Jordanian editorial cartoons: A multimodal approach to the cartoons of Emad Hajjaj

Hanada Al-Masri

Denison University, Modern Languages, 100 West College St., Granville, OH 43023, United States

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper investigates Jordanian editorial cartoons drawn by the eminent Jordanian cartoonist Emad Hajjaj. It aims at analyzing Hajjaj's cartoons within a multimodal approach to context with a consideration of three types of sub-contexts essential to the understanding of the cartoon's message: (1) macro-context, (2) microcontext and (3) dynamic context. The data is based on a corpus of 300 cartoons analyzed within a general linguistic framework inspired by Van Dijk's (2008) theory of context models. Two main results emerge: First, Hajjaj's cartoons take into full consideration the verbal, visual, and socio-cultural modes to create visually stimulating images and socioculturally relevant issues. Second, the study presents an inventory of Hajjaj's lexical devices and innovative techniques.

1. Introduction

Editorial cartoons have always struck a nerve in popular culture. They are available to a wide range of readership and they have a wide circulation through daily newspapers, magazines and recently the Internet and social media. According to Douglas and Malti-Douglas (1994: 60), an editorial cartoon is "an image, usually combined with words, often in balloons … [and is] generally a direct commentary on current events". Researchers have always been interested in editorial cartoons (also referred to as *political cartoons*[1]) for a variety of reasons: cartoons render a wide range of political, cultural and social events shaped by ideological viewpoints (Chaplin, 1994; Dougherty, 2002), they are a rich source of social entertainment (Gocek, 1998) and serve to release tension through their humorous and satirical remarks (El Refaie, 2009), they enhance social criticism by provoking self-criticism and reflecting by means of a process of introspection (Al-Mahadin, 2003), they carry multilayered messages about people and events (Gilmartin and Brunn, 1998) and they are effective because of their succinct nature (Vokey, 2000). Although there are many definitions of editorial cartoons that reflect their different functions, this paper adopts the same operational definition used by Douglas and Malti-Douglas (1994).

2. Theoretical framework

Many contemporary studies on editorial cartoons have adopted the framework of *multimodality*; an interdisciplinary approach whose theoretical assumption is based on the premise that "representation and communication always draw on a

---

[1] See Johnson (1937) for the history and developments of cartoons.

multiplicity of modes, all of which contribute to meaning"[2] (Jewitt, 2009). The multimodality character of cartoons; be it visual, spoken, gestural, written, three-dimensional, and semiotic have been studied by many researchers like Forceville (1996), El Refaie (2009), Forceville and Clark (2014), Negro (2014), Lin and Chiang (2015) and Schilperoord and Maes (2006), among others.

Khang (2002), for example, argues that editorial cartoons are unique modes of visual communication which may be more persuasive than language, see also Odriguez and Dimitrova (2011) for a theoretical model of visual framing. El Refaie (2009: 174) calls for a consideration of the visual metaphor, especially when "the metaphorical process of transferring meaning from the imaginary to the real world is conveyed predominantly in the visual mode". Lin and Chiang (2015) focus of the conceptual mode of the cartoons and propose a cognitive multimodal approach based on metonymies and metaphors. They suggest that the conceptual mode interacts and integrates with the visual and verbal modes to present the conceptual scenario underlying the conceptual metonymies and metaphors. Though promising, their model overlooks the role of shared knowledge and the larger social context essential to the interpretation of cartoons.

Forceville (1996), who have studied editorial cartoons extensively, rejected the traditional conceptual view of metaphors proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) since it only manifest itself in language and draws on the resemblance of two different objects that share some common characteristics. Instead, Forceville (1996) proposed a theoretical framework to analyze the visual metaphor as a cognitive phenomenon. Based of this framework, one needs to identify which are the two parts of the metaphor, which is its target (literal) and which is its source (figurative), and to understand the feature(s) that is/are to be mapped from source to target. Forceville (forthcoming) later developed his concept of the visual metaphor into the *multi-modal metaphors*, whose target (literal) and source (figurative) are each represented "exclusively or predominantly" in different modes and their similarity is cued by "co-referentiality" or "co-occurrence". Later in this paper, the analysis of Hajjaj's cartoons will benefit from Forceville's approach; particularly the *verbo-pictorial metaphor* which emerge as the most common type of his multimodal metaphor approach.

