

Visual Grammar Approach to Sociosemiotics; A Study of Some Selected Cartoons in Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

Cartoons are powerful communication weapon for disseminating information because they frequently condense complicated concepts and criticisms into a single visual frame. The aim of this study is to critically analyse some selected cartoons in Nigeria Newspapers using Gunther kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar approach to sociosemiotics to unearth hidden meanings and confront societal concerns. Four cartoons were purposively excerpted from two Nigeria newspapers (*Vanguard, Daily Trust*) and were analysed using only the representational and interactive metafunctions of visual grammar. It was discovered from the study that cartoon is a semiotic mode that expands readers interpretative and audience repertoires and a contemporary lens for deciphering the intricate process of meaning-making, showing that cartoon strips are not just for mere entertainment.

Keywords: Sociosemiotics, Cartoons, Multimodal, Visual Grammar

Introduction

Sociosemiotic analysis is an interdisciplinary field that combines the study of semiotics and sociology. It focuses on how meaning is constructed and communicated through social and cultural systems, including language, signs and symbols. It provides a theoretical framework for analysing the social dimensions of signs and symbols used to construct and convey meanings within specific social contexts.

According to Hodge and Kress (1998), 'sociosemiotics is concerned with the ways in which language is used to construct social relations and cultural meanings'. They argue that language cannot be understood in isolation from its cultural and social context, and that the meanings of language are shaped by social and cultural practices in which it is used. The semiotic approach to visual grammar as developed by Gunther Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) has been applied to a wide range of visual communication, including advertising, film, television, and digital media. It has been used to analyse the ways in which visual elements are used to construct and reinforce social meanings and identities. This approach to visual grammar has its emphasis on the importance of context in understanding the meaning of visual communication. It recognises that visual communication is not just a passive representation of meaning, but is actively used by individuals and groups to construct and negotiate social identities and relationships.

This visual approach has been influential in the development of multimodal discourse analysis, which examines the ways in which different semiotic modes of communication, including visual, verbal, and gestural, interact to construct meaning. In multimodal discourse analysis, visual grammar is used to analyse the structure and meaning of visual communication, and how it interacts with

other modes of communication to create meaning. Visual grammar in multimodal analysis has an ability to provide a systematic and structured approach to analyzing visual communication. Visual grammar provides a set of rules and conventions for analysing the use of visual elements such as colour, shape, and composition, and how they are used to convey meaning. They also allow analysis of visual communication in relation to other modes of communication. This study will use, visual grammar to create meaning and shows how visual cues interact with linguistic elements to convey social and cultural meanings.

Multimodal Discourse

MDA theory is considered the subdivision of systemic functional linguistics developed by Michael Halliday (1986), which focuses on sociosemiotic approach of critical discourse analysis. It provides a new vision on the importance of symbolic resources other than language. MDA is a critical practice of discourse analysis accentuating the importance of interspersing visual images and concepts of verbal discourse. Many scholars try to give a definition to multimodal discourse. Van Leeuwen (2005) points out that 'multimodality means the combination of different semiotic modes-for example, language and music-in a communicative artifact or event'. A more specific definition is that 'multimodal discourse involves the interaction of multiple semiotic resources such as language, gesture, dress, architecture, proximity lighting, movement, gaze, camera angle, and so on' (O'Halloran, Tan, Smith & Podlasov, 2011).

In sum, multimodal discourse studies that language is not only the source of meaning,

verbal signals and visuals are also integral means of communication. As such, the approach focuses on the combination of written/spoken language and visual images. It also provides a tool kit for the analysis of visual compositions such as advertisements, magazine pages and covers, and photographs. The method allows us to break down compositions into their basic components and then understand how they work together, in order to create meaning.

Semiotic Resources/Modes

In semiotics, ‘mode’ is refers to the organized use of material resources for purposes of meaning making. A social semiotic approach to representation and communication sees all modes as meaning making systems, all of which are integrally connected with social and cultural systems (Kress, 2003). Kress (2005) affirms that meaning is made by individuals, who act in social environments and use socially and culturally shaped available resources. This approach shares commonalities with pragmatics (Bezezemer and Jewitt 2009). In particular, it emphasizes the situated perspectives of communication and meaning in a context. Modes are defined as abstract ways of organizing meaning making which can realize ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings. Thus, language is a mode because it can realize all three metafunctions and do so either in the form of speech or in the form of writing. As stressed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), visual communication is also a mode because it can also realize all three metafunctions and do so in materially different ways- as drawings, photographs, paintings, etc.

