

DISCOURSE IN THE VISUAL MODE

Tsuneo Yamaguchi and Fred C. C. Peng

0. Introductory Remarks.

Language is not a collection or an infinite set of individual sentences. Though it may be useful to limit one's study of language only to sentences to focus on some particular aspect of language, to insist on such a limitation for all studies will often cause a linguist to ignore certain important facts. In other words, language is multifunctional which can often bring about sentence ambiguities as a result of disregarding the context of situation or other external factors surrounding the sentence. Thus, a study of individual sentences in their context will reveal more than if the context is disregarded.

As a consequence of the sentence-level analysis having become out of date, discourse function began to draw attention of linguists who have come to the point where they can no longer treat language at the artificial level of the sentence but at the more natural, and hence, complex level of discourse in a series of speech acts.

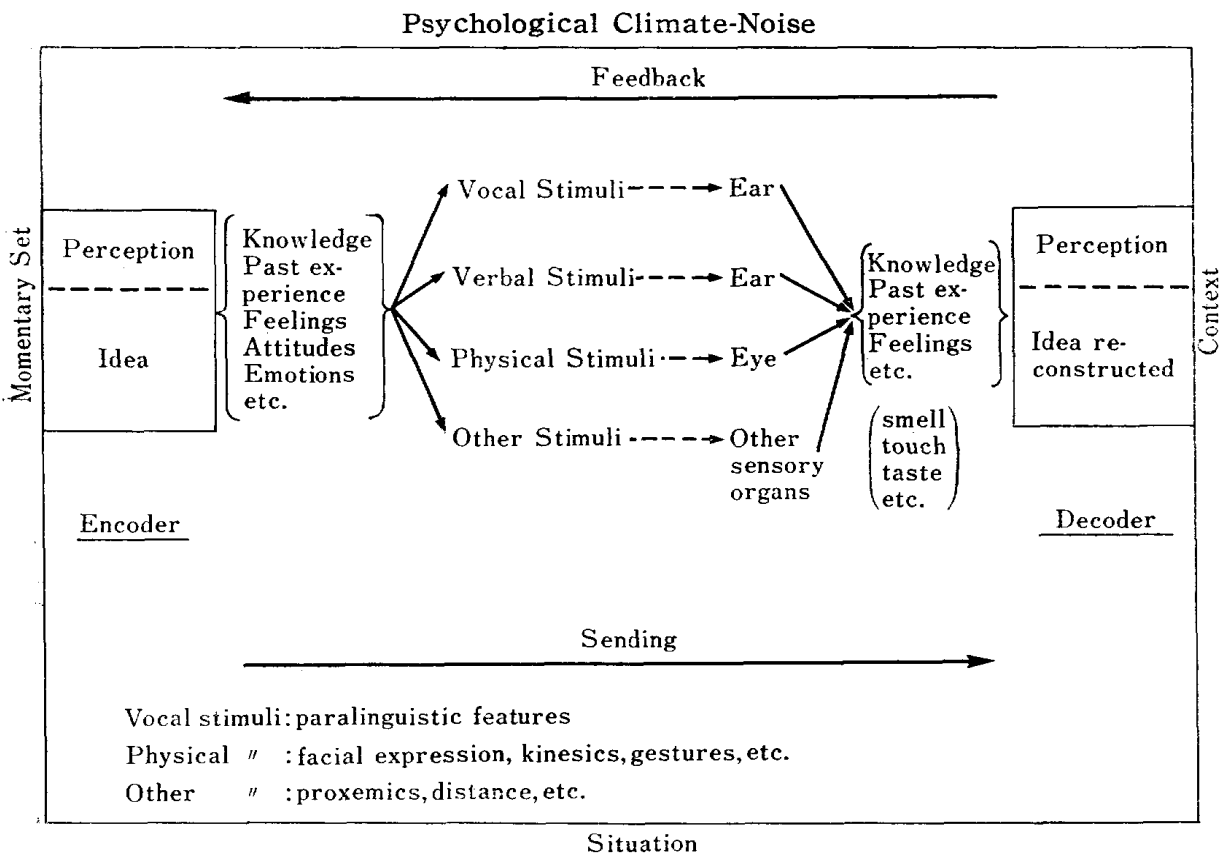
There are certainly many ways to study about language. This paper, however, is an attempt to deal with speech acts in the visual mode, which communicate by sight to a great extent.

