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Demotivators as Deprecating and Phatic Multimodal Communicative Acts*

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to show how an analytical framework that combines multimodal, semantic and pragmatic analysis can account for the way in which demotivators function as communicative acts. A demotivator is a conjunction of an eloquent picture or photo with a caption which comments on its content, which usually produces an ironical effect. In what follows I address the origin and definition of demotivators, the evolution of their socio-communicative function, the categorisation of demotivators by area of focus, and the relation between the linguistic and the visual components of demotivators. The empirical material includes demotivators created by members of the Polish-, English- and Russian-speaking communities. A corpus of over 1,000 items has been gathered. The items were retrieved from the following websites: <http://demotywatory.pl/>, www.demotivators.ru, www.demotivers.com, and the social networking service *Facebook*. The study provides evidence that demotivators should be treated as a discrete category of units which have the potential to develop in pragmatic and multimodal directions.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

In this chapter I build on Halliday's (1985: 32–37) distinction between the *ideational*, *interpersonal* and *textual* functions of language, and his proposal that these functions deal with three aspects of communication: the message, the exchange and the representation, respectively. Halliday argues that the three aspects are inseparable in the sense that a modification to any of them influences the communicative process and its interpretation. It is representation, i.e. text, which constitutes the point of departure in this research; however, the focus is on how its composition influences the process of interpretation of the message. The items selected for the present description constitute multimodal texts as defined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 177), who propose that a multimodal or composite text is “any

* Published in: *Multimodal Epistemologies. Towards an Integrated Framework*, ed. by Arianna Maiorani and Christine Christie, New York and London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 28-49.

text whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic code.” The representations I analyse are designed as a coherent combination of written text and images.

Multimodality research has fruitfully employed the tools of systemic functional linguistics (as shown e.g. in Jones and Ventola 2008, Part IV). In this chapter I approach multimodal texts from a different angle, combining the familiar and widely used speech act theory with a theorisation of semantic syntax and communicative grammar that is little known outside Poland. It is suggested that the three theories in concert can create a workable framework which would account not only for the internal relations observed within a semiotic sphere of an analysed entity or the relations holding between different semiotic spheres, but would also show how the interplay between the linguistic and the visual influences the communicative functions revealed in the recipient’s response to the multimodal designs and how it contributes to the process of their interpretation.

The specific development of speech act theory which is relevant to this study is politeness theory. In their formulation of politeness theory, Brown and Levinson (1987: 62–68) describe Intrinsic Face-Threatening Acts¹ as those which are contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker. They define Face as *wants* which every member of a society knows every other member desires, and whose satisfaction is beneficial for the members. The authors distinguish between negative and positive face, negative face being the want of a member that his/her actions be unhindered by others and positive face being the want of a member that his/her wants be desirable to at least some other members. Brown and Levinson (1987: 65–66) divide face-threatening acts into those which threaten negative face and those which threaten positive face. The addressee’s negative face is threatened when it is indicated that the speaker does not wish to avoid violating the addressee’s freedom of action. Acts that threaten an addressee’s negative face include orders, suggestions, advice, reminders, threats, warnings, offers, promises and compliments. The addressee’s positive face is threatened when it is indicated that the speaker consciously disregards (does not accept) the addressee’s feelings or wants. Within the cluster of acts that threaten positive face we find expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt and ridicule, accusations, insults, contradictions, disagreements, challenges and blatant noncooperation in activity. Majewska (2005) in her comprehensive study of deprecating acts classified deprecation as belonging to the latter set. Following this classification the deprecating value of demotivators is analysed in Section 2.4 with reference to positive face threatening acts.

In order to throw a new light on the relation between the linguistic medium and the visual medium in Section 2.6 selected aspects of predicate-argument syntax (semantic syntax) and communicative grammar² are employed. Semantic syntax is a model introduced and developed by Karolak (2002). The central idea of the model is the assumption that there exists a grammar of concepts and a grammar of forms. The grammars are interrelated;

the primary domain is the conceptual level which constitutes a point of reference for the analysis of the grammar of forms (the linguistic level, the level of formalization). Concepts are either predicates³—constitutive concepts, or arguments—concepts which are implicated⁴ by predicates. A predicate together with the arguments it implicates constitutes a predicate-argument structure (a proposition). When verbalized (formalized at the linguistic level), the predicate-argument structure constitutes a categorematic expression, i.e. an expression which is semantically complete if marked by three components—temporality, truth value and thematic-rhematic structure. The following illustrates a basic predicate-argument structure and its formalization:

