Some reflections on the iconicity of digital texts

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A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The digital text is mainly characterized by its animation and its "manipulable" nature (that is its interactivity), and it is commonplace to say that the digital text becomes an *image*. In this article, I demonstrate that we should take a closer look at the specificities of animated and "manipulable" texts, and consider them rather as "pluricode couplings", which involve two different semiotic systems, a text and a icon, within the same active support of the sign. The semiotic method presented in this paper is intended to approach different kinds of couplings between text and iconic signs and to reflect on the potentially "immersive" reading practices emerging from some of these couplings.

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According to Walton (1990, p. 219), when we face the image of a windmill, we behave as if we were looking at a "real" windmill, while we do not exclaim "this is a boat" when we read the word "boat" in a text. As Michel Foucault also explains in his book *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (*This is not a pipe*), whereas visual representation seems to imply a resemblance to things, linguistic reference seems to exclude it: "We show through resemblance, we speak through difference", Michel Foucault affirms (1973, p. 39). This assertion must be of course further qualified. The existence of an "iconicity" of the linguistic sign has been much debated, that is to say: its capacity, through the perception of its visual or aural structure, to display a representation of its referent.

In language, one of the elementary forms of iconicity is based on the assumption that a system of semantic correspondences can be found in the system of sound correspondences, and that the "sound" system could reflect the "meaning" system. The crowing of a rooster is translated into French and German as, respectively, "cocorico" and "kikeriki". These onomatopoeias seem indeed closer to their extralinguistic referent than the words "coq" and "Hahn", which refer to this animal in these two languages.

A secondary form of iconicity in language is visual. Hugo (1839; 1987, p. 684) states: "Have you noticed how picturesque the letter Y is and how innumerable its meanings are? The tree is shaped into a Y. The intersection of two roads is shaped into a Y. The confluence of two rivers is shaped into a Y. The head of a donkey or an ox is shaped into a Y. A glass on its foot is shaped into a Y. A supplicant who raises his arms to heaven is shaped into a Y." Depending on ages and beliefs, this iconicity is interpreted by authors either as an opportunity to approach the Cratylian dream of providing access to the divine essence of things, or as the reflection of the cultural values of human society (V. Hugo).

The font and colour of a text can also be perceived on an iconic mode, even if many twentieth century artists have rebelled against the idea of an immediate correspondence between colour and referent: "A colour is true, realistic, emotional in itself without being inevitably related to the sky, a tree, a flower; its worth is self-determined", Fernand Léger affirms (1965, p. 111). The group µ, a team of Belgian semioticians, therefore proposes to differentiate between the "iconic sign" and the "plastic sign" (1992): The iconic sign is analogical and refers to a real object. The plastic sign resorts to codes that come in lines, colours and textures, regardless of any mimetic relationship with the object.

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In digital technology, a text is mainly characterized by its animation and "manipulability" and it is commonplace to say that the digital text becomes an *image*. I think that we should take a closer look at the specificities of animated and "manipulable" texts. I will discuss such couplings between linguistic text and movement in the first part, and between linguistic text and manipulation gestures in the second part of this paper. Before I get to the heart of the matter, I should mention that I will not examine how readers actually "practise" these pluricode couplings. I will in fact consider them as "traces and anticipations" of reading practises that can be, either partially or completely, carried out in a precise communication context.

In order to approach and circumscribe the possibilities of the iconicity of digital texts while considering the reader's possible expectations, I will borrow some concepts from the German "Reception theory" (often called "reader-response" theory in Anglophone research). The main objective of this theory, as described by Wolfgang Iser in his book *Der Akt des Lesens* (1976; *The Act of Reading; L'Acte de lecture* 1995, French edition cited in this paper), is to study the reading practice as an individual and social co-construction of meaning.

On the one hand, the act of reading is influenced by a set of individual and socially shared elements, which form the reader's "horizon of expectations" (Jauss, 1972–1978). On the other hand, the act of reading is guided by the "repertories" and "strategies" of the text (Iser, 1995, p. 127 ss.) and the reading device, which already "anticipate" a mode of reception.

The "rhetorical figure" is radically redefined in this semio-pragmatic methodology: it is not only considered as a textual phenomenon, but as a "pre-figuration" of the reader's practices and expectations.

1. The repertory and strategies of a digital text

I consider the act of reading as an encounter between the horizon of the text, and the reader's horizon of expectations. The "repertory" of the text contains all the necessary elements to trigger this encounter: allusions to historical events, social conventions, models of reference, commonly shared representations… The strategies link these elements together, and delineate the conditions of perception.

In the case of hypertext, the repertory and strategy of the "parent text" (the text that contains the hyperlinked words) especially foreshadow a place for readers and guide their comprehension of the "related text". In this sense, the "action potential" of hyperlinked texts is based on the identification of the temporal or logical elements that are common to the parent text and the related text. As pointed out by Jeanneret and Davallon (2004), a hypertext conveys "traces and anticipations of readings": the encounter between the parent text and the related text results from an interpretative act, performed by the author, and which fully, partially or hardly meets to the reader's expectations.

2. Iconic irradiations

Hypertext does not only establish a relation between a parent and a related text, it is also an interactive, "manipulable" element that combines at least two different semiotic systems through the same active support: a text and a "manipulation gesture".

In a research project at the University Paris 8,[1] we have been considering certain sequences of gestures as "iconic signs", more accurately called "semiotic units of manipulation". Unlike the linguistic signs, which are (in principle) characterized by an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified, iconic signs, thanks to their visually perceptible or physically "manipulable" structure, come closer to the representation of their experienced referent. The semiotic unit "activate", mobilized by the handling of a hypertext, combines for example a consecutive, brief and non-repetitive press/release gesture within an interactive zone. Readers may recognize this unit because they already experienced it elsewhere, for example by pressing the button or switch of a radio, a lamp, etc.

The signified of the unit "activate" can thus be circumscribed by ideas of brevity and immediate reactivity, without being subject to conscious thought: the iconic signified is rather a form with which the perceiving body enters a "mimetic resonance" (Meunier, 2006, p. 137).

I propose to call "iconic irradiation" the interaction of an iconic sign with a linguistic sign. Iconic irradiation is activated by any manipulable hypertext and reinforces the expectations of instant "revelation" (Gervais, 2006): As if he/she was indeed pressing on a switch, the reader expects an immediate reaction of the interface. In some cases, iconic irradiation seems to be able to turn the text into a "pretence" of its referent, as I will show later by analyzing in detail an example borrowed from a German hyperfiction.

In animated text, the linguistic sign is coupled with movement. Some movements constitute the signifier of an iconic sign that we call "temporal semiotic unit" (TSU), referring to the TSUs in music. This reference to the field of music may be surprising. As part of a research project on musical semiotics, researchers at the French laboratory MIM have identified a number of "temporal semiotic units", such as the one called "obsessional", characterized by a fast, reiterated, insisting sound (i.e. a rapidly repeated piano note).[2] While I was watching some visual animations (i.e. flashing animations) and listening to the sound units (i.e. the "obsessional" one), I was struck by the impression of synesthesia that they conveyed. We think indeed that some of these TSUs can be equally implemented in sound, text or image. The reader recognizes these iconic signs because he/she

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[1] Philippe Bootz, Serge Bouchardon and Jean Clément are also involved in this research project entitled "Signs and figures in digital creation".

[2] Examples of sound patterns for the "temporal semiotic units": <http://www.labo-mim.org/site/index.php?2008/08/11/24-les-ust>.