1. Discourse and the Visual Mode.

K. Abercrombie (1968) said, "we speak with our vocal organs,

but we converse with our whole body.” Speech is closely linked with, and supported by, a variety of other non-linguistic systems or channels of media method, which adds to the meaning of utterances, provides feedback, and controls synchronization. In other words, there is often a choice of verbal or non-verbal methods of communicating, and these two kinds of systems, broadly speaking, often occur simultaneously in conversation. ¹ The following is a diagram to identify the mechanism of speech acts, while expounding that the behaviors required to produce and interpret a discourse are not simply code-determined, but rather involve the use of some established and some unconventional codes in very idiosyncratic ways.

Fig. 1



As is shown in the foregoing diagram, a speech interaction involves the simultaneous use of audition and vision as well as several other sensory channels. What should be noted here, however, is the importance of the visual effect on a successful total communication through the visual mode. In short, we react more to what we see than to whatever we detect by other senses. This is true on the ground that the optic nerves are responsible for 80 per cent of the information we process.

Then, this would be a pertinent place to refer to "discourse in the visual mode." When we think of a discourse, the image that comes to mind is that of a conversation, monologue, or a written treatise as is likewise defined so in a dictionary,² but never that of cartoons or comics. In retrospect briefly of its history, discourse analysis has outgrown the sentence- and text-level analysis after structuralist methods having entailed the taking of stretches of language longer than the sentence. In fact, while a lot of attempts have been made at each level, the sociolinguist seeks a broad and detailed description of language above the level of the sentence and the text.³ The attempt of an analysis of cartoon discourse, however, seems to have some advantages over that of other texts, particularly, owing to the visual effect hyperbolized on our communication. Since discourse in cartoons seems able to express more than is explicitly stated in words alone, cartoon discourse is something more than transmission of explicit information. Thus, it should become clear that cartoon discourse is not simply the transmission and interpretation of coded information.

It further argues, then, that a formalization of cartoon discourse involves an enlargement of the linguistic domain, it includes elements

of the context of situation, which accompany real world conditions attendant on the speech act, and thus, are understood through unexpressed lexical information : the visual effect.

2. An Analysis of Cartoon Discourse.

While dealing with cartoon discourse as well as discourse at large, we cannot forget the notion of the "context of situation." The actual words of any verbal exchange must be fitted into a wider physical, mental and social context. The actual communication can take place only in a situation in which the participants share much in common : a physical location ; a goal ; an interest ; etc. Thus, they cannot be usefully dissociated from this overall context of situation, from which one of the concerns of this paper arises ; that is, language is context-dependent and, therefore, not a self-contained entity.

In verifying this concept, several experiments for one thing were attempted, in which the material used were cartoons and comic strips. And this is where the analysis of cartoon discourse can take shape. Although cartoons are being underlined with quite a tinsel social evaluation, they are well-equipped for the purpose of multitudinous examinations. The relationship between cartoons and the viewer shapes a good communication channel with illustrated as well as framed contexts through which success in decoding and encoding of information is achieved.

Furthermore, the speech in cartoons is printed in letters, and the sequence of movements is cut into pieces, frame by frame, and yet the whole remains quite picturesque as well as realistic. As a consequence, nothing can be more valuable than cartoons for

research use, for very often in research we want a still picture to give us time to study it. Often the essential aspect of movement is the change from one position to another rather than the actual motion. After all, pictures in cartoons give realism to speech or discourse occurring there. Pictures present us the appropriate speech action which is printed in the frame. This is why cartoons seem valuable for discourse analysis.

The following are the objectives which run at the bottom of the paper.

