

In the Name

of

God

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Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Department of English Language and Literature

M.A. Thesis

**Validity of Kress's Multimodal Analysis Theory
A Case Study of Audience Assumptions**

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To:

My Dear Mother

&

Asrin

Abstract

Communication is the non detachable element of human life. People communicate via different means. Language is not the only mode of communication. People can use images, gestures and body language too. New modes of communication are under focus of research in recent years. One of the modes being under attention is the study of visual modes of communication, namely still images, moving images and films. Almost none of the previous studies in this field consider the viewers' assumption as an effective factor in evaluating results of image analyses. This paper tries to study images as a new way of communication and meaning construction to test the validity of the analytical model of Kress & Leeuwen. They have tried to develop a descriptive method of image analysis and called it the *Grammar of Visual Design*. In order to test the validity of their method, a case study was carried on. A data was collected from two English newspapers: New York Times and Washington Post, and they were analyzed via the analytical model of Kress & Leeuwen. On the other side, a group of English students of Razi University of Kermanshah, Azad and Payam Nour Universities of Mahabad were asked to write their assumptions about the very same images. Comparing these two groups of results was my method to answer research questions. The results indicate that the analytical model of Kress & Leeuwen is valid and works properly, but to one who wants to analyze images and comprehend their meanings, it seems necessary to be familiar with the analytical model. Results show those who have no knowledge of image analysis, cannot fully understand the meaning of images.

Keyword

Social Semiotics; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Image analysis; Kress & Leeuwen; Grammar of Visual Design; Meaning making; Sign.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1-1- Introduction

The world is changing so fast. Nothing is like what it was a decade before. Every aspect of human life has become under control of high-tech devices. Space travels are done easier than ever. Robots are replacing workers in factories, and they even do cooking and cleaning in houses. Everything has become easier and more enjoyable. Computers do almost everything for people, either directly or indirectly. Shopping, paying bills and sending letters is done via computers. It doesn't seem to be wrong to say human beings live on the earth with another society, i.e. the society of computers, or better to say the society of new technology. "We live in a period of transition, two worlds coexist uneasily: the world of nation states, with their national languages and cultures, and the global world" (Machine & Leeuwen, 2007, p. 2). We are engaged with our neighbor society in every moment of our daily lives. Just as a tangible instance think about banking processes. Ten years ago just to pay a bill we had to attend the bank personally, stand in long lines for a long time -hours sometimes- to see the teller, pay the money and at last get the receipt. All this time consuming process can be done in a few seconds by a cell phone wherever the user is. Here just one of the aspects of modern facilities will be taken under focus, the one which is in relation to the subject of this study: screens and images.

Nowadays life is like a colorful picture. Everywhere we look, a screen is visible, e.g. in streets, in banks, on mobile phones, in offices, in our working rooms, on refrigerators, ovens, and almost everywhere. Alongside electronic screens, huge billboards, banners, newspapers, magazines, books and booklets and almost everything we buy has an image on it, images that can be shown animated on screen or still on paper. The point here is that the new technology and tools it has provided for human society, has led to a life full of visual signs. For modern man the easiest way of experiencing the world is seeing the world, the method which is available using screens. One can go to Venice while he is sitting in his room in Bombay. Virtual cities are among popular visual based software. Touch screens have made managing screens much easier. So we are facing a world full of images and visual signs. It won't be any wrong to say our lives is controlled by images. According to W. J. T Mitchell (1995) "The problem of the twenty first century is the problem of image" (p. 2). He talks about "pictorial turn" which means the long dominance of words and texts is over and pictures are no longer elements of entertaining or illustrating, but they are pivotal elements of communication and meaning making. Understanding how quickly our visual environment is changing is not so difficult. Just turn around and watch, that's it. The new generation has grown up in a visually rich environment, and it is quite normal for them to see images and screens everywhere. This generation is visually literate. They visually interact with friends on the net, so they can be called "visual communicators" as mentioned in Oblinger and Oblinger (2005, p. 5). The

main point is not just the ability of understanding images, but the new generation's ability to understand, produce and use them in order to communicate. The outspread of images and visuals means that language is not the only way of communication any more, but just one mode among available meaning making modes.

