Interpreting Stereotypes: Images and Text

Mohammed Alhuthali

Taif University, Taif , Saudi Arabia

E-mail: mohammedhuthali@gmail.com

Abstract

While the concept of resemiosis is critical in multimodal analyses, in practice the focus often falls on understanding the individual semiotic resources in use and their interaction (intersemiosis). This paper uses the framework developed by Martin and White (2005) of affect (how do we feel about the images), judgement (how is this influenced by the social norms in use) and appreciation (how do we read the image) in order to structure an analysis of resemiosis. This forces attention to how judgemental this process is, what type of assumptions are made by the observer and how the observer's interpretation may vary from that of the original creator.

This paper studies a two frame cartoon and considers how we might evaluate this using the concepts of affect, judgement and appreciation. In this case, the reader of the cartoon is clearly meant to identify positively with the second interaction (both what is being said and how). However, it is worthwhile to note that in both frames, the street sweeper is presented completely passively – either as an object of pity or to be helped – lacking any agency in their own respect.

By taking full account of the concepts of appreciation and judgement, this allows us to also consider if there are other interpretive frameworks. These may lead the observer to read the image in a manner very different to that intended by the original author.

Keywords: Resemiosis, Judgement, Social norms and expectations, Multimodality

1. Introduction

Halliday's development of the traditional models of semiotics placed stress on the importance of context to frame the implied meaning and in influencing how different readers might respond to the same text (Halliday, 1978). This process was captured under the label of resemiosis (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Kress, 2010). Resemiosis addresses the reason why certain semiotic resources are used in particular contexts or for a given task (Iedema, 2003) but is primarily about the approach used to interpret text or other images.

As Halliday's original work was extended to place the emphasis on multimodality (O'Halloran, 2008; O'Halloran & Smith, 2011), it became essential to focus not just on the meaning of each semiotic mode and their wider environment but how they interacted (Lirola, 2006). Sometimes different modes such as the use of gestures and speech or words and images can be complimentary (reinforcing each other) and in others they may contradict or be used to address a completely different meaning making focus. In practice, while resemiosis remains a part of multimodal research, the focus has shifted to the individual semiotic resources and their interaction (Jewitt, 2005; Martin & White, 2005). One reason for this may lie in the emphasis on detailed coding systems designed to explore the construction and interaction of the semiotic modes. From this perspective, how an external observer might interpret the overall multimodal presentation can be lost from the analysis due to the complexity of most notation systems used to capture individual modes and their immediate interaction.

To address this gap, Martin and White (2005) suggest a focus on two aspects of interpreting multimodal images. First, is whether the constituent parts are complimentary or contradictory. In effect are they designed to reinforce (perhaps by moderating or enhancing their individual effects) each other or are they are either designed to cancel each other or focussing on very different issues?

The second part of their analytic framework is to identify our feelings about the multimodal image (in their model this is called affect), how our feelings reflect the wider social rules (judgement) and what values are we applying to our evaluation (appreciation). In combination, this shifts the focus from the detail of how the semiotic modes are constructed to the interpreter and the interpretation process. It also allows consideration of when the current interpreter may react differently to the intentions of the original creator and whether other interpretative frameworks might apply but were minimised or excluded by the original creator.

2. Literature Review

Multimodal research has always acknowledged the importance of context in the process by which semiotic modes are interpreted (Kress, 2010; Leeuwen, 2006; Terry, 2007; van Leeuwen, 2006). However, in practice the focus has fallen on identifying the various modes and how they interact (O'Halloran, 2011a, 2011b). Thus coding structures are often developed to show how ideas are built up, how the different modes interact and the extent that the different modes support, modify or contradict each other (Jaipal, 2009). The

consequence is, to some extent, that the process of resemiosis is removed as a focus of analysis (Iedema, 2003; Jewitt, 2005; Martin & White, 2005).

Thus the process of interpretation is often left as an implicit part of the detailed study of a set of multimodal images (Jewitt, 2008; Kress, 2010; Siegel, 2006). This tends to lead to a loss of focus both on the influences of the intended meaning making by the creator of the multimodal resource and the interpretative process of any observers. Iedema (2003) noted that when studying meaning making in a science classroom the information that a given session is from a secondary school level science class frames our expectations as to the type of resources expected and the interaction between teachers and pupils. However, it is still possible that different observers understand the expectations in different ways and this affects their view as to what should happen in the classroom. This also suggests that the focus of interpretation is at the composite (meta) level as much as on the actual semiotic elements (Martin & White, 2005). In effect, what we expect to see will strongly influence the interpretation of the actual semiotic elements.