1. How do people decode the highly condensed utterances of everyday speech, and how do they use the social system for doing so?
2. How do people reveal the ideational and interpersonal environment within which what they are saying is to be interpreted? (How do they construct the social contexts in which meaning takes place?)
3. How do people relate the social context to the linguistic system? (How do they deploy their meaning potential in actual semantic exchange?)⁴

Unlike written discourse, which consists of sentences strung out sequentially like pearls of a string, cartoon discourse expresses meaning by the simultaneous combination of the visual mode and the written discourse. Decoding the written discourse deals primarily with abstract linguistic symbols, but the visual mode can effectively serve as a natural bridge between the pictorial imagination and language written.

In this work of cartoon discourse, the primary concept underlying throughout the entire experimentation is the effect of visual mode not only upon cartoon discourse, but also on our total communication, in that we know we react more to what we see than to

whatever we deduct by other senses. Such being the case, we could probably increase the amount of English by leaps and bounds in our learning if only we could make better use of our visual mode. And this could become one significant contribution to overthrow the long-lasting dark period of English teaching here in Japan.

2. 1. *Types of Discourse.*

The form of the cartoon discourse risen out as a great concern over discourse in general is roughly divided into two: *sequential* (or *linear*) and *simultaneous* discourse.

2. 1. 1. *Sequential (= Linear) Discourse.*

As is literally implied, the sequential discourse takes the linear form as its base-line of the discourse at large. This can go either horizontally or vertically, depending on the established convention. Japanese, for example, takes both forms in its written discourse. This is attributed to the fact that we make use of two types of written forms such as "Hiragana" or script Japanese syllabary, "Kanji" or Chinese characters, and "Katakana" or square Japanese syllabary, for the convenience to relate to the Japanese phenomena by the former, and the foreign phenomena by the latter. The first two types of writing can be written in both horizontal and vertical manners, whereas the third type is, more often than not, preferred horizontally. This phenomenon is also employed in the case of the cartoon discourse.

In fact, this concept of linearity or sequentiality runs at the bottom of discourse of all kinds in terms of semantic coherence. And when this principle is somehow disrupted, for instance, by the reduction of some linguistic elements or the deletion disregarding the context

of unrelated digression from the story, then, the discourse chain loses its coherence and, thus, the ill-formed discourse will result in terms of the semantic range. The following example makes it clear.

A : What's for dinner tonight ?

B : Beefstew.

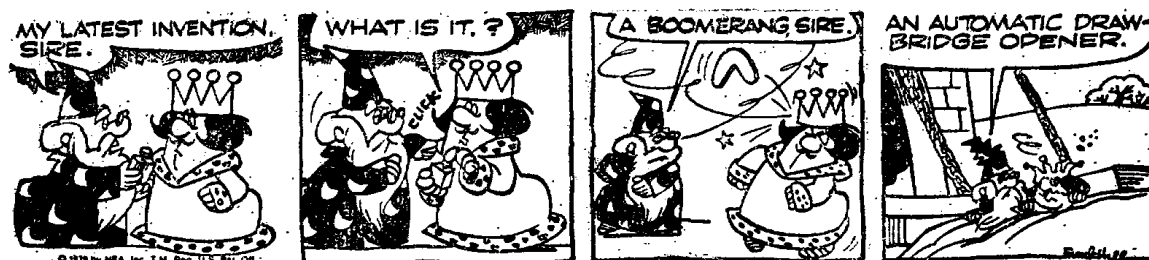
A : Who's made it ?

B : I'm so hungry.

Concerning the above discourse, *B*'s response is anomalous, lacking its semantic consistency. We can *visualize* what will happen afterwards ; *A* would probably be upset about *B*'s impolite as well as rude manner, disregarding the "norm" or "rule" of discourse. This is all because this discourse is disrupted by an illogical response which, after all, lacks the linearity of discourse.

Another example, this time, is of strips of cartoon.

Fig. 2



In the sequence of the above strips, deliberate insertion of an irrelevant frame causes disruption of linearity the whole story possesses. The second one from right is the frame in question. The right sequence is as follows.

Fig. 3



With this concept of sequential discourse kept in mind, let us now proceed to discuss “visual discourse” in the next section.

