

THE INTERACTION OF VISUAL AND VERBAL COMPONENTS IN COMICS IN THE ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS ON ECOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: THIS PAPER OFFERS A STUDY OF THE INTERACTION OF VISUAL AND VERBAL COMPONENTS IN COMICS DESCRIBING VARIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN THE ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS ON ECOLOGY. IT IS SHOWN THAT THE ADDRESSEE PERCEIVES THESE ELEMENTS AS ONE WHOLE CONVEYING THE MAIN MESSAGE. THE INTERPLAY OF THE VISUAL AND VERBAL REPRESENTING VARIOUS ECOLOGICAL PROBLEMS HELPS STUDENTS TO BETTER ADOPT ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY IDEOLOGY BASED ON HUMAN-NATURE HARMONY.

KEY WORDS: COMICS, COMIC STRIP, PANEL, SPEECH BALLOON, THOUGHT BALLOON, ADDRESSER, ADDRESSEE, VERBAL, VISUAL, ENVIRONMENTAL IDEOLOGY

I. INTRODUCTION

PRESENT-DAY textbooks are characterized by the interaction of verbal mode and non-verbal resources, especially images, graphs and scientific formulae. Research shows that people remember 80 % of what they see [14]. Visual literacy, that is the ability to understand pictorial information, has become one of the basic skills required for communication in the postmodernist world. Even human perception of verbal and visual images differs: reading is a left-brain specific action, employing the use of logic and analysis, while seeing is a right-brain specific action, utilizing imagination and free associations. Texts containing both verbal and visual elements are regarded as polycode or multimodal [1, 2, 11, 16]. For linguists, issues arising from the consideration of elements of different semiotic systems, their interaction with each other and with the language itself have emerged in recent decades as important challenges since their interest in the research of such texts is caused by the necessity to describe their nature, acquisition, and a special role in communication, which makes it more effective [1, p. 8-9] and intensifies its aesthetic side [4, p. 90].

II. RESEARCH PROBLEMS

THE aim of the article is to describe the social and linguistic nature of comics and show how their visual and verbal elements interact in expressing professional ideology in English textbooks on ecology.

III. DISCUSSION

DESPITE the 18th and 19th century development of the series paintings of William Hogarth, the cartoons of Thomas Rowlandson, the illustrations of Phiz or George Cruikshank, the comic sketches of Hokusai or the captioned picture stories of Rodolphe Töppfer, sequential visual narrative (comic strips) flourished only in the 1890-s in daily papers and

since then have found a wide audience of readers in the world. In Germany such stories are called *Bilderbogen*, in France *bande dessinée*, in Italy *fumetti*, in Japan *manga*. In the words of Bryan Boyd, "comics tapped deep-rooted cognitive capacities and appealed to deep-rooted cognitive preferences as they discovered a whole series of ways to lower comprehension costs and raise the benefits of even a reading time" [3, p. 106]. The reading of a comic book requires both the aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit [5, p. 8].

K. KAINDL emphasizes that "the comic strip is a hybrid genre, whose analysis cannot be clearly assigned to any one academic discipline" [9, p. 173]. *Comics* are defined as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" [12, p. 9], "a series of adjacent drawn images, usually arranged horizontally, that are designed to be read as a narrative or a chronological sequence" [10], "the additive fusion of the text and image relationship to achieve a narrative end" [7, p. 8], "a particular type of narration whose text contains a sequential series with verbal and visual elements embedded in a special frame" [13, p. 12]. The focus in each of these definitions is on the sequence as a string of images read one after another to produce a definite meaning.

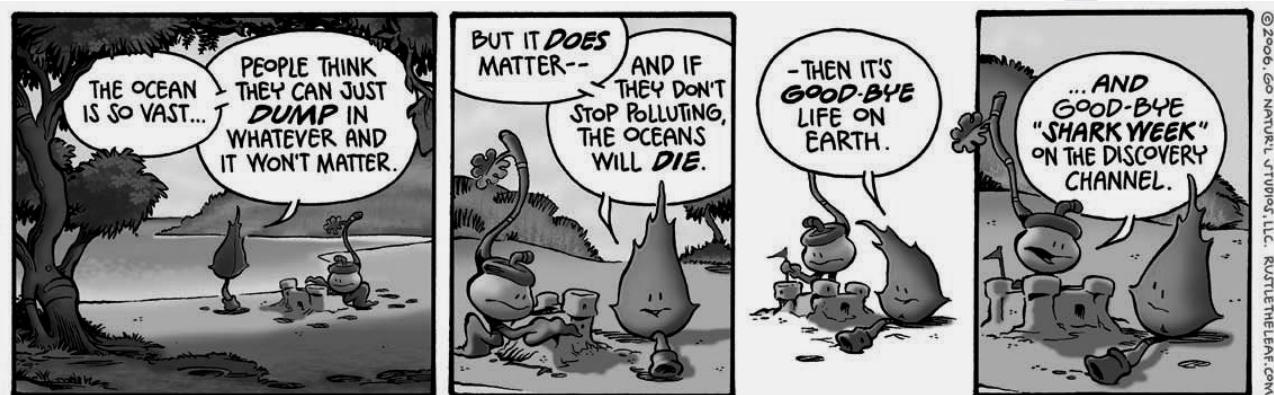
FROM the point of view of semiotics theory, images and words are equivalent entities, and comics is a system of signification in which words and pictures are perceived in the same way [15, p. xi]. As suggested by Maurice Horn, "expressions in the comics is the result of this interaction between word and picture, it is the product and not the sum of its component part" [8, p. 10]. The combination of co-presented and interacted verbal and visual elements in comics creates a heterogenous text. The blend between pictures and words is vital in comics as it creates a meaning which neither picture nor word conveys alone without the other. By means of these forms, the addresser decides to mark, emphasize, stress, compare, or contrast his message in a significant way, and this information alone is conveyed to the addressee. Comics obtain narrative power by presenting depicted moments in a visual array, where the reader's habituated strategy of reading the images from left to right produces a succession of moments, and bridging inferences link these moments into a coherent story. A reader's sightline is constantly moving between visual and verbal elements to make sense of what is depicted on the panel. The interaction between verbal and visual elements allows addressers to enclose a vast amount of information within a short graphical space with the economy of language means. Comics are reductive in creation and additive in reading. That is, the creators reduce the story to moments on a page by encapsulation, and readers expand the isolated moments into a story by closure. And within the basic unit of encapsulation, the panel, there is the paradigmatic choice of how much of each of the elements to show within the encapsulated moment. Addressees use conceptual structure derived from cultural and linguistic experience to construct the meaning of each panel of comics art, while they rely upon pragmatic abilities, such as bridging inferences, to make a coherent text.

