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著者名(英)	Luke Rowland
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# Multilingual texts as multimodal constructions

Luke Rowland

## Abstract

At the beginning of each year at Kanda University of International Studies, students design and display recruitment posters seeking new members for their extra-curricular activities. One conspicuous element of these posters, amongst the various images, colours and other languages on display, is the presence of the English language and Roman script. In recent years within sociolinguistics, there has been an increasing focus on written multilingual texts of this kind and an accompanying interest in the various methods for analysing and understanding them as multimodal constructions. This article explores the typical features of these posters and discusses the interplay between different modes on written texts of this kind.

## Introduction

In recent years within sociolinguistics, there has been an increasing focus on written multilingual texts and a concomitant interest in the various methods for analysing and understanding them as multimodal constructions (see for example Blommaert, 2013; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996; Piller, 2003; Scollon and Scollon, 2003; Sebba, 2012). Sebba (2012) posits that any:

account of written language alternation must be multimodal in its approach to the text, taking into account the visual and spatial relationships of languages on

the page, screen or sign, at the same time as it takes into account their linguistic properties. (p.113)

Thus, there has been a notable shift away from viewing written multilingual compositions as operating purely via linguistic means and an accompanying move towards recognition of the important complementary work done within these texts by the visual (i.e. through images, font, and colour etc.) and spatial (i.e. through layout and framing etc.) semiotic modes.

Each year, Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) students design and display recruitment posters seeking new members for their extra-curricular activities, which are commonly referred to by the students as 'clubs' or 'circles'. One prominent element of these posters, amongst the swirl of images, colours and other languages on display, is the presence of the English language and/or Roman script (RS). With reference to Sebba's (2012) ideas, the posters are clear examples of multilingual, multimodal texts. This article explores the typical features of these posters and discusses the interplay between different modes on written texts of this kind.

### **Club member recruitment posters at KUIS**

At the beginning of each year, club member recruitment posters are displayed in the hallways of the university. These posters are intended to attract new members to the various sports and cultural activities clubs at KUIS. The posters are designed by volunteers from the different clubs who have an interest in contributing to their clubs in this way or a particular skill set related to poster design. Generally

speaking, the target audience of these posters is freshman students who have not yet joined clubs or circles. The posters are displayed from April to the end of May each year and are regulated by a Student Council. Before a poster can be exhibited it must be approved and stamped by the Student Council and this requires that each poster conforms to various rules regarding, for example, the size of the poster, the area of the university in which it is permitted to be posted, and the length of time it can be displayed. Interestingly, the Student Council explicitly recommends (but does not mandate) that clubs provide some information in English on the posters so that non-Japanese speaking international students might be made aware of the various extra-curricular activities on offer at KUIS.

From a genre perspective, the posters can be seen as a blend of assorted advertising texts, community notices, and military recruitment posters; in my view, the students' posters form a sub-genre of these more established texts and one that I have chosen to term, *club member recruitment posters*. Bax (2011), with reference to Swales (1990), offers that a useful way of approaching the analysis of any genre is to consider that its function "governs the other features of the genre, its structure, content and so on" (p.49). Seen from the opposite angle, the features of a genre serve to enhance that genre's capacity to function in a specific way and towards a particular end. Clearly, the function of the club member recruitment posters is to attract and enlist members to continually repopulate the clubs after senior students graduate and leave the university at the end of each year. Accordingly, the student posters at KUIS exhibit certain common features which aid these recruitment efforts by ensuring that the posters appeal to the greatest

number of potential members.

### **Typical features of the posters**

With few exceptions, the posters share a set of features (see Figure 1) which are prominently displayed and often separated from each other linguistically, visually, and spatially, on each piece of poster paper. Figure 1 provides an example club member recruitment poster which has been ‘marked-up’ with *borders* and *numbers* to indicate the five typical features on display. Firstly, each poster carries a heading or banner (marked with a *1* in Figure 1), most often at the top of the page but occasionally in the middle or at the bottom, which communicates either the name of the club or the type of club or both. In a separate section, details about the club’s pursuits and activities (*2*) are usually given in paragraph or list form. A list of meeting or upcoming event details (*3*) is also given covering when and where the club meets on a weekly basis or when and where the club is next going to perform. Contact details (*4*) including the name of the club leader or captain and his or her email address are usually given separately. Finally, all the posters include images (*5*) of one kind or another, with many featuring photographs of club members engaged in typical club activities or of the equipment and uniforms that the club uses. Following Bax (2011), these five features all serve to support the function of the genre by attracting attention and informing potential members about what they can expect if they do decide to join a particular club. Moreover, the features themselves are aided in their work by their linguistic, visual and spatial arrangements on the poster paper.



Figure 1: Example club member recruitment poster displaying the five typical features.

### Multimodal support of genre features for genre functions

Using Figure 1 as an example, it is possible to explore the ways in which the student designers of the club member recruitment posters exploit the written linguistic, visual, and spatial modes to attract potential club members. With reference to Sebba (2012), it is clear that the five features in Figure 1 comprise separate visual-spatial units; that is, “contiguous areas of the surface (page, screen, sign, etc.), which are separated from the rest by areas of blank (text-free) space or by lines, bands or similar visual devices” (p.106). There are examples of English and/or RS in visual-spatial units 1, 2 and 4. Unit 3 is monolingual Japanese in a combination of Japanese scripts (kanji, hiragana, katakana). Unit 5 refers only to the

image of the headphones sitting on a surface. While units 3 and 5 certainly play important roles on this poster, the following analysis will focus only on units 1, 2 and 4 as they display English/RS.