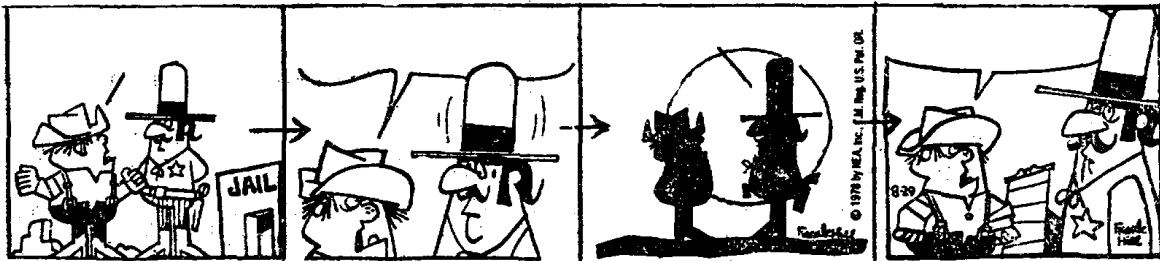
2. 1. 2. *Visual Discourse.*

By visual discourse, or simply, picture story, is meant the activation of message transmission through the visual effect of cartoons. This concept of visual discourse will be amplified in the course of the following experimentation. In the meantime, suffice it to say that the reception of the message is via the visual channel and is not verbally explicit. It is presumably in two steps. the first being the intake of the pictures in sequence and the second, their significance.

Visual discourse so defined is of course not limited to the comic strip. The cartoon or single cartoon, as is sometimes so called, can produce the same effect, because it can result in a chain of a number of verbal or written descriptions, forming a discourse. Visual discourse can be diagrammed as follows (see Fig. 4 & 5), together with the conventional “linguistic discourse” (see Fig. 6).

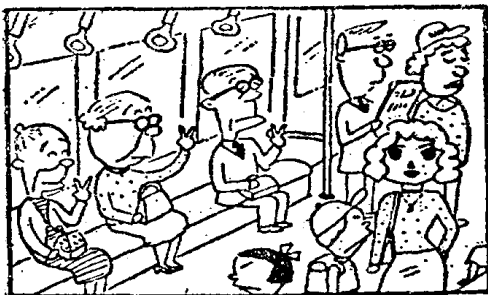
The following are three illustrations of discourse the first two being visual, one devoid of written message and the other, accompanied by it, and the third being linguistic.

Fig. 4 Visual Discourse : A 4-panel comic strip



This is the series of picture without a written discourse :
It is a kind of discourse chain formed as a result of
invisible relationships of each other.

Fig. 5 Visual Discourse : A single cartoon



→ →
Somebody has spread a false rumor + Trains have mites + A take-off on the rudeness of young Japanese passengers

A single cartoon can result in a series of utterances,
forming a discourse chain in our head and can be described
either verbally or in writing.

Fig. 6 Linguistic discourse

An earthquake is a shaking
movement of the earth's surface

+

They are most commonly caused by
the jar given the earth's surface
when a fault occurs

+

Study of earthquake helps us to
learn more about the nature of the
earth's interior

+

The safest place to stand during
an earthquake is in a doorway

A series of speech activities can be sequenced as a unit in different sizes such as a "paragraph," "passage," "text," etc. The explicit wording, however, is essential for the complete transmission of the message intended.

2. 1. 3. *Simultaneous Discourse.*

When two different systems of communication function at the same time, this is termed "simultaneous discourse." Cartoon discourse is a case in point where two systems, non-linguistic and linguistic, are involved, thereby displaying the intersystemic function of language in communication.

Cartoon discourse so defined is made up of two types. The first is when a single cartoon is accompanied by a caption. The caption, needless to say, functions to explain the general view of the picture, while the picture itself depicts the intent of the message to be transmitted (see Fig. 7). The second is the case of a comic strip. When each frame of a strip precedes, accompanied by a written passage, the linearized message is expressed together in the two systems, giving rise to a diffuse whole of simultaneous discourse (see Fig. 8). Thus, unlike written discourse, which consists of sentences strung out sequentially like a string of pearls, we can say that cartoon discourse is simultaneous in that it makes use of the

visual mode in two different forms: non-linguistic or picture and linguistic or written passage. Decoding the linguistic side is primarily to deal with abstract linguistic symbols, but the visual discourse (by "visual discourse" here is meant pictorial discourse, although written discourse is also visual in a strict sense, as is understood earlier) can effectively serve as a natural bridge between the pictorial information and the language written with the picturized and social context, while narrowing down the referents of words or of picture which are an index to other implicit meanings.

