mere declarative statement implies an act of criticizing the decision. An important 'multimodal resource' in this image is the dark glasses that the addict puts on which symbolizes 'darkness' and gives an impression of 'lack of clear vision' on the part of the government whom the addict stands for and represents. Similarly, an actress playing the role of a wanton woman in prison is chosen to comment on the decision stating, "Hey you guy, you held your meeting online and want the people to meet in the streets (in reference to the decision of ending shutdown)". Again, this mere declarative statement performs the indirect act of criticizing and mocking the decision.

Another important symbolic aspect is there in comic (9) which relies on a scene of an Upper Egyptian, represented while throwing a lamb in a river. As stated earlier, the man metaphorically represents ‘the Ministry of Health’ and the lamb represents ‘the Egyptian people.’ A comment from the Ministry is written stating, “It is now up to you and your immunity system. Don’t trouble us anymore”. These symbols act as ‘multimodal resources’ indicating a type of power relation where the people are *weak*, and the government is *strong*. According to O’Halloran (2006), images are read and interpreted through accompanying resources which he calls “multimodal/semiotic resources.” That may involve the choice of colour and font size that may be indicative. An important multimodal resource that emphasizes this power relation is the fact that “the people” is written in small font compared to that of “the Ministry of Health,” which also indicates distance.

In group B, the webcomics relate to the crisis between the doctors and the government in Egypt following the Prime Minister’s statement, in which he accuses the doctors of being responsible for the increasing death toll of coronavirus victims due to their negligence and carelessness. Doctors are represented all through as being victimized by the government and the people as well, some of whom behave cruelly towards their neighboring doctors, fearing infection. The characters chosen to represent the doctors are usually victims while those representing the government, or the people are usually silly or cruel. Thus, famous actor Abd El-Haleem Hafez in the famous film entitled “*Al-Khatayah (Sins)*” (comic 1) is chosen to represent the doctors. In this film, that hero is a victim of bad luck and bad treatment by his stepfather. He was an illegitimate child who knew the truth about that in a very famous scene in Egyptian Cinema. This scene is borrowed in the webcomic context where the victimized son stands for the doctors while the stepfather who was always unjust towards the boy stands for the government. This symbolization signifies a sense of victimization and an exercise of power where the doctors are *weak*, and the government is *strong*. The dialogue between the young man and the stepfather implies a discourse of power and victimization. The young man (representing the doctors) shockingly asks, “That means I am not Egypt’s white army!!” and the stepfather harshly replies, “No, you are negligent, negligent. Do you know the meaning of ‘negligent’?”

In addition to the government, the people are also significantly symbolized in comic (2) where the famous idiotic character “Al-Karmooti” stands for the people. The dialogue associated with the image shows a power relation of

victimization where Al-Karmooti, in the first frame of the comic seems to pay a warm goodbye to a doctor saying, “May God be with you, the white army. Goodbye and may God bless you,” but in the second frame once the doctor is giving him his back, he says to the man next to him, “Don’t ever let him get in the building again”. In terms of its compositional presentation, this webcomic has a significant characteristic: it has a title at the top stating, “The Egyptian People are inherently religious.” This title indicates the main theme of the narrative represented in the webcomic which is to criticize and mock the Egyptian people’s misbehavior towards doctors. In addition, designing the comic in two frames allows the viewer to see the progress of the narrative.

The same symbolization is repeated in comic (4), where the character of an ill-mannered traffic dealer stands for the people while a delicate nice-looking man wearing a suit stands for doctors. In the first frame of the comic, the traffic dealer is represented as talking to the doctor stating, “You are my sweetheart. You are Egypt’s white army.” Then, in the second frame, while the doctor is leaving, the dealer states, “This man is a real drag. He will cause us illness, that son of a bitch”. This representation again symbolizes a relation of victimization and an exercise of power. Similar to the previous webcomic, designing the comic in two frames allows the viewer to see the progress of the narrative.

Significant ‘multimodal resources’ are also there in group B in the case of comic (5). It consists of a clipped scene from a movie entitled “*Annazer Salah E-ddin (Headmaster Salah E-ddin)*,” where the hero, who is represented in the movie as a naïve person, is asking a man, “What are you doing in the hospital, doctor?”. In the second frame, the man, who stands for doctors, replies, “I am acting negligent”. The facial expression of the doctor in the second frame when replying, and the gaze that is different from the gaze in the first one both indicate resentment and anger. Furthermore, the bigger font of the doctor’s reply emphasizes the message that the doctor wants to convey (i.e., ridiculing the Prime Minister’s statement).