According to Van Leeuwen (2005) semiotic resources are the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes, whether produced physiologically- for example, with our vocal apparatus, the muscles we use to make facial expressions and gestures- or technologically- for example, with pen and ink, or computer hardware and software- together with the ways in which these resources can be organized. The following are modes of semiotic resources: linguistic, audio, spatial, gestural, and visual mode.

Linguistic: the linguistic mode refers to written or spoken words. The mode includes word choice, the delivery of written or spoken text, the organization of words into sentences and paragraphs, and the development and coherence of words and ideas. Linguistic is not always the most important mode; this depends on the other modes at play in the text, and other factors. Linguistic is probably the most widely used mode because it can be both read and heard on paper or audio. The linguistic mode is the best way to express details and lists. It also allows for precise and explicit meanings to be conveyed.

Audio: the audio mode is focused on sound including, but not limited to, music, sound effects, ambient noise, tone of voice in spoken language, silence, volume of sound, emphasis, and accent. An example of audio mode- one that depends on sound- is the recording of a public speech that is delivered orally to a live audience, a radio address, or a podcast.

Spatial: the spatial mode as the name implies, refers to the arrangement of elements in

space. It involves the organization of items and the physical closeness between people and objects.

Gestural: the gestural mode refers to the way movement is interpreted. Facial expressions, hand gestures, body language, and interaction between people are all gestural modes. The gestural mode works with linguistic, visual, audio, and sometimes even spatial modes in order to create more detail and communicate better to the reader or consumer of the gestural text.

Visual: the visual mode refers to the images and characters that people see. It involves the use of images, drawings, photographs, and other visual elements to convey meaning. Visual texts can evoke emotions, provide information, and communicate complex ideas through the arrangement and manipulation

Cartoon as a Visual Mode

According to Bren (2004), cartoons are regarded as ‘humorous pieces designed most especially to evoke laughter’. Cartoons are full of plenty stereotyped metaphors, myths, satires and sarcasm that reflects the ambiguity of societal perceptions, feelings, attachment, memory and societal interpretation of their meaning. Political cartoons have long been a method by which newspapers and magazines are poked. They are unique combination of pictorial editorials and creative commentary, which allows cartoonists to make social commentary beyond the written word. Cartoons can be considered as a specific kind of semiotic domain and as multimodal discourse, it comprises of different semiotic resources like

signs, words, image, colours, music, layout as can be seen in printed and animated videos.

In the study of cartoons, a reader should pay attention to all verbal and visual details portrayed in order to grasp the meaning of the cartoon since newspaper cartoons constitutes a strategic route in disseminating information to the public on current societal issues.

Theoretical Framework

Sociosemiotic theory is a theoretical framework that examines the relationship between society and semiotics. It states that ‘the society in which man lives or objects exists has a fundamental interpretation, understanding and usage of various signs which exist in that society’ (Halliday, 1986). Sociosemiotic theory also, is the study of signs and symbols. It examines semiotic and gestural practices, specific to a culture and community, for the making of various kinds of texts and meanings in various situational contexts and contexts of culturally meaningful activity. Sociosemiotics explores how meanings are produced, communicated, and distributed within social and cultural contexts. This theory posits that signs and symbols play a crucial role in shaping social interactions, power relations, and the construction of reality.

Roland Barthes, a key figure in sociosemiotic theory, emphasized the significance of signs in both language and culture. He argued that signs are not fixed or universal, but rather are socially constructed and open to interpretation. Barthes believes that meaning is not inherent in signs, but rather emerges through the social practices and discourses in which they are used, in his book, *Mythologies* (1957) he stated, ‘signs, when they come

together within a social system produce effects of meaning that are specific to that system”.

Sociosemiotic follows Halliday’s tradition in recognizing three major kinds of semiotic meanings which are functioned and performed simultaneously. According to Halliday (1978), the three metafunctions are called ideational, with a function of creating representations, interpersonal with the function of creating and establishing a relation between the writer and the reader, and the textual with the function of bringing together the representations and interactions into a meaningful whole. Recognition of these three major functions in language has largely influenced Kress and Van Leeuwen’s sociosemiotic framework of visual communication grammar.