Martin and White (2005) develop this argument by shifting from a focus on the interaction of the semiotic modes to consideration of the wider interpretative framework. This suggests that the mode of discourse is important and that this captures both how (e.g. text and pictures or multimodal communication or gestures and speech) and where (a workplace, within a shared social setting or in an un-differentiated social setting). In effect, shifts in 'where' may well trigger very different approaches to evaluating the presented information. In addition the concept of tenor (Martin, 1992) captures the participants, their relative status and the role they are taking in the situation. Thus interpretation can shift according to context and, of importance, an observer may not frame this analysis in the same way as the original author intended. This reframing maybe more likely if the situation presented is unusual (to the observer) or unexpected. Thus, returning to the classroom example (Iedema, 2003), our expectations of how a teacher and pupils should interact may well be different to the rules being followed by the actual participants, and this reframing will influence how we interpret the multimodal resources presented.

In Martin and White's (2005) model, this process of appraisal interacts with the other concepts of multimodal analysis as: "as an interpersonal system at the level of discourse semantics. At this level, it co-articulates interpersonal meaning with two other systems – negotiation and involvement" (p. 33). This leads to an argument that the process of appraisal interacts with other semantic resources as (Martin and White, 2005, p. 35).

In this model, attitude reflects our feelings about the situation we are appraising. In itself it can be further sub-divided into: Affect, judgement and appreciation. Affect reflects the emotional resources we have available to construct our emotional response. Judgement is how we use normative constructs in order to evaluate the presented information. In this context, our constructs are partly a product of our own background and expectations as to what is desirable or acceptable (Elster, 2007; Harris, 2013; Kenwood, 1999; Lock & Strong, 2010). Finally, appreciation reflects the resources available to construct meaning. In Martin and White's (2005) model attitude in effect "moves beyond emotion to deal more

comprehensively with feelings, including affect, judgement and appreciation" (p.40).

Table 1. Interpersonal Semantics and Other Semantic Resources

Register	Discourse semantics	Lexicogrammar	Phonology
Tenor	**Negotiation** – speech function – exchange	– mood – tagging	– tone (& 'key')
power (status)	**Appraisal** – engagement – affect – judgement – appreciation – graduation	– 'evaluative' lexis – modal verbs – modal adjuncts – polarity – pre/numeration – intensification – repetition – manner; extent	– loudness – pitch movement – voice quality – phonaesthesia – [formatting]
solidarity (contact)		– logico-semantics – vocation	
	Involvement – naming – technicality – abstraction – anti-language – swearing	– proper names – technical lexis – specialised lexis – slang – taboo lexis – grammatical metaphor	– 'accent' … – whisper … – actronyms – 'pig latins' – secret scripts

3. Research Design

This model of attitude as a tool to understand the interpretative process can be applied to ensure that the focus on resemiosis is retained in multimodal analyses. In this research, the concepts were used as follows.

3.1 Defining the Terms

Affect. Is used to answer the questions: what are our feelings towards the presented image or situation? Are these feelings positive or negative? How far can we link this response to common social rules and expectations? Is the language and image sufficiently clear that our response can be unambiguous or is it not clear what was originally meant?

Judgement. Reflects the social element in any evaluation and addresses the extent that our interpretation may reflect our own background and expectations. To assist this interpretation it is useful to consider if the image is something we would expect to see (veracity) and whether we believe it to be plausible (normality). Judgement also allows us to consider if the original author meant the image to be read in a particular way (and if so, how might our interpretation vary from that intended by the original creator)?

Appreciation. As noted above this captures the process by which we construct any meaning. It can be subdivided into reaction (does it catch our attention), composition (how the image is composed and how any images and text/words interact) and value (do we see any merit in the image). Clearly this links closely to the issue of judgement as we evaluate the semiotic resources presented.

These terms can be used to enable a structured analysis that focusses on the process of resemiosis rather than the more conventional emphasis on intersemiosis.

3.2 Focus

To enable this two related cartoons were chosen. They are designed to show two similar interactions between a parent and child about the consequences of the child's failure to work hard at school. As such the semiotic modes are words, and the facial and hand gestures of the participants. The key part to this analysis is to make the judgement process as explicit and clear as possible.

Image 1 is:

Figure 1. Interaction of Parent and Child (1)

Image 2 is:

Figure 2. Interaction of Parent and Child (2)

In the first image, the mother is speaking at her child, the language is demeaning of the street sweeper, she is pointing as if to emphasise distance. In the second, the child and mother are

interacting, the language implies the child should study to help the street sweeper, she is indicating direction with her hand rather than pointing.