2. Webcomics: Intertextuality and Narrativity

By recontextualizing the scenes clipped from the movies to fit into the context of the webcomics, a kind of intertextuality is prevalent. This intertextuality helps evoke narratives. They are understood as a concrete story of a certain significance, with characters, settings, plot, and outcomes. As clear from the previous analysis, the selected webcomics seem to borrow specific scenes, embedding narratives that have a bearing on the same issue they intend to highlight. Thus, all comics in group A tell a story about the inefficiency of the

government's performance and of the people's anger, whereas all comics in group B tell a story about the marginalization/victimization of doctors and about the doctors' anger. As a disadvantaged group, webcomics on doctors, in particular, underlie demands for inclusion. That sense of exclusion and inclusion shows identity and group membership. Accordingly, the webcomics under analysis can be said to tell a "public narrative" about the suffering of the people/doctors and about the anger of the people/doctors' regarding the government's decisions. They voice the demands of a specific sector (namely doctors) who feel marginalized. The symbols used all through act as a narrative bridge to visualize these ideas.

Relatedly, it is worth highlighting the fact that because they are taken out of their original contexts, webcomics require Grice's cooperation principle to be understood. It is Grice's assumption of a kind of mutual cooperation between the *producer* and *receiver* of language that prompts the recipient not to regard such clipped scenes that are fragmented and taken out of context as mere funny production; rather he/she assumes that the producer wants to supply certain information and attempts to figure it out. He/she assumes that a certain intended message is implied.

Indeed, intertextuality is in itself a technique of indirectness through which an indirect speech act is performed. This fact together with the fact that they underlie certain narratives make webcomics a kind of metaphor. As pointed out by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), any semiotic act involves an interesting sort of mediated communication where "the power of an image-producer must be transferred on to one or more represented participants" (136). It is indeed this kind of transference of ideas that makes webcomics metaphoric in nature.

3. Webcomics: Metaphor, Indirect Speech Acts and Politeness

Since webcomics creation has to do with borrowing from a certain domain (movies, hence the source domain) to another one (webcomics, hence the target domain) to transfer a certain associated idea (criticizing, ridiculing, warning, etc....), the domain of webcomics can be rightly regarded as metaphoric in nature. In particular, they are 'implied metaphors' that make a sophisticated type of comparison through implication. More importantly, Zanoletti in her book, "*Translating an Artwork*" (2012) asserts that any semiotic work of art is

metaphoric in nature as it involves transference of ideas. This is especially the case with the webcomics under discussion since they are employed as vehicles to convey a certain message (criticizing certain states of affairs) and they are mainly based on borrowing from another domain (clipped scenes from movies) to transfer a certain associated message.

In the webcomics of group A, all the clipped scenes stand as **vivid metaphors** of ‘blindness’ and ‘idiocy’ for certain stories of the government’s inefficiency. For instance, comic (11) borrows a famous scene from “*Al Kit Kat*” film where the blind hero and his friend help each other to ride a motorbike. This scene is transferred from the context of the movie to the webcomic and is modified so that the blind hero and his friend become the Minister of Health and a General in the Police. The ground of comparison is blindness and inefficiency in taking decisions. Just as is the case with the original scene where the hero and his friend helped each other and made a wrong decision of riding a motorbike, so did the Minister of Health in taking her decisions.

The same metaphor of blindness is repeated in comic (1) where the two blind friends are borrowed to represent ‘the people’ and ‘the Ministry of Health’. The conversation that takes place in this scene is borrowed for the webcomic to show a dialogue between the blind man and his friend where one of them states to the other, “If an efficient ministry like me, doesn’t bet on the awareness of clever people like you, then it will be total destruction”. This metaphor is also an indirect way of criticizing the government decision to end the precautionary measures.

Another metaphor of idiocy underlies the scene taken from the movie “*Ghabi Minnu Feeh (Too Stupid)*” in two comics (3, 4), representing two different situations. The two comics, however, borrow the character of the silly hero to act as the Prime Minister issuing his statement regarding lifting the precautionary measures and the curfew. This transference results in transferring the quality of stupidity from the hero to the Prime Minister and his decision. The same applies to group B, where a metaphor of victimization is a dominant factor underlying all the comics under analysis. Thus, comic (1) borrows the clipped dramatic scene between the son and the stepfather to be transferred to the relation between the doctors and the government, with victimization as a ground of comparison. Similarly, comics 2, 3, and 4 have an underlying meaning of victimization but this time practiced by the people towards doctors.