While sequential information of the picture is reorganized and reordered into the form of a general maxim, association by contiguity is transformed into association by similarity. This rhythmic correlation between the visual mode and linguistic discourse can be called the simultaneous function of "self-synchrony" (Condon & Ogston, 1967), referring to the synchronized functions of both

Fig. 7 Simultaneous discourse : A single cartoon and caption



"I outgrew sports cars. I outgrew surfing, and I think it won't be long now before I outgrow girls!"

"I wish I could get my youth back! I used to pick on young chicks,"

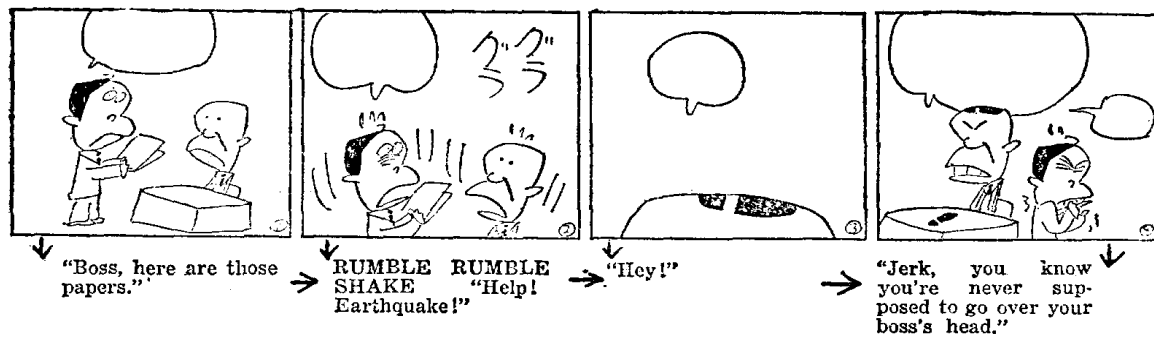
(**Visual or mental**
discourse)

Linguistic and visual discourse make up the whole flow of discourse.

modes.

The following diagrams as well as sample cartoons show again the simultaneous interaction of the two kinds of discourse.

Fig. 8 Simultaneous discourse : 4 - panel comic story



Linguistic and visual discourse form the synchronized harmony of the two discourse, completing the series of story with full understanding.

The cartoon discourse works, because it allows the viewer to attend to these two channels of communication : visual and linguistic mode at a time. Though cartoon discourse seems much more complicated than a simple written discourse, it does make use of some basic non-verbal elements such as "kinesics," "paralinguistics," and proxemics" and, thus, may be less overwhelming than a mere written discourse to, for example, whoever has difficulty with language.

3. Functional Analysis of Cartoon Discourse.

Cartoon discourse is the sum of several channels of communication intersystemically functioning to accomplish a chain of discourse. And from the utterances in the cartoon specimen below, while disregarding any other "background" feature, nothing can be revealed. Neither interlocutors nor the context of situation is made clear. Hence, Peng's model (1979) of language function is applied to its analysis :