$P(x, y)$ is a predicate-argument structure which consists of a predicate P which opens slots for two arguments— x and y . This is a general formula consisting of a predicate variable (P) and individual variables/referential arguments (x, y), which represents a constitutive concept with the capacity to implicate two arguments. The notation $P(x, y)$ signifies an open proposition which can be “filled in” by numerous specific concepts—there are many predicates which satisfy the conditions of this capacity, e. g. READ, WRITE, SEE.⁵ If we refer to a specific predicate we call it a predicate constant. Therefore, any of the mentioned concepts (READ, WRITE or SEE) constitute predicates which can be labelled predicate constants. The general formula $P(x, y)$ with a predicate variable P assumes a more specific shape $C(x, y)$ with a predicate constant C (= e.g. READ) when we refer to a particular concept:

$$P(x, y) \rightarrow C(x, y) \rightarrow \text{READ}(x, y)$$

This can be colloquially explained as *READ (someone, something)*. The proposition $C(x, y)$ is still open because it holds two individual variables. Their slots can also be specified by replacing them with individual constants a, b , i.e. specific concepts in the capacity as arguments:

$$P(x, y) \rightarrow C(a, b) \rightarrow \text{READ}(\text{BOSS}, \text{NEWSPAPER}).$$

The above proposition is closed and can be linguistically formalized as e.g.: *The boss is reading a newspaper* (with the three mentioned components: temporality, truth value and thematic-rhematic structure).

Karolak’s idea of the relation between the conceptual level and the formal level has been used by Awdiejew and Habrajska (2004) in the communicative grammar model as a foundation for text interpretation. Following Sperber and Wilson’s (1986: 5) scheme of verbal communication, Awdiejew and Habrajska (2004: 31, 293–296) show that a text (or discourse) can be interpreted by decoding the speaker’s initial cognitive representation. They introduce two basic stages of interpretation. The first stage is the analysis of the sequence of forms which leads to the discovery of the propositional

structure (predicate-argument structure) while in the second contextual meaning is compared to standard meaning.

The first stage of interpretation is further divided into two sub-stages. In the first sub-stage we look for all predications denoted by the constituents of the utterance. In the second sub-stage we situate the isolated predicate-argument structures in a spatio-temporal scenario.

To illustrate Awdziejew and Habrajska's model in a simple way let us consider a text⁶ represented by a single word⁷ which is a formal exponent of an entire scenario involving several predicate-argument structures (cf. Ozga 2011: 104):

widow

SC (t₂, t₁, t₀)

t₂: P (x, y) → C (a, b) → HAVE (WOMAN, HUSBAND)

t₁: P (x) → C (a) → DIE (HUSBAND)

t₀: ~P (x, y) → ~C (a, b) → ~HAVE (WOMAN, HUSBAND)

This colloquially reads as:

stage t₂: the woman had a husband (was married)

stage t₁: the woman's husband died

stage t₀: the woman no longer has a husband (though she used to be married as the previous stages of the scenario indicate)

The above procedure, which draws on the idea of the relation between conceptual and linguistic structures, constitutes an excellent tool for the description of text interpretation and thus an analogous *modus operandi* is used in the description of the interpretation of multimodal communication in Section 2.6 of this study. The interpretation of multimodal texts differs from monosemiotic ones only in the sense that concepts are related not only to linguistic structures but also to visual elements (i.e. formal exponents of concepts are both linguistic and visual entities).

2.3 DEMOTIVATORS

2.3.1 Origin and Definition of Demotivators

Demotivators are a relatively new phenomenon in communicative reality. They constitute intersemiotic acts as they combine two semiotic spheres⁸—language and image (Piekot 2007: 103). The history of demotivators is connected with Despair Incorporated,⁹ which produces posters and souvenirs (T-shirts, mugs, calendars) satirizing/ridiculing the motivational indoctrination of companies, firms and corporations. Despair Incorporated is known

first and foremost for its cynical and ironic demotivators, which are parodies of the pompous and solemn language and images of Successories,¹⁰ a company producing posters, texts, prizes and other items whose aim is to motivate the target audience. A recent coinage, the term *demotivator* has not yet been recorded in major English and Russian dictionaries. According to Internet sources demotivators (demotivational pictures, demots) are a combination of an expressive picture or photo with a caption which comments on its content.¹¹ Ironic, derisive and often cynical, demotivators parody motivational posters.

2.3.2 Functional Evolution OF Demotivators from a Socio-Communicative Perspective

It appears that the original function of demotivators has undergone an evolution. At the first stage of the functional shift demotivation gave way to deprecation (cf. Ozga 2010: 257–264) and demotivators started to function as deprecating multimodal acts. The specificity of a deprecating act in a speech event lies in an attack on the positive aspect of the face of the interlocutor. It thus belongs to the category of Positive Face Threatening Acts (Brown and Levinson 1987: 66), which cause damage to the recipient. For such an attack to be effective, we must assume that there is a particular addressee at the scene of the event, i.e. an individual with particular views, temperament, system of values. The addressee must be in the speaker's semantic view as the speaker must predict what will offend and diminish the addressee. This may be carried out through intonation and body language—a condescending tone of voice or a disrespectful shoulder shrug, i.e. not necessarily through linguistic devices (Majewska 2005: 13). In a “multimodal event” (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 8–9, 20; Jones and Ventola 2008: 10) these crucial factors are interwoven in a slightly different way. A demotivator is not a spoken act but is created as a response to a particular phenomenon and is received (like a written text) in a particular situation. Its addressees have a particular mindset and temperament and so it will be received as deprecating only by those who regard it as deprecating. Finally, the role of gestures, body language, facial expression and intonation, i.e. the nonverbal aspects of a speech event, is taken over by an image and its design, i.e. the imagic medium (Ozga 2010: 260).

