Can pictures say no or not? Negation and denial in the visual mode[☆]

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Abstract

In principle, verbal and image languages have different ways of coding conceptual content. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that both modes, the linguistic and the visual, can convey identical contents, and indeed, linguists have claimed that images are not suited for expressing the meaning of certain linguistic categories, like negation. As the linguistic literature argues convincingly, in natural language a distinction between negation and denial is justified. Employing insights in visual communication and cognition science, this paper explores the possibilities for visually expressing negation and/or denial. At the hand of both the analysis and an empirical pilot study of a set of advertisements, we come up with a positive answer to the title question: yes, pictures can say 'no'.
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1. Introduction

The topic of this paper can be phrased as: can you say *X is not Y* with a picture? Or can a picture say *not X*? If it comes to expressive potential, there is consensus in the linguistic literature: the visual mode is by far inferior to natural language. For example, the visual mode lacks the kind of expressive devices permitting type/token distinctions, such as modifiers and determiners; neither can it express causality, optatives, conditionals, or spatiotemporal references. On a more general level, the received view is that the visual mode lacks vocabulary and grammar, and therefore cannot express assertions, i.e. expressions that can be assigned a true value. The possibility of *negation* can be seen as a litmus test here: only if a certain modality is capable of expressing a true proposition *p*, is it capable of reversing its true value by expressing *not p*. A clear stance on the subject is taken by Worth in his illustrious statement 'Pictures can't say ain't' (Worth, 1981:162). In the same vein, Jackendoff (2007, 105ff) argues that only natural language allows one to attend to what is not, and to express the complex conceptual structures that negation supposes. More recently, Khemlani et al. state that 'Much of language cannot have a perceptual representation, such as a visual image, and negation is one of the most important of such concepts' (Khemlani et al., 2012:546). Case closed, so it would appear.

However, Giora et al. (2009, in this issue) take a different, less logocentric stance on the matter of pictorial negation. Addressing the question whether the visual modality is equipped with devices equivalent to lexical/morphological markers

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such as *no*, *not* or *un-*, Giora et al. (2009) call attention to conventional visual markers like (red) crosses and stripes used, for example, in traffic signs and price tags announcing discounts. Such markers establish negation by being superimposed upon an image (or a word), their scope being determined by their size. In a message like ~~discrimi~~nation the scope of the strikethrough is limited to *discrimi*, while the remaining *nation* suggests some opposite meaning that results from negating the first part: <u>*no*</u> *discrimination produces nation*. The authors conclude that those signs '(. . .) allow a picture, taken as a whole, to visually say ''no'' (. . .)' (Giora et al., 2009:2224).

Markers like stripes and crosses are decidedly non-verbal. At the same time, however, they are not an integral part of the semantics of the pictorial modality but instead constitute a separate, extra-diagetic coding system relative to the visual mode. The goal of this paper is to explore possibilities for visual negation. However, rather than focusing on the kind of extra-diagetic markers studied by Giora et al., we intend to explore visual forms of negation that *can* be considered integral to the visual mode. The question addressed here is whether it is possible for a still picture to attend viewers to what is not, using devices that belong to the system of visual signs and its principles of assemblage. By taking issue with these matters we strive to deepen our understanding of the structural factors and expressive potential of visual expressions – in short, our understanding of visual communication.

The paper is organized in five sections. Section 1 is logocentric: it discusses views on linguistic negation in order to identify some of its forms and prerequisites. The conclusion is that negation comes in different types, that it is sensitive to focus, and that it may apply to various parts and aspects of an utterance. Section 2 addresses in general terms some of the expressive problems that visual communication is faced with. Sections 3 and 4 present the main results of our study. In section 3, we isolate and exemplify two pictorial templates capable of putting a certain entity in the viewer's focus of attention, and subsequently nullify that entity. Section 4 reports on an empirical study into the way 'real' viewers respond to images that instantiate the templates outlined in section 3. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Types of negation in natural language

In natural language semantics, a distinction is drawn between *negation* and *denial*. Awareness of this distinction may enhance our recognition of the kind of negation effects pictures might bring about. *Negation* is a sentential operator which changes the truth value of the sentence. Although negation markers such as 'not' or 'no' can occupy various positions in a sentence, at the level of formal representation the place of the negator is relatively fixed and allows only for minimal variation, such as scope variation with respect to other operators like quantifiers or modal operators.[2] In the examples (1), taken from Khemlani et al. (2012), (1a) exemplifies broad scope or sentential negation, whereas (1b) exemplifies narrow scope or VP- negation.

(1)   a.   No artists are beekeepers
        b.   Some artists are not beekeepers

The *communis opinio* is, however, that the difference between sentential and VP negation can be neglected. Horn (2001) treats both cases as VP negation, while Giannakidou (2004) argues that the analysis of negation as a VP-operator is not at odds with the propositional analysis, but rather a variant of it (Giannakidou, 2004; see also Napoli, 2006:247).

Denial is a concept of Speech Act theory. Its function is to *object* to a previous utterance, that is, '(. . .) to remove previously introduced material from the common ground' (van der Sandt, 1991:1). In order to appreciate the difference between negation and denial, compare the following examples.

(2)   a. S_1 Peter lost his wife. Mary is not happy.
        b. S_1 Mary is happy
               S_2 Mary is not happy

Sentence pair (2a) contains an example of *negation*. The two sentences enumerate (sad) situations, or together form an argument for introducing Peter and Mary to each other. In this case, stating that Mary is not happy is not meant to refute someone else's claim to the contrary, i.e. that Mary is happy. The dialog in (2b) exemplifies *denial*. S_2's contribution produces some inconsistency with regard to the assertion made by S_1, to the effect of removing its content (i.e. *Mary is happy*) from the common ground. In (2a), on the other hand, no such inconsistency is at stake. In other words, denials negate a certain utterance *X* that is part of the immediate discourse context by expressing *not (X)*, whereas negations

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[2] Cf. Moscati (2006): 'The overt realization of sentential negation is subject to broad cross-linguistic variation, while the logical representation of the negative operator seems to be unaffected by those surface variations' (abstract).