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The interplay of words and images in expressing multimodal metaphors in comics

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Abstract

This paper aims at providing a provisional classification of different types of multimodal metaphors belonging to the verbo-pictorial variety found in comics, based on the relation between written and visual language, as two modes of human communication commonly combined in everyday life. Starting from the theoretical background on multimodal metaphors and comics studies, and using a corpus comprising comics and graphic novels published by both mainstream and independent American houses, the authors propose the following three types of relations which occur in multimodal metaphors in this medium: (1) image-dominant metaphors, (2) text-dominant metaphors, and (3) complementary metaphors.

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1. Introductory notes

The main aim of the study is to establish a provisional classification of different types of verbo-pictorial multimodal metaphors in comics by exploring the nature of relations that can exist between their written and visual components. The paper will briefly present the employed theoretical framework and the mainstream views on the relation between the two strands in comics, which will be followed by the proposed classification of verbo-pictorial

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multimodal metaphors in comics. Each relational class will be explained and accordingly illustrated by examples from American mainstream and independent comics and graphic novels.

2. Theoretical framework – CMT and multimodal metaphor

The present study operates within *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (CMT), which is based on *the embodied mind thesis* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999), the idea that all aspects of cognition and the human mind are largely determined by the form and functioning of the human body. CMT (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) is one of the main vehicles of cognitive semantics, and has been one of the key elements in the recent development of comics studies (see Stamenković and Tasić, 2014). Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 5) describe the essence of metaphor as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.” The central notion in CMT is the one of *mapping* – the term refers to systematic metaphorical correspondences between related ideas, i.e. domains. In the CMT system, the features of one domain are mapped onto the ontological or structural features of another domain. Other elements of the conceptual domain of *the source domain* are likewise “mapped” onto elements of the conceptual domain of *the target domain* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Grady, 2007). The constancy with which different languages employ related metaphors, which often appear to be perceptually based, has led to the idea that the mapping between conceptual domains corresponds to neural mappings in the human brain (Feldman and Narayanan, 2004: 385–392; Lakoff, 2008). Metaphors provide rich evidence about the ways in which some aspects of our lived experience are associated with others, for reasons that reflect basic aspects of perception, thought and neurological organization.

Within cognitive linguistics, the term metaphor is understood to refer to a pattern of conceptual associations, rather than to an individual metaphorical use or a linguistic convention (Grady, 2007: 188–189). The conceptual essence of metaphors has increasingly led towards studying metaphor in other, non-linguistic domains. A number of such studies which combine two or more modalities of human expression have been labelled the studies of *multimodal metaphor*. These are based on the claim that “if researching non-verbal and not-purely-verbal metaphor does not yield robust findings, this jeopardizes the Lakoff-and-Johnsonian presupposition that we think metaphorically” (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009: 4). In multimodal metaphors, we tend to use entities that are more depictable (serving as the source domain) to describe those that are less depictable (serving as the target domain), whereas one has to pay attention to their stylistic properties as well (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009: 12). Finally, in investigating a set of metaphors that are labelled multimodal due to the fact that they combine images and text, one should also consider the fact that those domains that involve spatial configuration, size, clarity, and colour are “more noticeable in visual discourses than in verbal ones” (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009: 13).

3. Word and image

In comics studies, the relation between words and images has been explored as one of the key elements for understanding comics (e.g. Eisner, 1985/2008, 1996/1998; McCloud, 1993). Words and images in combination have had great influence on the growth of comics as a medium, particularly due to their power to tell stories when exploited one with another (McCloud, 1993: 152). Comics, thus, represent a composite text, in which the reader has not only to perceive and interpret the present signs, but also to reconcile the two strands, and view them in relation to each other (Stainbrook, 2003: 135). The ways in which we can combine them are practically limitless, but McCloud (1993: 153–155) suggested a classification containing seven major categories: (1) word specific, where pictures illustrate a largely complete text; (2) picture specific, where words add a “soundtrack” to a visual sequence; (3) duo-specific, in which both strands convey the same message; (4) additive, where one of the strands amplifies or elaborates on the other; (5) parallel, where words and images follow different courses and do not intersect; (6) montage, where words can be treated as integral segments of the image, and (7) interdependent, where words and images combine to create a message they could not convey alone, whereas the balance between the two can vary from case to case.

4. The interplay of words and images in multimodal metaphors in comics

Having in mind the diverse set of relations that may exist between words and images in comics, we have tried to analyse these relations in those cases in which they are combined to convey metaphorical content. The classification we propose is based on a qualitative analysis directed at investigating the role of each of the components in delivering the metaphor in question. Every category will be accompanied by an appropriate example.

4.1. Image-dominant metaphors

The first category of multimodal metaphors observed in our analysis corresponds to what McCloud calls the “picture-specific” combination of words and images in comics. The *image-dominant* metaphors are those instances of metaphorical content where the core meaning of the mapping as well as the two domains between which that mapping is made lie primarily in the visual component. The visual channel is itself rather sufficient to convey the intended meaning from the author/artist to the reader/viewer, and, if interpreted separately, it can easily be labelled a visual or pictorial metaphor. Nevertheless, the accompanying text provides yet another layer of explanation to the content which is presented graphically. This enriches our experience and understanding of the metaphorical content, thus rendering the manifestation of a conceptual metaphor truly multimodal. The degree to which the textual component adds to the meaning of the visual one, and in turn facilitates the comprehension of the metaphor in question, can, naturally, vary to a certain extent. This, however, requires more space and a more detailed consideration, hence it will be exempt from the current analysis.