At the second stage deprecation, while remaining the most popular pragmatic device in the creation of contemporary demotivators, acquired a secondary phatic-cum-social function, which emerged at some point when social networking services gained popularity (Ozga 2010: 262). Thus, no matter what the object of deprecation is when a demotivator is manufactured, it seems that the main idea behind contemporary demotivational items is that they serve as a means of establishing some virtual contact among Internet (mainly social networking services) users. The aim of devising a demotivator is to draw attention to the author's creativity and at the same time to show

prospective interlocutors that he/she wants to communicate with them by attracting their interest through a funny representation of a particular phenomenon in reality (by means of multimodal devices). Therefore, contemporary demotivators seem to function as a kind of intersemiotic game aimed at drawing the receivers' attention and making them laugh or smile, and a kind of mutual understanding arises among people who find the object/phenomenon/situation represented in a demotivator ridiculous and deserving deprecation, which can be regarded as one of the attributes of group membership.¹²

2.4 SOCIO-COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF DEMOTIVATORS

The following illustrates the process, focusing on Polish Facebook chats—translated by the present author—which developed under three demotivators. The mechanism is as follows. Someone puts the demotivator on the website in the sub-domain designed for demotivators, and it immediately gathers a group of people who find the topic of the demotivational picture



Figure 2.1 www.facebook.com/demotywatory?ref=ts [accessed 20 July 2012] (originally: <http://demotywatory.pl/2902664/andquot;Teraz-wszyscy-razem>).

interesting and a list of comments develops or a discussion begins. Additionally, these people share the picture with their Facebook friends who may leave a comment (often enriched with an emoticon), click *like this item* or again share it (i.e. forward it to friends or post it on their timelines).

The picture shows numerous human arms stretched out radially towards the centre where the palms are put on one another. The caption underneath says: “Now all are together, later each in their own direction.” The instability, transience of human relationships, especially of friendship, constitutes the object of deprecation. The caption is a quotation from *Changes*, a song by the Polish hip-hop group Fenomen. Intertextuality (cf. Beaugrande and Dressler 1983: 10 ff.) as a means to create demotivators is not uncommon. There were 691 users who liked this item and the list of comments in the original sub-domain comprised 43 entries.

Some of the posts are short comments confirming the message of the demotivator, i.e. nostalgia for former friends:

The painful truth!

Unfortunately . . .

Individualism . . .

This is how it goes, unfortunately . . .

Life . . .

Everyone has their own priorities, unfortunately

The opposite ideas were expressed less often, i.e. encouraging people to be optimistic. These messages were linguistically more complex due to the fact that a contradicting predication was conveyed:

Well, folks, you gotta be optimistic!

Unfortunately, it is exactly like that :(but if one really cares a crossroads can always be found even if people depart.

We fly the nest, we set up our own nests but the good memories remain.

Every now and then users make more extensive comments, articulating their thoughts triggered by the demotivating picture. These tended to form much more extensive and independent texts:

Each in their own direction with a rich hoard of shared experience which you can later on share with others, which you can store in your memory, with which you can ‘charge your batteries’ when life is hard. This is how life goes – sometimes it makes you part with people, but it depends only on us how we make use of what has touched us. ;)

It’s always like that – if you yourself don’t write or phone, then there’ll be neither hide nor hair of them

Occasionally, comments did not directly refer to the item but to an earlier comment:

It must be like that because an end is the beginning of something new and moreover in order to have memories you must lose something.

But you don't have to lose in order to have memories ;)

Rude and ironical comments were not infrequent:

This is fucking good thing, you will never have to look at those fuckers again.

The caption would be a good fit for a photo of people crowded in front of the Media Markt door five minutes before the sale starts;]

The last two types of comments tend to be made by people who are not interested in the message of the demotivator, but who set themselves specific goals (being offensive/being ironic). The phatic function does not work with them. As a rule they browse the website in search of an item which they can use as an object of vulgarity or irony.



Figure 2.2 www.Facebook.com/demotywatory?ref=ts [accessed 13 July 2012] (originally: <http://demotywatory.pl/3453257/Kurek>).

