

# A multimodal discourse theory of visual narrative

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## Abstract

There have been many attempts to provide accounts of visually expressed narratives by drawing on our understandings of linguistic discourse. Such approaches have however generally proceeded piecemeal — particular phenomena appearing similar to phenomena in verbal discourse are selected for discussion with insufficient consideration of just what it means to treat visual communication as discourse at all. This has limited discussions in several ways. Most importantly, analysis is deprived of effective methodologies for approaching visual artefacts so that it remains unclear what units of analysis should be selected and how they can be combined. In this paper, we articulate a model of discourse pragmatics that is sufficiently general to apply to the specifics of visually communicated information and show this at work with respect to several central aspects of visual narrative. We suggest that the framework provides an effective and general foundation for reengaging with visual communicative artefacts in a manner compatible with methods developed for verbal linguistic artefacts.

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## 1. Introduction

The ability of sequences of visual materials to fulfil communicative purposes that are in many ways analogous to those achieved by sequences of linguistic elements is now broadly recognized. Indeed, the question of the relationship of film — i.e., sequences of *moving* images — to language and even film considered ‘as a language’ has been with us for almost as long as film itself (see the thorough discussion and further references in, e.g., [Metz, 1964](#)). An explosion of interest in the same question when raised with respect to sequences of *static* images — as in comics, graphical instruction leaflets, picturebooks and so on — is now also to be observed (cf. [Evans, 2009](#); [Cohn, 2013a](#); [Miodrag, 2013](#); [Schumacher, 2013](#)). Nevertheless, the general area of applying linguistic approaches to the visual remains one that is hotly contested. Many working primarily on the visual side have voiced fundamental critiques of the relevance of linguistic theories and methods when addressing visual communication. And much of this critique draws attention to the very different basis that verbal language, with its reliance on convention and the construction of larger elements from smaller elements, appears to have when compared with visual artefacts, exhibiting strong iconicity and an apparent lack of basic non-iconic elements that may be defined independently of their use in larger wholes (cf. [Gombrich, 1959:6](#); [Bateman, 2014:46–47](#)).

This continues to raise difficult questions not only concerning the theoretical relevance of properties derived from the study of language but also with respect to basic methodological issues for the determination of units of analysis.

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In fact, a broad feeling can be observed that applications of insights gained within linguistics to the visual are inherently guilty of the kind of linguistic imperialism commonly attributed to Saussure and Barthes, in which language is taken as the model, the “master pattern”, for all semiotic, i.e., meaning creating, behaviour. Given the rather marked lack of success exhibited to date by linguistically-oriented semiotic accounts of meaning construction in visual media, imperialism of this kind seems unwarranted. Indeed, although sometimes insightful, it is striking how little acceptance such approaches have found — semiotic accounts remain by and large at rather abstract, illustrative levels of application and even these are commonly considered with suspicion by visual analysts more generally.

In this paper we will suggest that one of the main reasons for this unsatisfactory state of affairs is the lack of analytic ‘bite’ that linguistically-motivated accounts of the visual have traditionally been able to bring to bear on their objects of analysis. The resulting descriptions in fact lack much of the general method of a linguistic analysis: particular forms or aspects of an artefact under study are extracted and discussed ‘as if’ they were linguistic in nature without the foundation of the broad raft of empirical methodologies usual in linguistic work proper. This leaves few principles for demarcating units — neither within images nor across sequences of images — and, once identified, consequences for interpretation are only informally specified. We believe that one of the most significant underlying problems to be resolved here is that of invoking inappropriate levels of abstraction. Verbal and visual media are fundamentally different at lower levels of descriptive abstraction and so drawing analogies too soon will tend to distort the respective subject matters. In contrast, we will argue that significant similarities between verbal and visual communicative artefacts can be located at the more abstract levels of *discourse*. It is then only at these higher levels of abstraction that insights from linguistic models can be beneficially applied and we begin to regain the sense in which sequences of both verbal and visual material can function similarly as communicative artefacts or performances.

The focus of this paper is therefore to articulate a model of discourse pragmatics that is sufficiently general to apply to the specifics of visually communicated information. We will suggest that this framework provides a new foundation for reengaging with visual communicative artefacts in a manner compatible with the methods developed for verbal linguistic artefacts, but without positing misleading analogies with linguistic syntax, morphology or phonetics. In the past there have been many attempts to develop accounts of visual artefacts and of the operations of visual communication involved that have characterized themselves in terms of linguistic discourse. But there has been relatively little critical discussion of just what is meant by considering visual communication ‘as discourse’ in the first place. This has limited progress in several ways. Most importantly, analysis has been deprived of effective methodologies for approaching visual artefacts. It is unclear what units of analysis should be selected and how they can be combined, which naturally compromises empirical application. By working through an explicitly formulated framework for analysing discourse that we have extended to operate across verbal and visual materials (as well as their combinations), we will show how a more robust position for analysis can be achieved.

We structure the discussion as follows. Crucial to the account is a reconstruction of the basic notion of *semiotic mode* that draws, at the least level of abstraction, on an acceptance of materiality and, at the highest level of abstraction, on a detailed model of discourse and its operation. For this, we also require an appropriate acknowledgement of the fact that properties of perception enter into the operation of many visual media in a fundamentally different way to that found with verbal language. First, therefore, we introduce our definition of semiotic mode in some detail because it is this that gives us the foundation necessary for applying notions of discourse across a variety of media. Second, we set out the model of discourse that we employ within our notion of semiotic mode, showing both how this can be made to lend itself to descriptions of non-verbal material and how a suitable relationship to perception can be drawn. Third, we illustrate the framework in action by taking several cases of visual narrative. Here we move progressively away from the treatment of verbal language to non-naturalistic visual narrative communicative artefacts. Fourth and finally, we summarize what has been achieved and briefly discuss how our approach is relevant for multimodal communication in general.

## 2. Semiotic modes and multimodality

Approaches to understanding the workings of complex multimodal artefacts continue to be hampered by inadequate characterizations of the notion of multimodality itself. It is common for sensory modalities and semiotic modalities to be conflated. This is, however, a confusion of ‘sense’ and ‘perception’. There is now considerable evidence that sensory inputs are combined and influence each other at very early stages in neural processing, well before perceptions are formed (cf., e.g., Kluss et al., 2012; Seeley, 2012). Since, as we shall argue in more detail below, semiotic modes require, and only operate in terms of, *perceptible* distinctions, taking sensory channels as the basic ingredients of multimodality and multimodal artefacts is not going to be adequate. More effective models of semiotic mode require that we first return to the basic notion of ‘materiality’, i.e., the ‘stuff’ which is used when making meanings.

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