The example presented here comes from the graphic adaptation of Paul Auster’s short novel “City of Glass”, and it comprises two panels, which, even though not subsequent in the comics itself but separated by several other panels, form a semantic whole that represents an image-dominant metaphor A PERSON IS A MACHINE.



Fig. 1. A PERSON IS A MACHINE (*City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*, copyright © 2004 by Paul Auster, Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli)

As we can see from the example above, the mere picture is enough for readers to understand the message being conveyed and the metaphorical content that it contains. It is clear that the person in the panels has turned into a sort of a machine, a wind-up toy that repeats daily activities by automation. The text serves the purpose of further refining the images and contextualizing the sequence. It adds a “soundtrack” to the visual channel, as McCloud says, and that soundtrack does appear as an integral part of the multimodal expression of the underlying conceptual metaphor. Both this category and the next one can also be considered “additive”, in line with the classification proposed by McCloud.

4.2. Text-dominant metaphors

The second category in our analysis is closest to what McCloud calls “word-specific”. Contrary to the previous category, what we have here is the dominance of text over image, and as far as metaphorical content goes, it is primarily expressed through the verbal channel. In such instances of multimodal metaphors, images follow the text focusing our attention to another aspect of the message contained in the speech balloons or captions. There are numerous ways in which images can illustrate the metaphors expressed in the text, and the example presented here comes from a Batman comic entitled *The Cult*.



Fig. 2. FEAR IS A PERSON (*Batman: The Cult*, copyright © 1988 by DC Comics Inc.)

The panel above expresses the FEAR IS A PERSON conceptual metaphor through the multimodality of the comics medium. The primary manifestation of this metaphor is verbal and it can be found in the top caption where *fear* is claimed to be able to seek one out. Fear is represented here as a person (or any living being, for that matter) that can seek and eventually find someone. The nightmare of Bruce Wayne (Batman’s true identity), whom we can see here as a young child in the bottom part of the panel, is interrupted by the sudden appearance of the Joker, Batman’s archenemy, who, indeed, personifies the fear that the protagonist is experiencing in this particular moment. This is how the visual channel supports the multimodal metaphor primarily expressed in the text. If we were to analyse this panel the other way around, we doubt that the image would be enough to convey the intended metaphorical content.

4.3. Complementary metaphors

The final category of multimodal metaphors in the present analysis deals with what we have named *complementary metaphors*. These are the instances in which words and images complement each other approximately equally in expressing the conceptual metaphors through the two strands found in comics. They can be duo-specific or interdependent, in keeping with Scott McCloud's terminology, meaning that both words and images can convey the same idea¹ or that they somehow depend on each other to do the task in hand, as can be seen in the example below from Craig Thompson's autobiographical graphic novel *Blankets*.

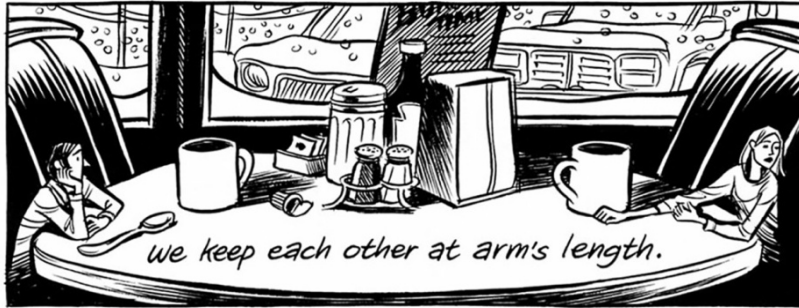


Fig. 3. EMOTIONAL DISTANCE IS PHYSICAL DISTANCE (*Blankets*, copyright © 2003 Craig Thompson)

In this panel we reach the target domain of emotional distance via two different representations of the source domain of physical distance. The first one is the verbal strand that contains the idiom “to keep one at arm’s length”, positioned carefully and intentionally between the two characters, almost as what McCloud would call a “montage”, while the second one is the image of the two people sitting at a table in a diner, drawn disproportionately small in relation to their surroundings to emphasize the distance between them that is, indeed, emotional. We believe that this example illustrates a complementary multimodal metaphor since not one of the strands seem dominant over the other when it comes to the interpretation of the message contained within. Furthermore, it is interdependent in its combination of words and images because the two do not express the same thing literally but depend on each other to create the message that might have otherwise been conveyed more or less unsatisfyingly.

5. Conclusions

We have tried to present a preliminary classification of multimodal metaphors found in comics, based on the type of relations existing between the pictorial and the textual component. Drawing on the theoretical tenets of CMT, comics studies and research into multimodality, we have divided multimodal metaphors into three distinct categories: (1) image-dominant metaphors, (2) text-dominant metaphors, and (3) complementary metaphors. One very striking conclusion, at least as far as the American mainstream and independent comics analysed here are concerned, is that the mainstream production (prevalently superhero comics) contains a minute number of multimodal metaphors. This is not so much because of the subject matter, but the manner of its rendition, which in this type of comics most often depends heavily on photorealism, meaning that the metaphorical content is usually delivered exclusively through the verbal channel.

¹ So as to remain within the proposed length limitations, let us just quickly illustrate what is meant by the duo-specific complementary metaphor. There is a moment in the Batman comics analysed for this paper, where the superhero, under severe pressure, says that he is falling apart, while this text is accompanied by a sequence of panels in which he is drawn as literally disintegrating from one panel to another.

We believe that this classification can serve as a foundation for further research and refinement, that would primarily include other schools of comics, as well as different media or forms of communication, such as, for example, advertisements.

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