The graphic part of the demotivator is a photo of Bartosz Kurek, a popular Polish volleyball player. The original caption in Polish says *Kurek. Tego nam Rosjanie nie zakręcą nigdy*. [English: *Kurek. This one will never be turned off by the Russians*]. It has been created to deprecate Polish-Russian relations. Gazprom (a Russian open joint stock company) is a major supplier of gas for Poland. During the gas crisis in Ukraine in 2009 Poland supported Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. As a result Russia threatened Poland with a plan to build a pipeline bypassing Poland, which would put the Polish policy on fuel in jeopardy. In colloquial language this plight used to be referred to as ‘turning off the gas tap by the Russians.’ The demotivator is based on wordplay since the surname *Kurek* is also a Polish common noun denoting a tap. This ‘tap’ cannot be turned off by the Russians, i.e. the Russian national volleyball team is not able to stop Bartosz Kurek from scoring points.

When put on Facebook the demotivator immediately attracted people interested in sports; 4,634 users liked this item, 281 users shared it, and the list of comments in the original sub-domain numbered 155 entries. Among the entries were:

- (a) posts confirming the message of the demotivator, which were often quite emotional in demotivational pictures connected with sport.

True!

Apt observation!

Dear boys!

Amen!

Champion!

Yes, indeed!

A good match he played!

- (b) More insightful comments by keen followers of volleyball, involving discussion:

It was Kuba Jarosz [another Polish volleyball player] who was the hero of this match.

Yes, but on the other hand Jarosz played well today whereas earlier he was simply a disaster so that's how it works, both ways depending on the match.

To be honest we won also thanks to the Serbs and their victory over the Russians. Jarosz at least played up to his standard/level/potential in the most important match ;)

But the Italians did manage it. They neutralized Kurek and the whole team disintegrated. THIS is not a team and Poland deserves a better coach than Anastasi, that's it.

I myself played volleyball for 13 years and I know that it is impossible to be infallible and irreplaceable ALWAYS and EVERY TIME :]

This hero made 17 mistakes last time.

- (c) Negative comments on the domain as such, provoking a defensive response:
A what heroes? Why, if this is just sport . . .
B For you it's just sport and for them it is their whole life and great pride for the supporters
*C So go and play yourself like that! They are heroes!! :***
- (d) one metacomment involving rude language, where the user criticized a stereotype according to which Polish sports fans love their sportsmen only when they win and tear them to pieces when they lose. Metacomments (comments on comments, not just rejoinders) were not very frequent but they could be found on the websites as well.

It's pathetic what you're writing here. and what if they lost? how you'd be bitching about them. the same when Adamek [a Polish boxer] lost and now everybody goes on about him. wretched country.

- (e) comments posted by the more economically aware users referring to the gas issue (only 2 comments of this kind appeared):

but there will be no gas. . .

when they read it, we will say goodbye to gas forever, and our own gas will perhaps be available in 5–10 years time so half of the cities, life being the way it is, will be frozen for the sake of one wretched match.

- (f) two negative political comments referring to history and current Polish-Russian relations. The first refers to the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939, and the second to the 2010 Polish Air Force Tu-154 crash, in which the President of Poland, the First Lady and 94 other people died on Russian territory, which resulted in considerable tension between the countries and also in many so far unconfirmed theories concerning the cause of the accident.

*They weren't stopped 72 years and 1 day ago, but they were today
Let's hope that there will be no fog at Okęcie [Warsaw Airport]*

- (g) comments on the originality of the demotivator which are the most interesting from the perspective of the phatic function. One of the crucial ideas behind the demotivator is that it must be a novelty. The more ingenious/original the item is, the more attention it draws and the bigger the “transitory community” of potential website users it gathers. The remarks below testify to the significance of the originality of demotivators and also criticise the way website administrators condone or overlook plagiarism.

Wasn't that demot on the main site before?

It's old hat, who has the admin rights on the demot-site? Because demots are really going to the dogs . . .

This demotivator has been posted up before . . .

THAT DEMOT HAS ALREADY BEEN ON THE MAIN SITE: (Oh, the administrators tolerate plagiarisms . . . well, well . . . shame on them!

Well, the best thing is to make a demot with the title of an Onet [one of the largest Polish web portals] article . . . congratulations to the team of course, but perhaps a little more inventiveness wouldn't go amiss.



Figure 2.3 www.Facebook.com/demotywatory?ref=ts [accessed 1 June 2012]
(originally: <http://demotywatory.pl/3903696>).

Nothing original here, there was a poster like this on a stand at one of the FIVB matches. Anyway . . . a wonderful game by Bartek today and in general ;).

The picture shows a couple who are playing Play Station together. The caption says: “Theoretically what most frequently separates a woman and a man [written in larger font] may bind them together perfectly [written underneath the first part of the caption in smaller font].” The demotivator deprecates relationships where men stereotypically prefer playing computer/PS games to spending time with women and—from the other point of view—women don’t understand men’s needs.

The deprecation stems from the confirmation of the stereotype, which is provided by the use of the lexeme *theoretically*. An outwardly positive message (seemingly breaking the stereotype) turns out to be pejorative. Out of 99 posted comments only 7 detected the depreciative semantics of the message.

And only theoretically

And that’s why it says “theoretically”

But this is only in theory . . . :(

Theoretically yes, it is much worse in practice.