Indeed, the transference underlying these metaphors helps mitigate the face threatening act of criticism underlying the comics, because metaphors are indirect means of delivering messages. In this case, they are “redressive acts” in terms of politeness. All the comments associated with comics in group A are

mere declarative statements that perform indirect speech acts of criticizing/ ‘discrediting the government’s performance, challenging the authority and its institutions, warning against a wrong decision, or even expressing fear. Similarly, those associated with group B perform the indirect speech act of criticizing the government’s decisions or the people’s behavior and victimizing the doctors. Since speech acts are, in terms of Halliday’s metafunctions, *interpersonal elements* that reveal attitudes, it becomes clear from the two groups that a general attitude of ‘anger’ and ‘opposition’ prevail in Egyptian society. Moreover, in terms of Halliday’s *experiential metafunction*, the way the involved groups (the people, the doctors, and the government) are represented implies an inclusive ‘we’ and suggest a discourse of difference and exclusion. This is supported by the negative representation of the government as a discredited social actor (represented as idiotic or silly) which stands in contrast to the presentation of self-image of the people and the doctors as a weak and imposed upon group.

More important, the symbols used all through (i.e., the symbolic choice of characters and clipped scenes) result in what Liao (2010) calls “social mobilization” as they can group people together and unify their standpoint towards the issue presented (37). All the previously analyzed webcomics of indirect illocutions (i.e., criticism, discrediting, victimization, etc.) have the perlocutionary force of positioning the viewer to see blindness (i.e., inefficiency) in relation to the government’s performance and victimization in relation to the government’s attitude towards doctors as central messages. Consequently, they evoke a kind of shared *identity* which helps, in turn, to achieve a sort of unified *ideology*. Since these webcomics, intentionally or not, affect the viewer’s standpoint, they can be truly said to act as “powerful vehicles of ideology, whether in the service of power or in challenge to it” (Høigilt 2017, 113).

4. Webcomics: Shared Ideology

Since webcomics are important means to convey a message, an ideology is always embedded in them. That supports Albers’ statement that a visual text is “a structure of messages within which are embedded social conventions and/or perception” (84). Ideology, in webcomics discourse, is articulated by various means. Firstly, it is enacted through what Van Dijk (1995) refers to as the *propositional level* which has to do with the way actors are presented in the structure of discourse (258). Thus, it is of ideological significance to negatively predicate the concerned authorities in association with negative qualities (inefficiency and idiocy) or to predicate the doctors as victims. This propositional presentation implies a dichotomy of Us versus Them and a sense

of an outgroup (the government) versus an ingroup (the Egyptian people). This depiction creates a kind of solidarity and gives the impression of unanimity and agreement among the ingroup members.

Secondly, ideology is manifested through the strategy of *emotionalization* which has to do with the “emotionalization of facts” (Menz 1989, 237). That it is to say, describing the action in a way that evokes an emotional response in the recipient towards a certain issue. Thus, in the case of group A, comic (10, group A) adopts a scene between two aged men where one of them looks sick in bed. The narrative behind the scene is expressed through the title “In 2040” at the top, followed by a dialogue between the two men where one of them says, “They (the authorities) say that week 600 is the most important one in the incubation period, in the life of the virus. Once it is over, we will be allowed to go out.” Symbolizing the Egyptians in terms of these submissive old men underlies an ideology of tolerance towards the government’s decisions. The dialogue in the comic performs the indirect act of criticizing the government’s decision of locking and imposing curfew that is extended many times under the same pretext of being in the incubation period of the virus. This dialogue, together with the submissive presentation of the Egyptians, result in the perlocutionary force of stirring the viewers’ emotions against the decision. In addition, the webcomic appeals to the relevance of the scene to the reader’s own experience to evoke his/her emotions. The familiarity the reader experiences with the situation heightens his/her emotional involvement.

This applies to comics in group B, where ideology is enacted through the strategy of emotionalization. Following the prime minister’s controversial statement and the consequent anger of the doctors, it was the behavior of some doctors to thank themselves on their Facebook pages. Performing the indirect act of sympathizing with doctors, comic (7) is composed of two frames. In the first one, there is a scene in which a man looks very emotional while talking to another one saying, “Thanks Egypt’s doctors. You are in the hearts” and the other man replies in the second frame saying, “Sit down chap. You are a doctor just like us.” The same indirect act of sympathy and the perlocutionary force of stirring the viewers’ emotions against the Prime Minister’s statement are achieved in the case of comic (8) which is composed of a scene from a very famous play entitled “*Eleyaal Kibrit (The Children grew up)*” where the character in the scene (standing for doctors) states, “I put a logo for myself and thanked me”.