### ***The heading***

The heading of this club member recruitment poster is monolingual/monoscriptal English/RS (i.e. ‘Music History Club’). The prestige associated with the English language is well-documented in studies from around the world (see for example Kasanga, 2012; Petery 2011; Piller, 2003; Taylor-Leech, 2011), including Japan (see Backhaus, 2007; MacGregor, 2003; Rowland, 2013), and it seems likely that the student designers have employed the English language/RS in the heading as a way of invoking a sense of prestige and *éclat*. In this particular visual-spatial unit then, the written linguistic mode is drawing heavily and successfully upon connotation to help the heading do its job of attracting attention.

In reference to the visual and spatial aspects of the heading unit, it is worth noting that the heading is positioned at the top of the page above all other units (although set against the background image). Also, the font size of the heading is larger than any other font on the poster with the capitalised first letters of each word (i.e. M, H, C) being the largest size text on the page. The heading’s position at the top of the poster, combined with the size of the font used, clearly support its efforts as the primary attention-grabbing device on the poster. Both of these modal aspects, one spatial and one visual, enable the heading to be visible from a distance (in contrast to other units) and to thus hopefully draw prospective members in for a closer inspection of details. It is the combination of the written linguistic mode and the

visual and spatial modes that generates the salience of the heading.

***Details about the club's activities***

This second section of the poster is a multilingual/multiscriptal unit featuring English and Japanese in kanji, hiragana, katakana and RS. RS is used for the name of the club as well as for the abbreviation of the name (i.e. MHC). It is also used to express various music related terms, such as DJ, MC, 'Dancer' and 'Club Music', and to communicate the name of a regular event in which the club participates (i.e. the 'Freshman Party'). Piller (2003) notes that, "internationally, English has become a general symbol of modernity, progress, and globalization" (p.175) and this poster designer's use of English/RS in this unit could be interpreted as an attempt to mark the particular roles of club members (i.e. DJ, MC, Dancer), the type of music involved (i.e. club music) and the main event that the club is involved in (i.e. the Freshman Party) as modern, fashionable and part of global youth culture. All other details are given in Japanese.

As previously noted, the languages and scripts in this unit are mixed and an equal size font is used throughout, conveying a sense of equality between the languages/scripts. Quite understandably however, far more space is given over to Japanese here as it does the bulk of the explicit communicative work, explaining the club's activities to native Japanese-speaking students, which is the primary purpose of this unit. One further point is that English/RS, where it is used, is either in sentence case or entirely in upper case which serves to further mark it as distinct from the Japanese language and scripts.



### ***Contact details***

The fourth unit is another multilingual/multiscriptal unit featuring the name and the email contact details of the leader of the Music History Club. One notable feature of this unit is that the leader's name is given in both a Japanese script (kanji) and RS (both partly redacted for reasons of anonymity). It seems reasonable to assume that this was done for one of two reasons: 1) to make the leader's name comprehensible to non-native speaking students and/or 2) to invoke a sense of prestige and modernity as in the first and second units. Also, in the second line of the contact details, 'address' is written in English/RS and the domain name from the email address is given in English/RS. From a native English-speaking norms perspective, it would usually be more appropriate to write 'Email:' rather than 'address:' as the prompt for someone's email address. In this case, 'address' would seem to be carried over from spoken Japanese, in which the word has been incorporated into Japanese from English as a specific spoken term for someone's email address (rather than their postal address). The poster designer has then decided to write the term in RS, perhaps because they recognise the linguistic origins of the term or perhaps to balance the different amounts of languages/scripts in this unit. As for the domain name, Sebba (2012) would likely classify this as an example of "language-neutral" (p.108) writing in which it is difficult to say which language, if any, the '@kuis.ac.jp' domain name belongs to. This is because the domain name in RS is a kind of 'forced' multilingualism/multiscriptalism which people of any culture with access to and the desire to use email are required to use regardless of what their native language is.

Once more, as in unit 2, the font size is equal for both languages (English and

Japanese) and all scripts (RS, kanji, hiragana, katakana). However in this unit there is a relatively equal amount of space used for Japanese and English/RS, with far less information needing to be communicated. One additional spatial aspect to note in this unit is that the club leader's name is given in Japanese *before* the RS version and this could be interpreted as an example of *code preference* (Scollon and Scollon, 2003), in which one language or script is marked as preferred through its position on a page, screen or surface. Generally speaking, the preferred code is the one that is at the top, in the centre or on the left or, in this case, preceding another code in sequence. Again, it is understandable that a Japanese club leader would prefer to give his or her name in Japanese *first* to a predominantly Japanese speaking audience. At the same time, it is further evidence of the importance of spatial positioning of languages in multilingual, multimodal texts.

### **Conclusion**

Amongst researchers of written language and multilingualism, there is growing recognition that in addition to the written linguistic mode, other semiotic modes, such as the visual and the spatial, deserve far more attention than they have heretofore received in the analysis of multilingual written texts. The potential of each of the modes for meaning making is significant in its own right but when the modes are analysed together it becomes clear how much important work they do in combination to support the features of a genre, such as has been outlined in the analysis of the club member recruitment poster presented above. This support in turn enables a genre's various features to effectively perform their individual roles in contributing to the overall function of a multilingual, multimodal written genre.

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