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Viewpoint and image schemas in multimodal political discourse

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Abstract

This paper investigates the ways in which multimodal artefacts on social media can infuse a simple object with political meaning. Using a cognitive linguistic framework, I examine the sudden conceptual enrichment of the umbrella, an object that became the defining symbol of the 2014 Hong Kong suffrage protests. The paper contends that the enrichment of the umbrella, which allowed it to represent the political values of the protesters, was enabled by the conceptual integration of cultural frames and viewpoints in artistic illustrations, which retained the shield-like functionality of the umbrella while simultaneously enhancing its symbolic meaning. First I explore the material affordances of the umbrella and the rudimentary schemas that restrict how the umbrella can be depicted. Second, I analyze two popular artefacts disseminated online. One is a cartoon that draws from the iconic “Tank Man” photo from Tiananmen Square. The other artistically alters the Hong Kong flag to look like a configuration of umbrellas. Building on the basic schemas of the umbrella, both multimodal artefacts insert new viewpoints that prompt the re-construal of the original frame. Third, I posit that the new frames and schemas of the artefacts informed how protesters and the Hong Kong government understood the movement as it unfolded.

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1. Introduction¹

The new truism of our modern world is that social media have completely revolutionized the means by which we communicate and interact with others. Academic interest in social media has burgeoned over the past few years (see [Tannen and Trester, 2013](#); [Bou-Franch and Blitvich, 2014](#)) as scholars begin to uncover how social media empower sociopolitical movements and campaigns. We hear endlessly about the powerful potential these websites and online platforms have to fundamentally sway public opinion and alter the tone of public discourse. In 2011, for instance, the microblogging site Twitter was widely credited with triggering the Arab Spring protests—sometimes called the Twitter Revolution. While many communication and new media scholars have attended to the broader social, communicative and discursive changes made possible by social media, few have probed the cognitive properties of the multimodal artefacts disseminated online. A cognitive approach to social media communication is one that aims to explicate the ways in which multimodal constructions, such as visual-verbal images shared on the Internet, progressively transform into increasingly complex artefacts. This paper is interested in laying the groundwork for a cognitive approach to social media communication, in line with recent work done by cognitive linguists studying internet memes ([Dancygier and](#)

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Vandelanotte, 2016, 2017a) and discourse analysts specializing in mental space theory (Oakley and Hougaard, 2008) and critical discourse studies (Hart, 2010; Thurlow, 2016). My work here draws inspiration from and exploits the theoretical underpinnings of this growing body of scholarship. In this first section, I will review pertinent concepts in cognitive linguistics that the paper builds upon. The article's theoretical framework is set out in Section 2, wherein I develop a viewpoint-focused understanding of image schemas. Then, I apply my theoretical lens to examine the sudden conceptual enrichment of the umbrella, an object that became the defining symbol of the 2014 Hong Kong suffrage protests. In Sections 4 and 5, I provide a detailed analysis of two blends, showing how the umbrella's viewpoint and its materiality shaped the message of the protest. I also discuss how a cognitive approach to studying the evolution of online multimodal artefacts and new media, which has fostered a rich and vibrant space for intersubjective meaning-making, can shed light on how simple objects can transform into rhetorically powerful symbols.

1.1. Overview of key concepts in cognitive linguistics

1.1.1. Embodied cognition and multimodality

Many cognitive linguists and discourse analysts have converged on multimodal research in recent years (see Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Hart, 2015; in this issue). Cognitive linguistic analysis, though traditionally concerned with the verbal modality, does in fact lend itself to being applied to the visual medium. The seminal works in this field (see Johnson, 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999; Langacker, 1987) have demonstrated the dynamic relationship between our language, body and perception. This embodied understanding of language, for instance, explain why many linguistic expressions rely on visual and spatial metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) assert that our daily interactions with physical objects help structure schematic images which we use to describe abstract concepts with. For instance, everyday sayings like *She could not contain her happiness*, and *He is filled with rage*, are informed by a container image schema whose structural properties are conceptually integrated with our notions of these emotions to form these metaphors. It is therefore not difficult to see how a cognitive linguistic framework grounded in the principles of embodied cognition can be translated to handle and unpack multimodal, particularly visual-verbal, artefacts. In this way, we can easily imagine how the sayings that use the container schema can be rendered pictorially. An artist might create an image in which a person's body resembles a container and might depict rage as a substance exiting his body. A visual metaphor, such as this hypothetical one, can be understood as a product of conceptual blending.

1.1.2. Conceptual blending theory and frames

Developed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002), conceptual blending, also known as conceptual integration theory, models the cognitive process whereby two mental spaces fuse together to form creative expressions and/or ideas. Mental spaces are “small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk for purposes of local understanding of action” (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002:40). Mental space theory suggests that these packets can store information elicited in discourse (see Fauconnier, 1994). While some of this information is created and managed within the specific discursive context in which it takes place (e.g. the utterance, *I think Francis bought a new car*, builds a thought space that indicates what the speaker, in that particular moment, believes is true about Francis), mental spaces can contain knowledge and ideas that lie outside of these contextual situations, deriving meaning instead from embodied and/or cultural domains. These more complex knowledge structures have been described by some cognitive linguists as frames (Fillmore, 1982; Barsalou, 1992; Sullivan, 2013). A frame is a set of ideas that can be elicited by presenting one related unit within that set of ideas. For example, using the term *teacher* in a conversation evokes a “school” frame and makes certain connected terms, like *classroom* and *homework*, mentally accessible and relevant.

In their explication of one type of blend, Fauconnier and Turner demonstrate how conceptual integration bring together mental spaces and frames to form “conventional source-target metaphors” (2002:127). Their example of the boxing CEOs, wherein two competing businesses are figuratively portrayed as CEOs attempting to knock out their competitor in a ring, is a blended product that is generated through the selective integration of two input spaces. One mental space, called the input space, contains the “boxing” frame while the other contains the “business” frame. Conceptual blending fuses together these mental spaces, enabling us to construe the competitive nature of business as a violent boxing match between two corporations.

1.1.3. Viewpoint

While image schemas, frames, mental spaces and conceptual blending have been the primary frameworks and methodological tools used by many cognitive linguists, recent advances in cognitive approaches to multimodal discourse analysis have emphasized the critical role of viewpoint (see Dancygier and Sweetser, 2012; Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2016, 2017a, this issue; Hart, 2015; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). As an inescapable part of cognition, viewpoint is, naturally, embedded in all forms of discourse (Dancygier and Sweetser, 2014). Viewpoint theorists, however, have

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