1-2- The Problem

It is necessary to elaborate on the differences between oral and textual language and the new mode, the visual communication. The different affordances of these modes can be simplified in a short sentence. "The world told is a different world to the world shown" (Kress,

2003, p. 1). Images have their own ability to illustrate the world in a different way. The difference rises from the logic lying behind language (textual and oral) and the visual mode of communication (images). "The organization of writing is governed by the logic of time, and by the logic of sequence of its elements in time but the organization of the image, by contrast, is governed by the logic of space, and by the logic of simultaneity of its visual/depicted elements in spatially organized arrangements" (Kress, 2003, p. 2). To put it in a nutshell, while speaking I have to say a word and after that another word and so on. I have to use the elements of my sentence in order to make meaning. My sentence is meaningful as long as I obey the logic of time and I use the elements in a sequence. Not obeying the correct sequence of the text or speech, one cannot produce a meaningful sentence. *Albert and Chris are my friends* means something and *Chris and Albert are my friends* means something else. This ordering is not meaningful in visual entities. In an image, being produced first or last does not matter, what matters is where on the paper or screen the element is located, by how much distance from other element(s) and in what size comparing to others. The logic of spacial ordering makes the meaning in an image, being in the center or in margin, being placed on the left or right makes a difference. The world we see in reality is just like an image. It means we do not see elements of the world in order. We see the entire world as a complex of all its elements being located in different locations in space. It is not important to see the sky before the earth or the other way round. The important point is to see the sky above the earth not under it. It doesn't mean that image reading has no order and rule. Surely understanding images is in need of following some ordering. It is what we call "reading paths" (Kress, 2003, p. 4). In a text or a piece of oral conversation, the ordering of words and elements forces the reader to follow those elements in the ordering he/she sees or hears. If I go against this ordering, I cannot make meaning out of the words alone. Images can have reading paths too. The maker of a picture can encourage the viewer to see the central element before the marginal one. He does it by making the central element more salient by means of features like size, color, sharpness and shape. What should be under the spotlight is the process of encouraging viewers. The maker of a picture can just encourage the viewer to follow a special path of seeing the image. But for a sentence, the wish of making meaning, forces the reader to follow the path, made by ordering of elements. However, while the reading paths of images are relatively open, the elements of images are meaningful entities. For instance, imagine a

picture of nature, with trees everywhere, a big mountain, a little lake in a corner of it, and some birds flying over it and so on. Every element of the image is meaningful by itself and they make a meaningful whole altogether. There is no vagueness in images. Whatever meant to be represented is represented. “Images are plain full with meaning, whereas words wait to be filled” (Kress, 2003, p. 4). According to Kress (2003), in an image we see the organization of elements already filled with meaning, but the imaginative work of writing or speaking is to fill the words with meaning and read them altogether at last. “The imaginative work in writing focuses on filling words with meaning – and then reading the filled elements together, in the given syntactic structure. In image, imagination focuses on creating the order of the arrangement of elements which are already filled with meaning” (Kress, 2003, p. 4).

Now that the difference between image and the other two modes of communication is clear, it is better to see more traces of images and their spacial logic in our lives. For example, let’s consider books. What we call books today are just collections of images in a cover. Even the small amount of texts appearing in them, are managed and located in relation to visual elements and they obey the logic of space. Texts in modern books are seen as visual entities. Old books were big blocks of texts and information bombarding the reader with new topics and information. The reader was passive and just a target for new information. But today books are under the effect of screen and its logic, which is the logic of space. They are collections of work sheets which engage students in learning. Images provide students with realistic views of the thing they are learning about. The effect of image and screen teaches students something important, learning via doing and seeing, not only reading. The learnt topic is much more tangible than before if is taught visually. Even for abstract concepts, readers are provided with some images and drawings which help them understand and feel that concept and have an imagination about it. Images facilitate students at least with a visual experience of the topic they are learning about.

The easiness of making an image and publishing it on screen is going to put an end to the long dominance of books and paper. “The former constellation of *medium of book* and *mode of writing* is giving way, and in many domains has already given way, to the new constellation of *medium of screen* and *mode of image*” (Kress, 2003, p. 9). But why images, or better to say, multimodal meaning making elements, are spreading so fast? According to Kress (2010) “One shorthand term which points to a collection of these is *globalization*” (p. 5). Using modern ways of communication, an image or a piece of news can be broadcast in a few seconds. Therefore, a sign made by a sign maker can be spread so fast. People are just a click away from each other in the virtually globalized world. One thing that can slow down the speedy growth of the dominance of visuals can be traditions. Local forms, beliefs and traditions always stand against new ideologies and new facilities. So the old tradition tries to save the mode of text and the medium of book and paper, but the globalization and the interwoven social networks, various cyberian societies, international meetings and virtual cities introduce the visual communication to people: the communication which obeys the logic of space just like images. In a world running too hastily toward globalization, no tradition can save books and texts from being replaced by