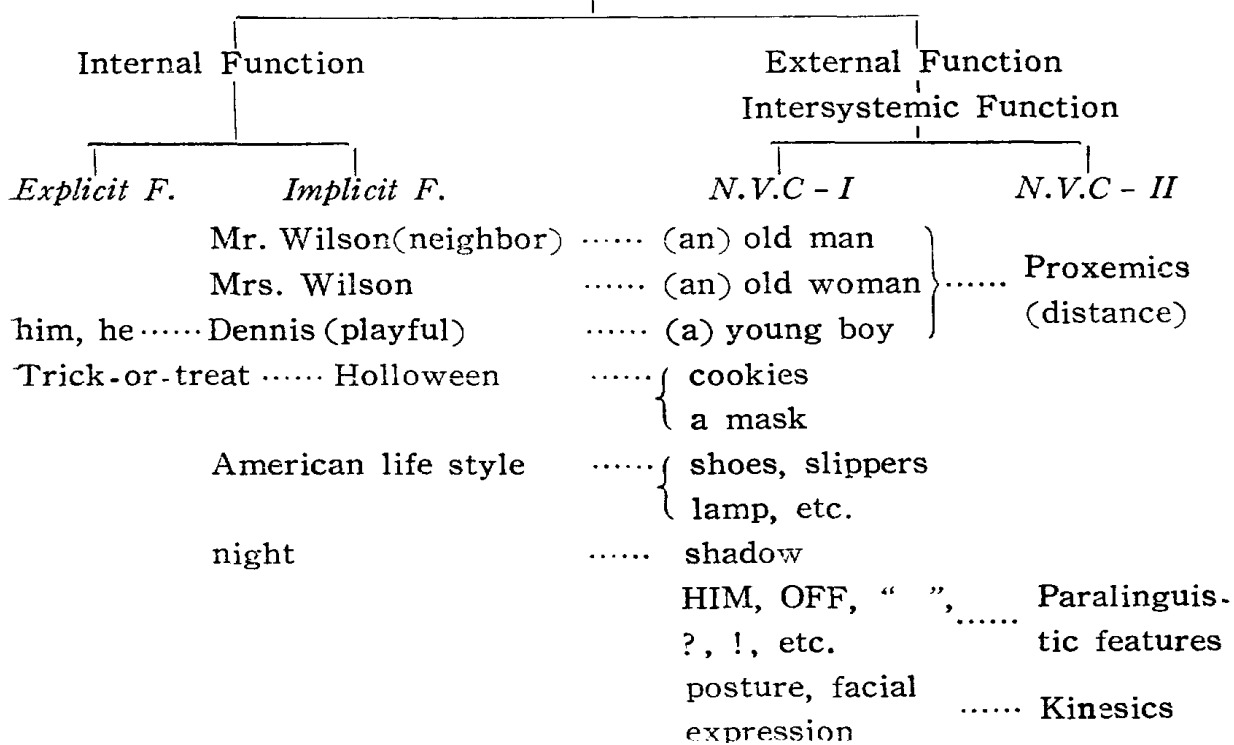
Fig. 9 (I)



'WITH HIM IT'S TRICK-OR-TREAT ALL YEAR LONG! WHY DOESN'T HE TAKE THE DAY OFF?'

Fig. 9 (II)

Cartoon Discourse



The cartoon explicitly provided such pronominal elements as “him” and “he”, for instance. If coherent discourse triggers the reduction of various elements in the surface structure such as definiteness, pronominalization, and sometimes out-right deletion, then, certain problems in analysis are created. Often to find a common element, we must supply missing material, omitted because a reader/listner would be expected to assume it without overt mention. Thus, unless the corresponding person to “him” or “he” is identified by some means in a preceding sentence, this utterance becomes “ill-formed.” This missing part, however, is supplied visually as is seen in the cartoon. In cartoon discourse it is not surprising that these processes are ubiquitous. Their presence testifies to the fact that discourse is usually unified. That is, the intersystemic integrity of the functions of both linguistic and non-linguistic variables are unified.

The old man and woman are Mr. and Mrs. Wilson who are next-door neighbors to the young boy whose name is Dennis. He is a playful child who always comes around their place, causing harrassment which is oftentimes a big headache to them. This is the information without which we are unable to detect what this single cartoon (Fig. 9) is all about. This is the implicit dimension of language discourse.

In the same vein, “cookies,” “slippers” “a lamp,” etc. are all the artifacts representing the American way of life and culture, from which we learn more about the scene of the cartoon.

Then, by looking at the location of each cartoon character (or distance), we can observe a relative relationship between Dennis and the old man and woman.

Their postures, facial expressions and some other bodily features

emit some kinesic information, while *HIM*, *OFF*, *!*, *?*, and “ ” are visually symbolized paralinguistic features which give a great deal of meaning to the cartoon.

Now, much more about the preceding sample cartoon can be said, and it is amazing to know how richly the cartoon is endowed with information in terms of the contextual feature. Thus, by analyzing cartoon discourse from both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects according to the functions of language presented earlier in Fig. 8, we may be able to come to the conclusion that cartoon discourse is *sine qua non*, particularly, for language teaching in Japan.