Apart from standard terse positive or negative comments and the rude ones, we can find posts referring to particular aspects of the demotivator which attracted the users. Some focused on the game that the couple were playing, trying to guess what it was:

Fifa :P

Tekken :]

hmm Tomb Raider?

Such comments indicate that what caught the users’ attention was the entertainment form itself while they ignored the male-female relationship that is central to the demotivator.

Some contributors felt the urge to briefly scrutinize the message of the item. Their comments focused predominantly on the gender-related qualities viewed from the perspective of the opposite sex.

Depends on the girl because if she’s ghastly the relationship hasn’t got an earthly chance

I often play with my boyfriend as well. He always chooses games that at least two can play, it gets worse when he loses. hehe :)))

It’s all ok., unless the girl plays better than the guy.

A few users disregarded the graphic part of the demot in their comments, focusing on the caption. In the predication about what separates or binds men and women the object (i.e. the *what* in the caption) is represented by the picture. These users challenged the demotivator's predication by replacing the picture with their own verbally expressed proposals. Most of them are primitive or obscene:

pissing in the upright position?

money :D?

The penis?

Who will let out a louder fart?;d

However, one of the comments in this group of examples was fairly personal and suggested a higher degree of sophistication and reflection of the female user (a quotation in Latin):

Certainly games more than clothes and make-up, khykhy. But de gustibus non est disputandum, with my boyfriend we used to adore playing, co-ops and all the MMOs, there's nothing better than the games we played together if both parties like that sort of entertainment :)

One comment against the stereotype that men are more interested in games was posted in inverted commas, by using which the author may have wished to distance herself from its content or to indicate that this is a recurrent phrase that she hears on a regular basis:

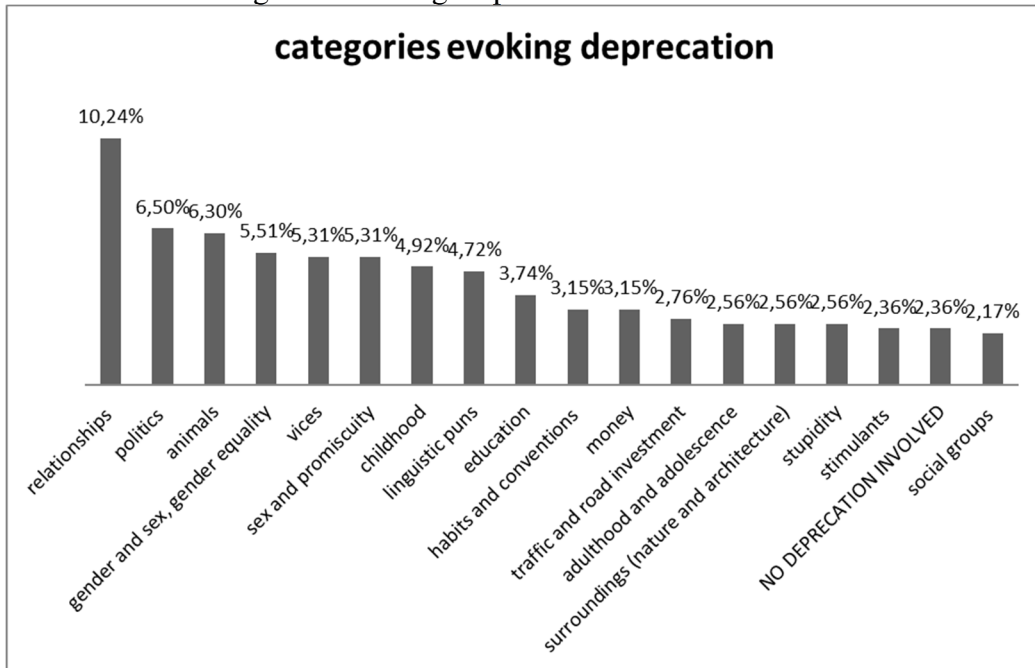
"How I hate it when my boyfriend takes Play Station from me"

The quotation marks may, however, have been used to signal that the comment is a caption that could go with the picture. Whichever interpretation is chosen, this and other comments given above clearly show the multifunctional character of present-day demotivators. Deprecation constitutes a point of departure for creating contemporary demotivational pictures but the "force dynamics" lies elsewhere—in enlisting the receivers as active participants in the communicative scenario.

2.5 CATEGORISATION OF DEMOTIVATORS BY AREA OF FOCUS

Despite the prominence of the phatic-social value of contemporary demotivators, illustrated above, their deprecating function constitutes the foundation for the other functions. A number of areas which are particularly prone to elicit deprecation have been distinguished.