screens and images. To look at the issue through another angle, we can see that ways for meaning making are shaped by social and economic factors at the very beginning. The way people communicate and make their meanings is in direct relation to social availabilities. By availabilities it is meant choices that are provided to meaning makers by society and also tools produced to serve him in the process of meaning making. “The environments, conditions and choices are mediated by the interests of members of social groups, so that practices, resources and technologies of communication respond to social and economical developments” (Kress, 2010, p. 19). Today, our situation in facing large masses of images is certainly a result of the way social and economical conditions are developing. Living in a visually rich world is the result of wealthy world paying money for new technologies which itself is born out of wealth. Human beings as inhabitants of such a world and as those who develop social conditions, change the way of communication and its tools. In other words, it is we that like to communicate visually rather than textually, so we try to do anything to satisfy our desire of visual communication: we buy new technologies, we invent new ways of visual communication, and we forget old methods and advertise for modern ways of keeping in touch with others and so on.

Visual communication is not just using images as the means of meaning making and transferring. It is a cognitive process. “Research demonstrates that seeing is not simply a process of passive reception of stimuli but also involves active construction of meaning” (Felten, 2008, p. 61). Felten (2008) explains the cognitive process by an example: school days. In the math class we had to draw a cube; a three dimensional object on a paper using lines. Our eyes project depth on those lines which are on a flat surface and by assembling a familiar shape constructs the meaning of a cube. This research makes it clear that it is not just satisfying of our desire to communicate visually that makes this method popular, but the ability of our cognitive system is another reason. We have the ability of making and understanding the hidden meaning in images and visual entities.

1-3- Significance of the Study

Now that the importance of the issue is clear, it is time to put forward the lack of something in studies on image analysis and multimodal communication in general. Most of the previous works in this field are supported by the theory of semiotics. But having a satellite view of previous studies, an important gap is visible. None of the studies that I have managed to have a look at have asked audiences, viewers in the case of my study, to see if their feedback proves what researchers introduce as frameworks of analysis and meaning understanding. The gap of viewers’ presence in research about multimodal communication motivated me to study if the results of analysis of an image are the same as the results of viewers’ feedback. As claimed in Felten (2008), it is our cognitive ability that makes us to be able to understand hidden meanings in images. If it is so, everyone should be able to get meanings made by the sign maker in the shape of an image or another mode of communication. Besides, the new approach to the concept of sign believes that signs are motivated. In contrast to what De Saussure says about the arbitrariness of sign, social semiotics believes that signs are motivated and the interest of the maker lies behind them.

It means that something motivates the sign maker to produce a sign. It does not seem logical to consider a motivated sign which is based on its maker's interest, to be produced without any communicational aim. The sign is made to convey a meaning. The question is whether viewers are capable of detecting the meaning produced by the sign maker or not? In order to know if the viewers can understand hidden meanings of an image and construct meanings cognitively, I decided to explore if the results of image analysis is the same as opinions of viewers about the meaning of the very same images. So I asked fellow students to see images that I had selected and try to guess their meanings. I also analyzed those images using the method introduced by Kress & Leeuwen (1996). Comparing results of viewers' opinions and my analysis is the method I used to answer my question.

1-4- Research Questions

To examine the validity of the image analysis method introduced by Kress & Leeuwen (1996) from the perspective of viewers' assumptions, it seems necessary to answer the following questions:

1. What is the role of images in conveying meaning to readers of a printed media like a newspaper?
2. Does the Kress and Leeuwen model for image analysis predict how images are actually understood by a group of university students?

1-5- Goals of the Research

The current paper tries to investigate if people who are not familiar with the image analysis model (Kress & Leeuwen) can understand hidden meanings of images as outlined by the model mentioned above. To see if there is a similarity between the viewers' assumption and the results of analysis is one of the goals of this research that can help readers to find out the reality of visual literacy and the validity of the analysis model. A visually literate society is capable of understanding and meaning making visually.

The other point that should be made clear is the role of images in printed media, newspapers in the case of this research. I want to find out the role of images whether they are channels of transferring meaning or not. It seems necessary to make it clear that images are used to convey meaning, not just objects to fill the paper without any communicative role.

1-6- The Structure of the Thesis

Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework of my research. The method of image analysis used by Kress & Leeuwen is derived from two other well-known approaches to linguistics. Social semiotics and Systemic Functional Linguistics are approaches used by

Kress & Leeuwen to develop their method of image analysis. Both social semiotics and systemic functional linguistics are briefly introduced in Chapter Two, followed by the method for image reading. The third chapter is the review of literature. Works done before related to my research are introduced in Chapter Three. Books and articles that use images and image analysis as their data and analysis method are presented in this chapter. Chapter Four is the methodology of research. It is like a step by step report of the research from data collection to the conclusion. The last chapter includes comparing results of image analysis with viewers' opinions. This comparison helps to find answers to research questions.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework