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THE INTERACTION OF VERBAL AND VISUAL ELEMENTS IN DISCOURSE: THE CASE OF *THE NEW YORKER* CARTOONS

This paper¹ constitutes an introduction to a systematic research in progress devoted to the intersemiotic analysis of *The New Yorker* cartoons. In the above-mentioned project, the attention is paid to the interdependence of visual and verbal modes of communication in the process of meaning creation. The analysis of this relation shall be conducted within the realm of cognitive linguistics, with the application of methods derived also from neurolinguistics, which issue will be briefly referred to in the concluding section of the present publication. The aim of the paper is to present the introductory characteristics of the particular relation between language and image observed in cartoons, to characterize various types of cartoons distinguished in the analysis of the representatives of the genre published in *The New Yorker* in the chosen years, and to introduce the area of further research.

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1. Theoretical framework of the research

One of the terms of particular significance in the analysis is *discourse*. In literature it is possible to find numerous definitions of this term, and therefore it is necessary to characterize the perspective on *discourse* prevailing in the following paper.

In my research I follow a definition by van Dijk, according to whom discourse is a communicative event [in which] people use language to communicate ideas or beliefs (or to express emotion) [and which is a] part of more complex social events [such as] an encounter with friends, a phone call, a lesson in the classroom, a job interview, during a visit to the doctor, or when writing or reading a news report.²

However, the multimodal analysis extends beyond language and thus the definition of *discourse* applied in it shall be even broader. Consequently, *discourse* in my research is also perceived as an action applying signs of different types, insofar as “all signs, including words, are only signs because they constitute an action among other actions”. The nature of this action is of a semiotic kind, insofar as it relies on focalizing meaning with respect to temporal and spatial dimensions and assigning roles to the users of language. This action is further manifested in a text which together with context constitute *discourse*.³

Similarly, the perspective on *text* applied in the intersemiotic analysis perceives this phenomenon not only as “the verbal part of a discourse”⁴, but most of all as “a semantic unit: a unit not of form but of meaning”.⁵ Consequently, “the concept of text in its broadest sense refers to messages of any code (...) [including:] films, ballet performances, happenings, pieces of music, ceremonies, or circus acts”.⁶ Following this perspective, it is possible to consider e.g. an opera performance as a text employing various modes of communication. As Johansen and Larsen observe

“In an opera, for example, there is a libretto – a linguistic text – which is sung or recited and which is linked to the musical text. In addition, there are the facial and bodily expressions of the signers, as well as costumes, scenery,

² T. van Dijk, *Discourse as Structure and Process*, SAGE, London 1997, p. 2.

³ J.D. Johansen, S.E. Larsen, *Signs in Use*, Routledge, USA, Canada 2006, p. 53–56.

⁴ P. Werth, *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse*, Longman, London 1992, p. 2.

⁵ M.A.K. Halliday, R. Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, Longman, London 1976, p. 1–2.

⁶ W. Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1995, p. 331.

lights, etc. all of them units of meaning which the producer, conductor, scenographer, singers and musicians – and possibly dancers – seek to bring into a meaningful relationship with each other. (...) What opera and drama seek to present – our speech and behavior – can also be considered, indeed, must be considered – as texts produced with the aid of more or less strict codes and conventions”.⁷

Such a description of *text* is very broad and perceives many non-verbal aspects, such as gestures and facial expressions, music and objects as components of *text*, which not only accompany verbal message, but carry their own meaning as well. This observation is particularly relevant with respect to my research in which the attention is paid to two of the elements coexisting in a text, namely language and image. As I intend to display in the following part of the paper, the two means not always can be separated from each other.

One of the basic assumptions in my research is that multimodality is linked to the concept of language, especially when its written form is taken into consideration. The above statement is well illustrated when we consider different font used in the transcription of one word, e.g. *language*. Depending on the choice of font, the word may be perceived as belonging to the context related to information technology (e.g. *language*), old manuscripts (e.g. *language*) or a child’s notebook (e.g. *language*). The choice of font influences the way the word is perceived and carries additional meaning. The focus on language as a main mean of communication and ignoring the visual aspects accompanying it resulted from the tendency to study language in its “amaterial, abstracted and idealized form”⁸. However, in fact language, either written or spoken, is always transmitted with the application of certain means (either visual or auditory) which give language the particular form and add meaning to the conveyed message. Therefore, the best approach to verbal and visual signs is to investigate them “in conjunction”, insofar as “examining one semiotic resource in isolation, for example language, results in an impoverished view of how that resource is organized for meaning”⁹. Additionally, “when verbal and visual codes coexist in the same text, the meaning is not normally conveyed by the two codes separately, but by their interaction”¹⁰.

⁷ J.D. Johansen, S.E. Larsen, *Signs in Use...*, p. 119.

⁸ G. Kress, R. Leite-Garcia, T. van Leeuwen, *Discourse Semiotics*, [in:] *Discourse as Structure and Process*, ed. T. van Dijk, SAGE, London 1997, p. 258.

⁹ V. Lim Fei, *Developing an Integrative Multi-Semiotic Model*, [in:] *Multimodal Discourse Analysis: Systemic-Functional Perspectives*, ed. K. O’Halloran, Continuum, London 2004, p. 229.

¹⁰ M. Saraceni, *Seeing beyond Language: When Words Are Not Alone*, “CAUCE” 2001, p. 437.

2. Visual and verbal modes of communication in cartoons – an introduction

The abovementioned observations are well illustrated in cartoons, which highly rely on the particular relation between verbal and visual modes of communication. In fact, the interaction of image and language in cartoons is crucial in the process of conveying meaning. The proper interpretation of a cartoon is only possible when both picture and words attached to it are taken into consideration¹¹.

To confirm this observation, I have conducted an experiment in which 14 respondents were given (1) a picture which was the part of a cartoon deprived of the caption, and (2) a verbal fragment of a cartoon deprived of its visual component. The image from the first cartoon depicts a man distributing leaflets and standing in front of a poster showing the man's portrait and his surname with American flags attached to it. The man is accompanied by two other people wearing hats and scarves with the man's surname written on them. The picture depicts also a woman passing by, to whom the man is trying to give his leaflet¹². The participants of the experiment were asked "What comes to your mind when you see this picture?" 6 respondents answered that they associate the picture with the elections/voting, 4 people mentioned a presidential campaign, 3 people stated that the picture depicts a man taking part in the American presidential campaign, and 1 person said that the picture presents a "promotional campaign of a showed man". However, the full cartoon included the drawing and a caption stating "Good morning. I'm Craig Nisbet and I'm trying to meet women."¹³ The addition of the caption clarifies the message that the author of the cartoon wanted to convey in his work. In fact, what the cartoon depicts is not a presidential campaign, but it presents a man conducting a "mate-looking campaign".

The verbal fragment of the second cartoon said "You may now begin your insane experiment."¹⁴ This time, 6 respondents answered that when they see this caption a scientific experiment comes to their mind, 3 people associ-

¹¹ Another element important in the process of the interpretation of cartoons is context, especially in the form of social and political conditions of the period in which the given cartoon was created.

¹² The cartoon by Peter Steiner ("The New Yorker" 10/15/1990), source: R. Mankoff (ed.) *The Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker*, New York 2006, p. 535.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ The cartoon by Carolita Johnosn ("The New Yorker" 8/23/2004), source: R. Mankoff (ed.) *The Complete Cartoons...*, p. 649.

ated the words with politics, 1 person mentioned a crazy man wanting to control the world, 1 – a funny situation in a bar, 1 – “a vegan guy and his trip to Sweden,” 1 – a man talking about his plans to a woman, 1 – did not associate the caption with anything. Similarly to the former cartoon, the respondents did not associate the caption with the meaning created by the combination of image and words, insofar as the complete cartoon depicts a couple and a priest during a wedding ceremony¹⁵. The bigger number of possible interpretations concerning the caption suggests also that in certain situations image is capable of conveying more explicit messages, whereas a linguistic message may turn out to be more abstract.

The abovementioned experiment confirms what is stated to be the essential feature of cartoons, namely the interdependence of visual and verbal elements in the process of conveying meaning. In my research, *The New Yorker* cartoons are investigated, insofar as this magazine pioneered the modern gag cartoon in which „humor arouses from joining picture to words in such a way that the one ‘explained’ the other. In this form, gag cartooning achieves its apotheosis when neither the picture nor the words have humorous meaning alone”¹⁶. Whereas the existence of this particular relation between language and image in cartoons has already been described in studies devoted to this genre, a model of intersemiotic analysis of this relation has not been suggested yet.

3. Types of cartoons

While analyzing cartoons published in the *The Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker* (2006) anthology, I distinguished six types of cartoons, which shall be characterized below.

The first type includes “picture and caption” cartoons in which image, in a form of a single drawing, is accompanied by a short verbal description. The description usually consists of one or two lines and is placed at the bottom of the picture. In this case, language usually clarifies the depicted scene and contributes to the occurrence of the humorous effect evoked by a given cartoon. The example of “picture and caption” cartoons is the one used in the experiment described in the former section of the present paper, i.e. the cartoon depicting

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ R.C. Harvey, *How Comics Came to Be*, [in:] *A Comics Studies Reader*, ed. J. Heer, K. Worcester, USA 2009, p. 29.

a couple and a priest during a wedding ceremony with a caption located below the drawing and stating “You may now begin your insane experiment”.¹⁷

The second type distinguished in my analysis is a “picture and language inside” cartoon in which words are moved from the bottom of the cartoon and constitute an integral part of the picture. In this type of cartoons, a decorative font appropriate for the style of a drawing is used in the verbal communicate. Similarly to “picture and caption” cartoons, also here language clarifies the scene. An example of this type of cartoons is a drawing in which a man and a woman sit in a boat which comes out of a tunnel. While in the background we can see the fragment of a funfair, the water into which the boat is going to fall is full of debris, and there are also some unhappy people swimming around. On the wall to which the tunnel belongs, there is a sign “Exit” and above this sign there is another one stating “The tunnel of love”.¹⁸

The third type includes “picture with both caption and language inside” cartoons. Here, language appears both below the drawing and inside it. An example of such a cartoon is the one which depicts a man sitting behind a desk with a pile of books next to him and people standing in a line in front of the desk. The first person in the queue is a woman who is approaching the man holding an open book, which he is handling to the man. The verbal message included in the drawing consists of words “Meet the author” placed above the desk and the man. The caption located below the picture represents the words of a woman saying: “Could you write, ‘To Penny, my darling ex-wife, who nurtured me and supported me all through my struggles as a fledging writer, and whom I blew off the minute I had my first big success’”.¹⁹

The fourth discovered type is “picture, no language” cartoons. In this type of cartoons the whole message is conveyed by visual means only, which fact supports the claim about the equal status of language and image in the process of conveying meaning. Whereas in the traditional linguistic perspective, images were considered to be only the supplementation of a linguistic content, the discussed type of cartoons proves that image itself is also meaningful and does not need to rely on language. “Picture, no language” cartoon is exemplified by

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ A cartoon by Mick Stevens (“The New Yorker” 3/8/1993), source: R. Mankoff (ed.) *The Complete Cartoons...*, p. 555.

¹⁹ A cartoon by Michael Maslin (“The New Yorker” 6/24/1996), source: R. Mankoff (ed.) *The Complete Cartoons...*, p. 585.

the drawing depicting a man dressed in a costume of Batman and looking through a window at a nurse with a child hanging like a bat from her arm.²⁰

Similar observation concerning the function of visual means of communication in text may be also made with respect to the fifth discovered type of cartoons, namely “sequence without language” cartoons. A set of three drawings depicting an Egyptian Sphinx first in its traditional pose, then with his hind legs stretched and his rear part up, and finally again in its traditional pose is an example of “sequence without language” cartoon.²¹

The last, sixth type of cartoons is “sequence with language” cartoons. This kind of cartoons contains a set of drawings accompanied by either a caption, words included inside the cartoon, or both, such as in the example depicting a sequence of four drawings portraying a man addicted to cigarettes, who in the first picture is presented as an elegant gentleman, then as a coughing man addicted also to other substances, then as an imprisoned man, and finally the last drawing shows a coffin, supposedly with the character of the cartoon inside. The caption below the cartoon says: “The fate of the cigarette fiend.”²²

However, the last three types of cartoons described above fall outside the area of my research, insofar as the first two categories do not include any relation between language and image, and the second and the third categories rely on the sequential presentation of the included images and words in the process of meaning creation and resemble comics, which is governed by different processes than a single-panel cartoon.

4. Statistical data

Another part of my analysis was devoted to statistical research concerning the frequency of occurrence of types of cartoons characterized in the previous section of the present paper.

²⁰ A cartoon by Danny Shanahan (“The New Yorker” 9/11/1989), source: R. Mankoff (ed.) *The Complete Cartoons...*, p. 525.

²¹ A cartoon by Amie Levin (“The New Yorker” 3/7/1977), source: R. Mankoff (ed.) *The Complete Cartoons...*, p. 424.

²² A cartoon by John Held Jr. (“The New Yorker” 11/28/1925), source: R. Mankoff (ed.) *The Complete Cartoons...*, DVD.

In my research, two periods were taken into consideration. First, I have counted the instances of various types of cartoons published in the first three years in the history of *The New Yorker's* cartoons, namely 1925, 1926 and 1927. The next analyzed period embraces the years: 2003, 2004 and 2005, insofar as 2005 is the last complete period included in *The Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker* (2006) anthology. The results of the analysis are presented in the table below.

	1925 (total 294)	1926 (total 556)	1927 (total 713)	2003 (total 941)	2004 (total 945)	2005 (total 887)
picture and caption	142	414	580	688	694	683
picture and language inside	15	19	10	91	98	85
picture with both cap- tion and language inside	74	51	55	98	95	70
picture, no language	6	8	4	40	39	33
sequence, no language	0	5	10	0	2	2
sequence with language	57	59	54	24	17	14

The results of the analysis presented above reveal certain differences concerning the two investigated periods. First of all, the total number of cartoons published every year in *The New Yorker* increased, and whereas in 1925 there were 294 cartoons, in 2004 the number amounted to 945. This fact may be related to the changes in the “semiotic landscape”²³ of the contemporary world in which, largely under the influence of the media, language became less efficient as a tool applied in communication than e.g. image and signs other than linguistic are applied more widely in the Internet or TV genres, in newspapers, books for children, manuals, comics, cartoons, etc.

When the structure of cartoons is taken into consideration, both in the past and in the present, the most popular type consist of a picture accompanied by a caption. In fact, this form is traditional for cartoons, insofar as it is related both

²³ G. Kress, R. Leite-Garcia, T. van Leeuwen, *Discourse Semiotics...*, p. 257.

to the precursors of the contemporary genre and its earliest instances.²⁴ The second distinguished type of cartoons, namely “picture and language inside” cartoons occupy the second position with respect to the frequency of occurrence at the beginning of the 21st century, but were very rare in the past, with only 10 such cartoons published in 1927. This fact may be related to the contemporary perspective on language and image, adopted also in the present paper, which assumes the equal status of verbal and visual elements in the process of conveying meaning. Nowadays, language is not only used to comment on the image to which it is attached, but it can also supplement the message conveyed by the image itself. The “picture with both caption and language inside” cartoons appear in the third place with respect to the frequency both in the past and present. This type is very similar to the “picture and caption” cartoons, and, in fact, may be treated as its subcategory, with the linguistic message attached to the drawing which in this case is supplemented by an additional language inside. “Picture, no language” cartoons occupy the fourth position at the beginning of the 21st century, but were very rare in the past (in 1927 there were only 4 such cartoons published). Similarly to “picture and language inside” cartoons, the increased popularity of cartoons deprived of any linguistic message at all may be related to the fact that nowadays signs other than linguistic are perceived as capable of conveying meaning without the support of words. On the other hand, “sequence, no language” cartoons are very rare in both periods (in 1925 and 2003 this type was not published at all). In the past, this fact may be related to the abovementioned dependence on language in the process of conveying meaning, whereas nowadays generally cartoons consisting of a sequence of images are rare due to the separation of cartoons from comics²⁵. On the contrary, in the past “sequence with language” cartoons occupied the third position with respect to the frequency of occurrence, which may be related to the fact that gag cartoon-

²⁴ The precursors of the contemporary cartoons are broadsheets, popular between 1450 and 1800 and consisting of usually a sequence of images accompanied by a caption. The earliest cartoons in the form as we know them today appeared in the 19th century, with the first cartoon referred to as ‘Cartoon No.1’ published in the magazine *Punch* in July 15, 1843 (Harvey 2009: 27).

²⁵ Both phenomena are closely related historically. In fact, both cartoons and comics are believed to have common ancestors, in the form of broadsheets, but it is believed that cartoons underwent two paths of development, one of which resulted in the emergence of comic books and magazines, and the second preserved many features from the pioneering single-panel drawings accompanied by caption. Major changes occurred around 1920’s, when cartoons published in newspapers started to evolve into comics, and drawings included in magazines began to rely more on image than language (see Harvey 2009).

ing was introduced to *The New Yorker* in 1925 and was not in its peak form yet, while comics, known earlier, were more familiar both to the readers and authors.

5. Concluding remarks

The present article aimed at highlighting the significance of the relation between verbal and visual means in the process of conveying meaning. *The New Yorker* gag cartoons were used as an example of texts perceived broadly as a phenomenon reaching beyond language and, in case of cartoons, consisting also of visual elements. The article focused on supporting the thesis about the equal status of linguistic and visual aspects of text and provided examples of cartoons, whose proper interpretation is possible only due to the interaction of language and image. The nature of this interaction is a very promising field of studies, which may open new possibilities of the linguistic research. Moreover, the analysis of the intersemiotic language/image interaction shall not only rely on the traditional methodology, but may be also supported by the application of new technologies, such as eye-tracking, which enables to follow the movement of human eyes and thus gives an insight into the cognitive processes taking part in the human brain under the influence of certain visual stimulus.²⁶

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²⁶ The issue of intersemiotic relation between language and image in *The New Yorker* cartoons is further discussed in my PhD dissertation.

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to introduce the issue of the particular relation of verbal and visual elements in The New Yorker cartoons and to point at the significance of the interdependence of language and image in the process of the creation of meaning. The paper constitutes an introduction to a systematic analysis in progress aimed at constructing an integrated model of intersemiotic analysis and contains theoretical premises concerning text and discourse perceived as multimodal phenomena. The significance of the particular relation between language and image, which, supplemented by context are the key to understanding cartoons, is illustrated in a described experiment revealing that the presence of both picture and language is necessary in the process of decoding messages intended by the cartoonists. The article also presents a description of types of cartoons distinguished in the process of the analysis of cartoons published in The New Yorker in the chosen years and contains the results of statistical research revealing similarities and differences concerning the stylistic form of cartoons during the initial period of their publication in The New Yorker and at the beginning of the 21st century. The final part of the article briefly introduces the area of further research.

Keywords: cartoon, intersemiotic analysis, text, discourse

WSPÓLISTNIENIE ELEMENTÓW WERBALNYCH I WIZUALNYCH W DYSKURSIE NA PRZYKŁADZIE FELIETONÓW RYSUNKOWYCH PUBLIKOWANYCH W MAGAZYNIE *THE NEW YORKER*

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest wprowadzenie do zagadnienia relacji między elementami werbalnymi i wizualnymi w felietonach rysunkowych publikowanych w magazynie *The New Yorker* oraz wskazanie na szczególne znaczenie zależności między językiem i obrazem w procesie powstawania znaczenia. Artykuł jest wprowadzeniem do powstającej w ramach rozprawy doktorskiej autorki bardziej szczegółowej analizy zmierzającej do zaproponowania zintegrowanego modelu analizy intersemiotycznej oraz

przedstawia teoretyczne podstawy dotyczące tekstu i dyskursu postrzeganych jako zjawiska multimodalne. Szczególne znaczenie relacji pomiędzy językiem a obrazem, które uzupełnione o kontekst są kluczem do zrozumienia felietonów rysunkowych, ilustruje opisany w artykule eksperyment wskazujący na fakt, iż obecność zarówno obrazu, jak i języka jest konieczna w procesie interpretowania komunikatu przekazywanego przez autora felietonu rysunkowego. W artykule zawarto także opis rodzajów felietonów rysunkowych wyszczególnionych w procesie analizy *cartoons* opublikowanych w magazynie „The New Yorker” w wybranych latach oraz przedstawiono wyniki statystycznej analizy ukazującej podobieństwa i różnice dotyczące stylistycznego kształtu felietonów rysunkowych zarówno w początkowym okresie ich publikacji w omawianym magazynie, jak i na początku XXI wieku. W końcowej części wskazano dalsze obszary planowanej analizy.

Słowa kluczowe: felieton rysunkowy, analiza intersemiotyczna, multimodalne cechy tekstu, język, obraz