A shift from the emphasis on language to other semiotic systems was pioneered by Hodge and Kress in *Social Semiotics* (1998) and by Kress and Van Leeuwen in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996, 2006). In these volumes which have led to the subsequent emergence of multimodality itself, the principles developed in relation to language were applied to different communicative modes. With a focus on visual design, they examine texts in relation to a socially created network of options that have meaning potential realized in the context of use, that serves ideological interest and that is framed by relations of power. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) extended Halliday’s metafunctions to visual images and other modes of communication by applying different terminologies. Representational, interactive and

compositional meanings were the new terminologies adopted by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) instead of ideational interpersonal and textual metafunctions respectively.

Visual Grammar (VG)

Visual grammar as postulated by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006). This approach to multimodality has its root in functional linguistics, mainly in the works of Michael Halliday (1978), and has been developed as a theory of multimodal sign making in the works of Robert Hodge, Gunter Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen. For Halliday, language is a result of social processes; the resources of a language are shaped by the functions it has developed to satisfy the communicative needs of the people’s lives. He emphasizes on the unity of the text (language), context (linguistic and non-linguistic), and social structure and advocates that language is a unique system of signs with a social function, that is capable of expressing the meaning of all the other sign systems. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (2006), in their book, *Social Semiotics* extended Halliday’s approach from language to sign making more broadly, and argued that societies develop and shape all semiotic resources to fulfill given social functions, express a social group’s values, systems of discourses, structures and power roles. Visual grammar has three metafunctions which are;

A) The representational metafunction: the representation metafunction looks at the participants of the image that is, the people, object and places represented. Most importantly, at visual syntactic patterns

representational metafunction puts the participants of the images in relation to each other. The structure dimension is important because it creates "meaningful prepositions by means of visual syntax" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). The authors presented two kinds of representation: the *narrative* and the *conceptual*.

B) The interactive metafunction: the interactive meaning is interested in the relationship between the producer of the image and the viewer. Although the interaction can be direct and immediate (such as in the case of people taking pictures of each other as souvenirs). Kress and Van Leeuwen note how the context of production and the context of reception are often disjoint. The producer and the viewer still share the image and "a knowledge of the communicative resources that allow its articulation and understanding, a knowledge of the way social relations can be encoded in



images" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). In visual communication, not only are social relations but also the relations between the producer and the viewer, represented, instead

of enacted. This representation is created through different type of *resources*

C) The compositional metafunction: the compositional meaning corresponds to the textual function of systemic functional grammar. It refers to the way the representational and interactive meanings relate to each other and their elements integrates into a meaningful whole through three interrelated systems: information value, salience and framing (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Different zones of the image such as left and right, top and bottom, center and margin endowed with different information values. Information value refers to the order in which each component of the composition is arranged: salience is realized through factors such as foreground or background placement, relative sizes, contrasts in tonal value or color, sharpness, etc;

Data Presentation/Analysis

Four cartoons are selected for this study from two Nigeria newspapers; *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust*. They will be analysed using only two metafunctions of visual grammar. These two metafunctions are: representational and interactive metafunctions.

Image 1: Invocation of politician's precedence (Vanguard, 6 October, 2022)

The cartoon strip shows a man walking with an ugly dark shade behind him. The image satirizes the Nigeria politicians. As elections

draw near, the politicians present themselves to be saint but their past as depicted in the image is scary.

Representational metafunction: In the cartoon, they are two participants. A man, who is a politician and a scary dark shade behind him. They are in an action transactional process. The dark shade is the actor while the man is the action. The dark shade and the size behind the man is a symbolic attribute to the past deeds of most Nigeria politicians. Vectors are formed through the fierce gaze of the dark shade towards the politician, the swift hands and limbs of the politician which serves as a guide for movement.

Interactive metafunction: As seen in the cartoon, the contact between the social actors and the viewer is in offer image act. The participants does not look directly to the viewer. It is presented in an oblique horizontal angle, showing the detachment which exist between the participants and the viewer and are in close social distance. The dark shade behind the man shows a degree of truthfulness of a Nigeria politicians which the image is trying to portray. Placing the scary dark shade behind him shows that their past evils goes about with them as they have all claim to be saints base on the upcoming Nigeria 2023 general elections.