Table 2.1 Categories Evoking Deprecation



The chart shows only the 18 categories which are represented by more than 2% of the analysed items. The research shows that male-female relationships are most likely to evoke deprecation. The categories excluded from the chart comprise 23.82% of the examined demotivators which deprecate film, success, religion, racial and national issues, technology, revenge and aggression, sports, art, work/job, physiology and medical problems, fashion and clothing, parenthood, food, obesity and diet, social advertising, knockoffs, neighbours and shopping (altogether 17 classes). It is worth observing that 2.36% of the collected demotivators do not demonstrate any deprecating function. They are in fact motivational in character, as they convey positive messages such as encouragement to enjoy life, relationships, etc. Nonetheless they were posted on demotivating websites and commented on by visitors. What justifies their presence on the websites is perhaps the phatic function described above.

While designing demotivators is by and large dictated by creativity, originality and ingeniousness, and therefore any object, phenomenon or activity stands a chance of becoming a target for demotivator designers, the statistics point to certain topic-related tendencies in the creation of demotivational pictures and reveal which areas of deprecation are prone to be used by the designers to arouse interest of the web users who are on the lookout for such material.

2.6 RELATION BETWEEN THE LINGUISTIC AND THE VISUAL

The final step of this study focuses on the relation between the media. Four major classes of the degree of integration of the media are distinguished. Each class is exemplified with a description of an item and its structure.

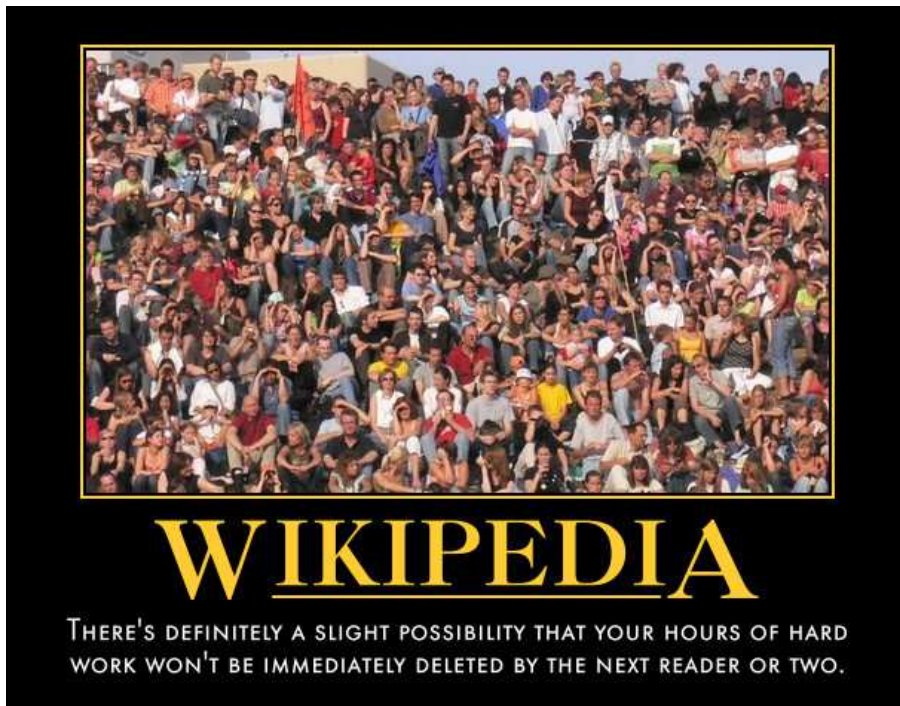


Figure 2.4 Sample (A) www.demotivationalposterz.com/2010/10/wikipedia.html [accessed 24 February 2012].

To the first class belong items in which there seems to be no direct semantic link between the visual and the linguistic—the relation is established through vague associations. The correct interpretation of the message behind demotivators of this kind usually requires a considerable degree of inference (Awdiejew 2004: 15; Sperber and Wilson 1986: 12–13) as it is often not immediately obvious what constitutes the connection between the predications expressed by the two semiotic spheres.

The visual part is a picture of a crowd of people sitting or standing on a slope or perhaps on a grandstand. Underneath is a two-line caption. The first line is the name of the free Internet encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* written in large font in upper case (all the letters but the initial and the final underlined). The lower line written in smaller font in lower case carries the main depreciative ironical predication: *There's definitely a slight possibility that your hours of hard work won't be immediately deleted by the next reader or two*. The irony is reinforced by the connection between the visual and the linguistic, which is established by the contrast between the word *slight* and the large number of people in the picture who are alleged Wikipedia editors.

The second class comprises items which exhibit a low degree of semantic overlap between the message expressed linguistically and the message



Figure 2.5 Sample (B) <http://demotivators.to/p/189555/ni-odna-devushka.htm> [accessed 14 May 2012].

expressed visually. In such demotivators the tangency between the media is structured through the use of the element shared by the linguistic and graphic predications.

The graphic part is a photo of a trouser belt with a buckle in the shape of a star with a hammer and sickle (☞) in the centre. The Russian caption underneath says: *ни одна девушка не обнимала так долго как он* [English: *no girl's embraced you for as long as he did*]. The semantic tangency between the semiotic spheres is construed upon the first referential argument of the linguistic predication (“he”) coinciding with the object shown in the picture (*trouser belt* has a masculine grammatical gender in Russian).

$$P(x, y) \rightarrow C(x_{ind}, y) \rightarrow \text{EMBRACE}(\text{he}, y)$$

$$P(x, y) \rightarrow C(a, y) \rightarrow \text{EMBRACE}(\text{TROUSER BELT}, y)$$

The demotivator can be further interpreted by reference to the cultural symbol of the hammer and sickle. Consequently the belt stands for the Communist regime, which used to lock people in an “embrace” during the Soviet era in Russia.

The third class of demotivators contains items which display a high degree of semantic integration of the media. The overlap between the predication

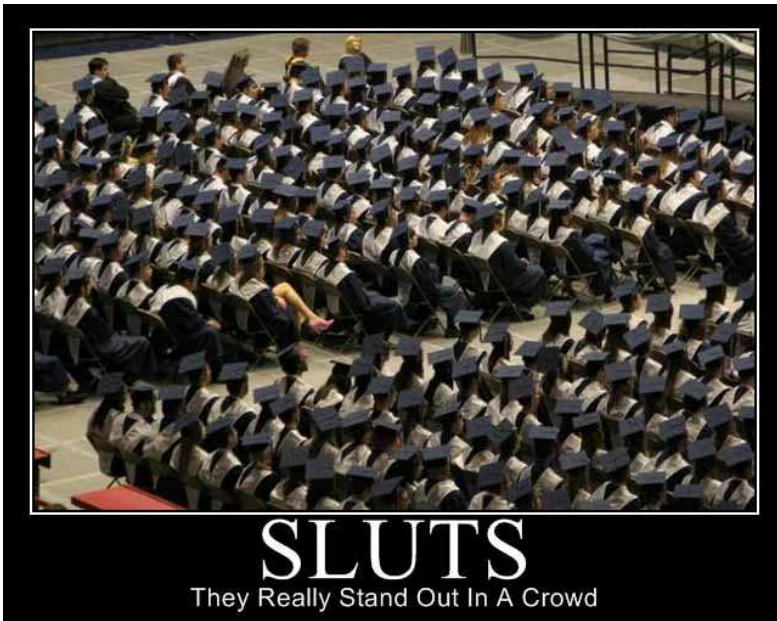


Figure 2.6 Sample (C) <http://500motivators.com/motivate/me/sluts-they-really-stand-out-in-a-crowd/> [accessed 18 July 2011].

expressed linguistically and the predication expressed visually is either built upon the specification of the predication (cf. granularity in cognitive linguistics, cf. Croft and Cruse 2004: 52) or the elaboration of the scenario.

The graphic component is a picture of young people sitting in rows of chairs either in a lecture theatre or a courtyard during a graduation ceremony. They are dressed in gowns and mortarboards and the conceptualizer views them from the left-behind side so their faces are for the most part invisible. The legs of one of the girls in the centre are crossed and she has a conspicuous pink high-heeled shoe on one of her feet, on an exposed leg (i.e. not covered with her gown). The leg and pink shoe are noticeable but not at first sight; one has to take a closer look at the picture to single them out. As in sample (A) the caption is divided into two lines. The first line printed in large font in upper case says *SLUTS*. The lower caption (all the letters but the initial in lower case; in smaller font) is a predication about the object in the first line: *They Really Stand Out In A Crowd*.

The recipient of the message is most likely to take the following interpretive paths¹³ during which the granularity becomes more and more definite; each stage of interpretation being more fine-grained:

Phase 1: the recipient sees the crowd of students

Phase 2: the recipient notices the girl with the exposed leg and the shoe

Phase 3: the value that stands out is specified for the receiver as characteristic of a slut.



Figure 2.7 Sample (D) <http://demotivators.to/p/332851/i-toboj-tozhe-ya-naigrayus.htm> [accessed 10 December 2011].

The picture shows what looks like a huge sand dune or the landward part of a sandy beach. There is an abandoned doll in the foreground and a girl and boy of under 10 are sitting in the upper right-hand corner. The girl is leaning against the boy embracing his neck with her right arm. The caption in Russian says: *И тобой тоже я найграюсь* [English, literally: *I will play with you too and then I'll ditch you*]. Both media point to a scenario. However, the scenario is not apparent in each of the media taken separately. The picture itself indicates that the girl used to be attached to the doll in some way, while “at present” she is attached to the boy—a two-phased scenario with specified referential arguments but with an unspecified predication. The constitutive complex concept of the caption is expressed by the Russian verb *найграться* which introduces a two-phased scenario. Contrary to the picture, the predication is the specified element of the caption while the referential arguments are unspecified:¹⁴

SC (t₋₁, t₀)

t₋₁: P (x, y) → C (x, y) → PLAY (x, y)

t₀: P (x, y) → C (x, y) → DITCH (x, y)



Figure 2.8 Sample (E) <http://demotivators.to/p/226381/sobaka-vuajeryaka.htm> [accessed 26 August 2011].