It is worth noting that repeating the same message (i.e., inefficiency of the concerned authorities, victimization of doctors, etc. ...) helps construct solidarity among the ingroup and exclude the outgroup (the government). It is through the

narratives underlying the webcomics that social identities are constructed. When these narratives are repeated, they are, in terms of Baker (2006, 38), “normalized” and, consequently, become part of one’s identity and ideology. When these narratives are shared, they form larger narratives over time and turn into a “narrative accrual” (Baker 2014, 167) which enables various similar individual stories to become larger narratives. In such a way, webcomics are a form of speech community that highlights a sense of identity and belonging.

Furthermore, the reference to *common future* in the case of comic (10), in group A and the underlying implied reference to *common destiny* of the particular group of doctors in comic (7), in group B, suggest a kind of shared identity that constructs a “mainstream voice” (Krzyzanowski 2005, 149). It is “a certain form of a collective voice which stems from a way of self-understanding,” of a particular group (149). This serves as an exponent of solidarity and distance. As a matter of fact, the overall mechanism through which the previously analyzed webcomics work is clearer when analyzing them in terms of Albers’ model of visual analysis. It helps show webcomics as an efficient system of communication that enables perceiving a certain intended message.

5. Visual Discourse Analysis

In terms of Albers’ model, several facts about webcomics can be deduced. Firstly, Clipped scenes are the “**underpinning system**” (88) that allow the interpretation of the intended message. The fact that webcomics rely on clipped scenes known to the viewer “**disciplinary knowledge**” (89) allows him/her to share some beliefs and thoughts in common with the image creator and, consequently, this makes it easier to understand the intended message. Moreover, it allows the creator to convey an intended message economically with the least possible words.

Secondly, one of Albers’ dimensions of perception is that of “**Social acceptability**” (93) which is significant in relation to webcomics. Indeed, the socio-cultural contexts of production and reception affect the cultural meanings associated with webcomics. Thus, for a pro-government these webcomics will be seen as performing the act of criticizing or prejudicing against the government, but for an anti- government, it might be regarded as an act which reflects reality, criticizes a certain state of affairs, and warns against it. This difference in perception, as pointed out by Serafini (2010), goes back to the fact that perception depends on the person’s understanding of multimodal texts in relation to background knowledge, socio-cultural and personal experiences.

Thirdly, a special type of what Albers calls a “**communication system in use**” (87) is there where each webcomic consists of a clipped image (the signifier) and a certain mental image created on seeing that clipped image (the signified). For instance, on seeing that image from “*Al Kit Kat*” film of actor Mahmoud Abd El Aziz as a blind man representing the government, the viewer will immediately construct a parallel mental image of members of the cabinet and of the Prime Minister as blind people. Accordingly, he/she will decode a message of inefficiency in dealing with the crisis. The mental image constructed in the mind of the viewer may force him to conduct a kind of analogy which, in turn, may force the viewer to share some beliefs and thoughts in common with the comic creator.

Conclusion

In an attempt to answer the research questions, the study adopts a multidisciplinary approach combining socio-pragmatic analysis with multimodal visual analysis. The analytical framework shows that Egyptians may linguistically construct their social position towards political decisions such as the lockdown and curfew rules indirectly and politely via exploiting the possible pragmatic tools (research questions 1 and 2). Generally speaking, the pandemic can be pragmatically seen as an event and the webcomics related to it as a macro-speech act that performs various indirect/implicit speech acts as criticizing, describing (since they describe a certain state of affairs), and narrating (since they economically narrate a whole situation).

From a sociolinguistics perspective, webcomics have communicative functions. They perform socio-communicative functions such as expressing public demands, resentment, humor, and public denials. They present a critique of Egypt’s authorities and a critique of the marginalization of the class of doctors. They reflect a whole narrative of the event and the Egyptian people’s reaction. Consequently, webcomics, on evaluating the authorities’ dealing with the pandemic, can be rightly regarded as being ‘attitudinal’ in nature. They create a certain behavioral and attitudinal effect. This is supported by the fact that following the widely circulated webcomics commenting on the tension between the doctors and the government, the Prime Minister began to woe the doctors, alluding to their great historic role in facing coronavirus, in contrast to his statement on their negligence that stirred the crisis.

Furthermore, in an answer to questions (3 and 4), webcomics are proved to be important means to convey a certain ideological message. This ideology is articulated either virtually, via ‘semiotic resources’ (i.e., elements of the image, font, etc.) or textually, via unveiling the indirect speech act underlying them. The

shared ideology embedded in the analyzed webcomics is found to be an ideology of opposition against government decisions. They reveal an ideological *we* (the people) versus *them* (governmental officials) discourse. They also imply a discourse of exclusion and inclusion where the people are included in the discourse as victims of the government officials who are excluded. Since webcomics reflect cultural aspects through visual means, they are part of what is called “visual culture” (Mirzoeff 2002, 11).

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