Image 2: Elections predator (Daily Trust, 26 February, 2023).

In the cartoon, a witch doctor is prophesying on who will win the 2023 Nigeria presidential election. A man sits unconcerned while the witch doctor prophesies.

Representational metafunction: Two men are represented as participants in the cartoon.

The man dressed as a witch doctor emanates



the dialogue ballon as the speaker. In the narrative process, it is an action transactional process. The witch doctor forms the vector through his hands and facial expression and he is regarded as the ‘actor’ and the other man who sits unconcerned is the ‘goal’ at whom the vector is directed to.

Interactive metafunctions: The native doctor shows ‘offer image’ act to the viewer and presented in oblique horizontal showing detachment from the participant to the viewer. The other man is in ‘demand image’ act as he looks directly to the viewer to say something about the prophecy of the witch doctor on who wins the presidential election and he is presented in a frontal angle. The social distance between the participants and the viewer is that of close social distance.

Image 3: Naria scarcity (Daily Trust 28 January, 2023).



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The cartoon is sarcastic and metaphorical. It depicts the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) cashless policy which seems unachievable on petty sellers and this is the part of the issue that surrounds the 2023 Nigeria general election, that is, scarcity of cash. A seller is seen with tray and her wares on it and with POS machine shouting with closed eyes 'BUUUUY...GROUNDNUTS'

Representational metafunction: From the cartoon, we have one Represented Participants (RP), the young lady carrying tray on her head represents a common street vendor in Nigeria. Her facial expression forms the vector, emanating from the participants to an unknown object. The absence of a phenomenon classifies the image as a non-transactional reactional process. The closed eyes and the POS machine in her hands can be attribute to the desperation and innovation of small business owners trying to adapt to the adapt to the scarcity of cash during the Nigeria 2023 general elections. The act of shouting **buuy groundnuts** highlights the economic challenges faced by individuals during this time.

The interactive metafunction positions the audience as observers of the scene, highlighting the struggles faced by ordinary people in Nigeria during the scarcity of cash. The participant does not face the viewer directly meaning it is an act of image offer. She is in an oblique horizontal plane and the social distance between the participant and the viewer is that of far social distance. The direct call to action by the young lady shouting **buuy groundnuts** evokes empathy in the audience.

Image 4 : “My cows are more obedient’ (Vanguard, December 2, 2022.)



The graphic representation is satirical showing how the president of Nigeria, Gen. Muhammed Buhari will swiftly ran to his home country Daura at the expiration of his tenure in May 2023. The arrow pointing at him with the inscription **NOVERMBER 2022, DECEMBER 2022, JANUARY 2022, FEBRUARY 2023, MARCH 2023, APRIL 2023, MAY 2023** depicting that he has just six months to ran to his place in **DAURA**.

Representational metafunction; in the visual image, there is one represented participants. In the narrative process, it shows action non-transactional process. The vectors are formed with his limbs and hands which serves as a guide to his movement, as he ran off his home country **DAURA**. The participant is the ‘actor’ while an unknown object where he looks at is the ‘goal’ In the conceptual process, there is analytical process the eye glass, the cloth, Daura (the name of his place) they are attributes to the president Muhammed Buhari who is the carrier. The suggestive symbolic process with the movement of the participant symbolizes that at the end of his tenure as the

president of Nigeria in May 2023 he will go back to his place Daura.

Interactive metafunction: In the image, the represented participant does not look directly to the viewer's rather to an unknown object, this is said to be an offer image and makes the viewer's imagine what he is looking at. He is in an oblique horizontal angle which shows detachment from the viewers. The image is a close social distance.

Conclusion

In summary, the visual grammar approach proposed by Gunther Kress and Van Leeuwen shows how visual images are used in communication. From the study, there is no doubt that cartoon strips investigate reflections of current societal situations and that of the members of the society rather than just to offer entertainment to readers. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) have stated that non-linguistics visual items can deliver meanings as well as linguistic ones. Also, that though language is the primary mode of communication but not the only means of disseminating information.

Consequently, from the study it can be concludes that the combination of language with other social semiotics resources (music, image, colour, language etc) communicate meaning effectively.

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