Each of these images was analysed in terms of affect, judgement and appreciation. As is clear, such an interpretation is personal to the observer and the discussion starts with an acknowledgement of the assumptions that are made.

4. Findings

Before moving to a detailed discussion of the two images and their implications it is useful to acknowledge that some assumptions need to be made. Many observers may make the assumption that the adult and child are either mother-child, or, to use gender neutral language, parent-child. In reality there is no evidence to support this assumption about a relationship other than that between adult and child. It is feasible the two adults are teachers. However, it is clear that the images are designed to be read sequentially so the second image should be seen as a deliberate response to the first. Primarily this reading is derived from the way in which the woman on the right turns to face the other couple as they speak in turn.

4.1 Affect

As noted, affect is very much about personal judgements. This matters as which of the two statements we find the most appealing will in part be a product of our personal beliefs and in part a product of how the creator of the images attempted to portray the differences and whether or not they sought to make one more appealing than the other.

One interpretation is that the second image is the more appealing and this is a deliberate construct by the original author. Reasons for this include the extent that the first adult is using demeaning language about the street sweeper ('you will end up like him'), is pointing directly at the man and, from the facial expression of the child is speaking directly at him. The second speaker suggests the child studies 'to make a better world for him', the gesture towards the street sweeper is less directly pointing and more indicative of location, she is looking down more at the child. Perhaps the strongest clue of the original intent is that the first speaker is looking at the second with an expression of surprise.

However, this interpretation is substantially influenced by the world view of the reader and by a lack of supplementary information. We have no idea what conversation preceded the image that might place the respective comments into context. Equally, some might find the first formulation more acceptable, seeing the sight of a man carrying out manual work as a reasonable consequence for a lack of application at school.

It is worth noting that in different ways both images present the street sweeper as passive and either to be pitied or helped by more educated members of society and that a lack of education leads to undesirable manual labour. Given the presented image, it is reasonable to infer this is the intent of the original creator. However, a wider reading of the image could challenge even this assumption. In part we all benefit as a society from clean streets so it is a judgement to see the carrying out of such socially necessary work as in some-way demeaning. Secondly, the street sweeper has no voice or background. Perhaps he is a university professor

who decides to work as a street cleaner for part of the week? This is unlikely, but indicates how important it is to consider the interaction of affect and resemiosis.

4.2 Judgement

The concept of judgement forces the observer to consider the practical issues of veracity and normality (is the presented image plausible) as well as to accept how our own expectations may frame our understanding.

Since it is clearly an image drawn to make a particular point, it maybe that the full test of veracity is not appropriate. It is meant to emphasise an argument rather than render a typical real world situation. However, it is not unbelievable that an adult might use a passing situation as a tool to help their own child frame the world in a particular way. In that sense the images may lack veracity but that is not the same as saying they are implausible.

From the discussion under the concept of affect, it is clear that the framing of the cartoons is meant to make the second interaction more likeable than the first. The facial and hand gestures in the second instance are more neutral whereas by speech and gesture the first speaker is being dismissive of the street sweeper and presenting him as a threat – if the child does not study. In the second the speech suggests that being able to help someone else is a reward that will follow from studying as hard as possible.

The extent that this interpretation might be shared between observers is a product of social and political norms. However, as noted above, in both images the street sweeper is completely passive, presented as either a person to be pitied or helped accordingly.

4.3 Appreciation

This in turn shifts the focus to how we come to a judgement about the relative merits of the two interactions. One reading is we are led to favour the second speaker because:

- Of the drawn interactions between adult and child. In the first the speaker is presented as talking at the child, in the second with the child;

- The way the respective speakers point either directly at (speaker 1) or towards (speaker 2) the street sweeper;

- The important difference in language from 'you will end up like him' to 'you will be able to make a better world for him';

- In the second image, the first speaker has turned (in surprise?) towards the second speaker indicating a reaction to the different formulation.

This suggests the images pass the tests of reaction (it is sufficient to attract our attention and lead to some attempt at evaluation), composition (the flow between the two statements and the interaction between the characters). The extent that the image is perceived to be of value probably is more linked to the extent that the observer would agree with the presented message. In other words the extent that we see the second interaction as more desirable may have a strong correlation to the extent that we believe the images have any merit.

5. Conclusions

Due to the complexity of multimodal analysis (even when it is simply studying the interaction of image and text) it is perhaps inevitable that the focus tends to fall on both describing the individual semiotic resources in use and their interaction (O'Halloran, 2011a, 2011b). In practice this leads to the outcome where resemiosis is acknowledged as a key element of Multimodal Analysis (O'Halloran, 2008) even if it is then not the focus of many studies. Martin and White (2005) proposed a structure to enable a formal analysis of the process of resemiosis and one that feasibly allows for comparisons between observers and requires careful articulation of the process of interpretation.