4. Conclusion.

Some of the findings out of the study of cartoon discourse are as follows :

1. Speech or discourse in cartoons always accompanies an appropriate context of situation, called “framed context” in which the speech originates, although discourse is never vocalized. Thus, both visual and linguistic modes through some adjustments and accommodations, to borrow Piaget’s terms, can account for everything we need to understand the context-bound speech
2. Pictures in cartoons, in contrast with discourse, are, more often than not, a more powerful and effective representation in a whole spectrum of communication since we listen with more than our ears, and we listen for more than sound we listen with all appropriate senses to perceive the total situation or receive the total communication
3. The phonetic change of speech or other delicate modifications of sound, including intonation patterns or “paralinguistic” features, can hardly be displayed in the written form. Nevertheless, various uniquely designed uses of symbols or other descriptive methods

render the viewer truth-like images of the objects in accordance with accompanied bodily movements or "kinesics" of cartoon characters. Thus, we can become emotionally active through this perceptual effect upon us, and can feel realism better

4. Cultural knowledge behind those gesticulative movements in cartoons is learned, which is far more effective than simply learning through written texts. This is a fact so important that cartoons can be very much usable for foreign language teaching
5. The social meaning of a term shifts with the situation, through which we realize true meanings of words, sentence use and, as a whole, communicative competence of its language.

After all, pictures in cartoons give realism to speech or discourse occurring there. Pictures present us the appropriate speech action which is printed in the frame. This is why cartoon discourse seems worth attention as well as challenging in terms of discourse analysis at large under the sociolinguistic spectrum.

Last but not least, as a first attempt at analysis of cartoon discourse, this study seems to have brought out quite a few concomitants both of importance and of repentance. But, believing it meaningful in a way, it has deepened further our maxim that verbal expression is only one facet of the multichannel process of interpersonal communication. Like all other forms of human behavior in the social and interpersonal situations of everyday life, those non-verbal elements seen in the cartoons manifest communalities and differences across languages, cultures, and social classes.

In the meantime, believing strongly that perspective of perception and discourse is compatible, our study in discourse analysis should be further directed at classroom use of cartoons as far as its practicality in foreign language learning is concerned, rather than just

a mere armchair theory.

Research is still going on which not only adds to the stock of knowledge in sociolinguistics itself, but which also has implications for some other related disciplines which make sociolinguistics encompass a much broader horizon.

NOTES

1. This is termed as "intersystemic function" of language, involving two or more systems of communication to accomplish speech acts, and is Peng's (1979) term.
2. "Communication of ideas, information, etc., by talking... or a long and formal treatment of a subject, in speech or writing." (Webster's New World Dictionary, 1974)
3. *Sentence analysis* or *code analysis* (Bell 1976) or *micro-linguistics* (Hill 1958) has been the traditional approach to the description of language while the analytical technique focusing on the sentence as its largest unit. *Text analysis* focuses on the correlation of linguistic form with linguistic form as an indicator of textual cohesion after having been dissatisfied with the obstacle presented by the sentence as the upper limit of description.
4. M. K. Halliday, 1978, p. 108

REFERENCES

- Abercrombie, K.
 1968 "Paralanguage" *British Journal of Communication* 3: 55—9
- Bell, R.
 1976 *Sociolinguistics*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd.
- Halliday, M. A. K.
 1978 *Language as Social Semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold
- Hill, A. A.

- 1958 *Introduction to Linguistic Structures*. New York : Harcourt, Brace and world Inc.

Peng, Fred C. C.

- 1975 "Sociolinguistics Today : In Lieu of an Introduction." *Language in Japanese Society* (Gengo-shakai-gaku), Fred C. C. Peng (ed.), Tokyo : University of Tokyo Press.
- 1979 "Gengo-shakai-gaku" *Eigo-Kyoiku to Kanren-Kagaku. Gendai no Eigo-Kyoiku* Vol. 2, Tokyo : Kenkyusha-shuppan

Webster's New World Dictionary, 1974