It is only the composition of the media that reveals all the constituents of the scenario and points to the metascenario based on the recurrence of the basic scenario (introduced by the constitutive predication):

META-SC

t_{-1} : SC (t_{-1} , t_0)

t_{-1} : P (x , y) \rightarrow C (a , b) \rightarrow PLAY (GIRL, DOLL)

t_0 : P (x , y) \rightarrow C (a , b) \rightarrow DITCH (GIRL, DOLL)

t_0 : SC (t_0 , t_{+1})

t_0 : P (x , y) \rightarrow C (a , b) \rightarrow PLAY (GIRL, BOY)

t_{+1} : P (x , y) \rightarrow C (a , b) \rightarrow DITCH (GIRL, BOY)

t_{+1} : SC (t_{+1} , t_{+2})

t_{+1} : P (x , y) \rightarrow C (a , y) \rightarrow PLAY (GIRL, y)

t_{+2} : P (x , y) \rightarrow C (a , y) \rightarrow DITCH (GIRL, y)

In colloquial terms it can read as:

t_{-1} : SC \rightarrow The girl played with the doll, the girl ditched the doll.

t_0 : SC \rightarrow The girl plays with the boy, the girl will ditch the boy.

t_{+1} : SC \rightarrow The girl will play with sb/sth else, the girl will ditch sb/sth else.

The last major class that has been distinguished includes items for which the same constitutive predications are expressed by both media. The role of the composition of the media is to reinforce the message by redundancy. Usually the graphic medium adds some detail to the constitutive predication, however, the detail is not crucial from the point of view of the main message interpretation.

The picture shows a dog peeping through the bars of a gate and watching two cats copulating. The caption says *Собака-вуйеряка* [English: *a voyeur dog*]. The elements which are added to the constitutive predication are the surroundings and the specification of the species being peeped at. The comic effect is linguistically strengthened by the use of a rhyme tag (Sobkowiak 1991: 160): /sə'**bakə**/ /vuajɪ'**r'akə**/.

2.7 CONCLUSION

The study shows that demotivators deserve to be treated as a discrete category of units with the potential to develop in various directions, not only pragmatic but multimodal. In this analysis they are presented as multimodal pragmatic acts combining pictures with captions; however, a new variety of demots has recently appeared on the Internet—a variety which expands the multimodal character by including other semiotic spheres through combining a short film with a caption where the sound and movement play an important part (cf. Baldry 2005: xi). As a new, robust multimodal message type, demotivators are commonly associated with the younger generation and thus it might be worth considering, in future research, whether and to what extent this type of communication constitutes a criterion for determining social identity.

Index of symbols

a, b	individual constants
C	predicate constant
META-SC	metascenario
P	predicate variable
SC	scenario
t_{-1} , t_0 , t_{+1} , t_{+2}	stages of the scenario
x, y, z, v	referential arguments (individual variables)
x_{ind}	argument position occupied by an indexical expression
~	negation

NOTES

¹ *Act* is defined by Brown and Levinson (1987: 65) as what is intended to be done by a verbal or nonverbal communication.

² Communicative grammar is understood here in a narrow sense, i.e. as a framework introduced by Aleksy Awdiejew in Poland. The model should not be confused with that of Zolotova (Zolotova et al. 1998), anthropological linguistics, glottodidactic descriptions of language or Leech and Svartvik's (2005) communicative grammar. In this study the term *communicative* refers strictly to Awdiejew's theory of language as presented in Awdiejew (2004), Awdiejew and Habrajska (2004) and Ozga (2011).

³ Semantic syntax is built upon formulas taken from logic, thus the term *predicate* does not denote the main verb phrase in the sentence structure (as defined in traditional descriptive grammars) but belongs to the level of concepts, where it is a relational constitutive member of a conceptual structure.

⁴ *Implicate* should not be confused with *imply*. It signifies a relation of opening slots for other concepts.

⁵ Concepts are written in upper case to avoid confusing them with words, which are formal exponents of concepts.

⁶ Habrajska (2004) devoted an entire monograph to the description of the procedures of text interpretation, where she analysed larger textual units. A simple example has been selected here to avoid long and complex illustrations.

⁷ Words which are formal exponents of a scenario are referred to as *hyper-terms* in communicative grammar (cf. Ozga 2011: 104).

⁸ Cf. *polysemiotic texts* in Szczęsna (2006: 233–244).

⁹ www.despair.com [accessed 30 May 2011], cf. Kersten (2005).

¹⁰ www.successories.com [accessed 16 June 2011].

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demotivational_posters [accessed 13 February 2011].

¹² Cf. interpersonal function (Halliday 1985: 32–37).

¹³ The interpretive path has been tested on 100 persons selected at random.

¹⁴ The analysis is based on the model of predicate-argument/semantic syntax (cf. Karolak 2002; Ozga 2011: 68–71).

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