The approach adopted has the strength of being grounded in various theories of perception and interpretation (Martin, 1992; Poyas & Eilam, 2011) and requiring the observer to articulate carefully just why they come to a judgement. In this respect, the method forces a degree of discipline and clarity on the observer when coming to a judgement.

The example used in this paper is relatively simple for two reasons. First the original author developed it to make a particular point about the expectations that fall on those who are educated and relatively well off. Second the semiotic structure is text and cartoon drawn images. Having said that, the first statement above is in itself constructed, not least the original cartoonist is not writing this paper. So we have to acknowledge that the analysis presented is the viewer's interpretation of the intentions of the original creator.

The advantage of splitting the process of resemiosis across affect, judgement and appreciation is the extent they interact but each also forces attention to a different part of the process of evaluation and understanding. The process is openly based on the attitudes of the individual observer and there is no reason to believe a different observer would reach the same conclusions, or, if they did, they might show a different reasoning logic. While in this paper, the reasoning has been by the author, feasibly a comparative study could be constructed using the questions and prompts to test for differences between individuals and how far those differences might be related to their wider beliefs or to their interpretation of the particular images and texts presented.

References

Bezemer, J., & Kress, G. (2008). Writing in Multimodal Texts. *Written Communication, 25*(2), 166-195. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088307313177

Elster, J. (2007). *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.

Harris, S. R. (2013). Studying the Construction of Social Problems. In J. Best & S. R. Harris (Eds.), *Making Sense of Social Problems* (pp. 1-10). Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner.

Iedema, R. (2003). Multimodality, resemiotization: extending the analysis of discourse as multi-semiotic practice. *Visual Communication, 2*(1), 29-57. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357203002001751

Jaipal, K. (2009). Meaning Making Through Multiple Modalities in a Biology Classroom: A Multimodal Semiotics Discourse Analysis. *Science Education, 94*(1), 48-72.

Jewitt, C. (2005). Multimodality, "Reading", and "Writing" for the 21st Century. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 26*(3), 315-331. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300500200011

Jewitt, C. (2008). Multimodality and Literacy in School Classrooms. *Review of Research in Education, 32*(1), 241-267. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x07310586

Kenwood, C. (1999). Social Constructionism: implications for psychotherapeutic practice. In D. Nightingale & J. Connolly (Eds.), *Social Constructionist Psychology: A critical analysis of theory and practice* (pp. 176-189). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. London: Routledge.

Leeuwen, T. V. (2006). *Introducing social semiotics*. London: Routledge.

Lirola, M. M. (2006). A Systemic Functional Analysis of Two Multimodal Covers. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses, 19*, 249-260.

Lock, A., & Strong, T. (2010). *Social Constructivism: Sources and Stirrings in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Martin, J. R. (1992). *English Text: System and Structure*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

O'Halloran, K. L. (2008). Systemic functional-multimodal discourse analysis (SF-MDA): constructing ideational meaning using language and visual imagery. *Visual Communication, 7*(4), 443-475. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357208096210

O'Halloran, K. L. (2011a). Multimodal Analysis and Digital Technology. In A. Baldry & E. Montagna (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Multimodality: Theory and Practice* (pp. in press). Campobasso: Palladino.

O'Halloran, K. L. (2011b). Multimodal Discourse Analysis. In K. Hyland & B. Paltridge (Eds.), *Continuum Companion to Discourse Analysis* (pp. 120-137). London: Continuum.

O'Halloran, K. L., & Smith, B. A. (2011). Multimodal Studies. In K. L. O'Halloran & B. A. Smith (Eds.), *Multimodal Studies:Exploring Issues and Domains* (pp. 1-24). London: Routledge.

Poyas, Y., & Eilam, B. (2011). Construction of common interpretive spaces through intertextual loops – How teachers interpret multimodal learning materials. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 28*(1), 89-100.

Siegel, M. (2006). Rereading the Signs: Multimodal Transformations in the Field of Literacy Education. *Language Arts, 84*(1), 65-77.

Terry, D. R. (2007). Intersemiotic Complementarity: A Framework for Multimodal Discourse Analysis. In D. R. Terry & W. Bowcher (Eds.), *New Directions in the Analysis of Multimodal Discourse* (pp. 63-109). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Introducing social semiotics*. London: Routledge.

Copyrights