Unlike previous studies which analyze cartoons within the traditional sense of 'context'[3] understood in terms of participants' identities, roles, place, time, institution, and knowledge of the world, this paper presents a multimodal approach to context and proposes three types of sub-contexts; namely: (1) the *macro-context*, (2) the *micro-context* and (3) the *dynamic context* which take into account the integration of the socio-cultural, verbal, and visual modes of the cartoon, respectively. I argue that these contexts are essential to the correct interpretation of the intended messages in Hajjaj's cartoons and crucial to the appreciation of Hajjaj's humor, linguistic choices and artistic devices.

Since a consideration of 'context' is fundamental in this paper, the proposed multimodal approach operates within the general framework of Van Dijk's (2008) theory of contexts, also referred to as *context models*. According to this theory, context is viewed as "a special kind of mental model of everyday experience" (Van Dijk, 2008: 71), which is also "socially based but subjective construct of participants about the for-them-relevant properties of such a situation" (Van Dijk, 2008: 56). By this, Van Dijk (2008) implies that language users are active participants who are "dynamically engaged" in creating their subjective interpretation of social, political or cultural situations. One of the strengths to this theory is its interdisciplinary representation of the communicative situation as pragmatic rather than just semantic. What follows is a detailed explanation of the proposed sub-contexts.

The macro-context refers to the socio-cultural mode or the general knowledge shared between the cartoonist and his readers. It includes a set of values, beliefs, metaphors, historical awareness and ideologies shared among a community of speakers. As such, this sub-context assumes a collaboration between the cartoonist who presupposes large amounts of world knowledge and the readers who activate relevant parts of this knowledge to infer the intended message (Van Dijk, 2008). This sort of background knowledge, Forceville (1996, 2014) adds, prompts the readers to resort to their cognitive environments in order to understand the fine grained interpretations of cartoons. Mey (1998: 41) further suggests that this context is what "gives our utterances their true pragmatic meaning and allows them to be counted as true pragmatic acts". In Hajjaj's cartoons, the macro-context is the Jordanian society, with all its socio-cultural layers.

The second sub-context is the micro-context, which refers to the verbal mode of the cartoon. The importance of this sub-context lies in its representation of the cartoonist's subjectivity and his unique way of presenting his messages to the audience. The micro-context is represented in the form of a speech balloon and sometimes a caption or inscription. The speech balloon is particularly important to the linguistic analysis in this paper since it reveals instances of lexical devices and techniques distinctive of Hajjaj's cartoons, see Section 5 for discussion. Captions and/or inscriptions; on the other hand, serve as either textual descriptions of the physical environment, time, and subject of the cartoon, or are employed as useful contextual clues and metaphoric expressions to disambiguate a concept or an idea. Unlike the macro-context where the mental models (everyday experiences) between the cartoonist and members of his community are similar, the micro-context represents the cartoonist's mental model that characterizes his personal linguistic style. Van Dijk (2008: 60) asserts that "mental models necessarily embody personal elements that make all discourse productions and interpretations unique".

The third type of sub-context is the dynamic context, which refers to the visual mode. It is "the continually changing surroundings, in the widest sense that enable the participants in the communication process to interact, and in which the linguistic expressions of their interaction become intelligible" (Mey, 2001: 40). This sub-context also complements and

---

[2] For multimodality in spoken discourse, see Adolphs and Carter (2013).
[3] See Van Dijk (2008) for a comprehensive account on the development of the concept.