THE importance of comics in advertising, teaching and propaganda cannot be underestimated. In the English textbooks on ecology they perform the functions propaganda since they visualize the main ideology of ecological education – to increase students' awareness and knowledge about environmental issues or problems, thus providing them with the necessary skills to make informed decisions and take responsible actions towards nature [6].

COMICS directly show the visual composition of scenes. Their grammar involves simple speaking patterned constructions of everyday speech between friends and acquaintances, thus

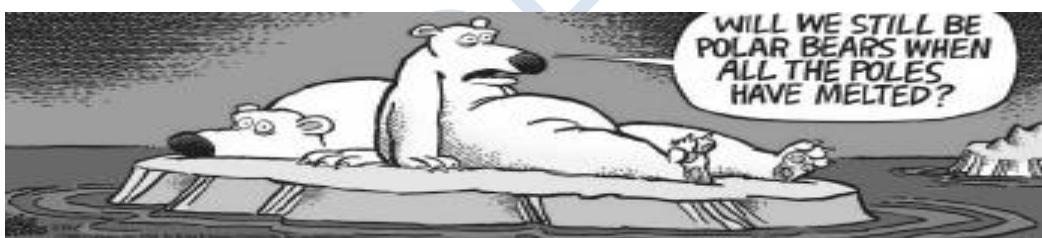
bringing the elements of belles-lettres and everyday discourses in textbooks on ecology. Informal lexis and spoken syntactic constructions make the message understandable to a great number of readers.

IN the example provided below, in four panels of a comic strip, the author describes problems concerning ocean pollution and its influence on the life of organisms on the Earth. With the help of personified plants (a leaf and an acorn) the author contemplates about the future times when there will be no life in the oceans. The use of the emphatic sentence (*But it does matter*) and words with negative connotation in bold italics (*dump*, *die*) incorporated in speech balloons appeals to the addressee's emotions.



[2, p. 505].

IN another panel comic strip, the author depicts the problem of global warming which causes the melting of glaciers in the Arctic regions.



[2, p. 487].

THE humorous rhetorical question (*Will we still be polar bears when all the poles have melted*) is attributed to personified animals (polar bears), who are "real hosts" of the Arctic region.

THROUGH the iconic representation of plants and animals conveying human features (phytomorphic and zoomorphic metaphors), the author of the textbook tries to persuade an addressee of his/her guilt over the inevitable damage to the nature and make him/her think about his future actions aimed at improving the situation.

LET us consider the next example where the author describes solid waste in an industrial society in three sequential panels. Here we can see the effect of visual contrast: a man visiting a municipal landfill carries green bags of waste (second panel) versus the landfill full of technical garbage (third panel). Even the colour of garbage bags appeals to the reader's positive emotions because green is the colour of balance and harmony, renewal and power of nature to grow. The shape of thought balloons adds connotations to the words found within – here, word bubbles of irregular elliptical form with jagged edges imply protagonist's thoughts.

The male character is drawn with big eyes and raised eyebrows which constitute the graphic realization of SURPRISE metaphor. With the help of opinion adjective (*amazing*) and object clause (*you see how spoiled a society is*), the author intensifies the described problem. In the last panel, due to the interaction of verbal (the clause *what it throws away* and the exclamatory sentence *how stupid a society is*) and visual (the landfill full of broken and used household appliances) modes, the author conveys the implicit meaning of the message, that is, non-equality of living standards in rich and poor countries.



[1, p. 403].

IN the next example with three successive panels, the author raises the problem of Earth's population, namely how the number of children in an average American family influences it. In a worry list, besides physical (*women's age to give birth*) and economic (*people's savings, current economy*) problems, protagonists mention an ecological problem as well (*another kid will increase your family's carbon footprint*)



[2, p. 208].

IN speech balloons, the addresser uses constructions with interjections (*Oh, man!*, *Well*), interrogative sentences with direct addresses (*You and Ted are thinking of another kid?*), contractions (*we're, that's been*), elements of question-response (*You and Ted are thinking of another kid? – Well, we're thinking of thinking about it*) which characterize everyday speech. Such elements imitate a spontaneous dialogue and draw addressees' attention to the subject matter of the conversation.

IN the comic strip example given below, a carbon footprint in the form of a human heel, compared with a Mercedes bus, is shown as a central element occupying two-thirds of a comic strip shape. This visual metaphor represents the total amount of greenhouse gases produced to directly and indirectly support human activities, usually expressed in equivalent tons of carbon dioxide. The protagonists' messages show their polar views on the problem discussed: by using an attitude phrase (*I wonder*) with an object clause (*what effect driving the van will have on my personal carbon footprint*), the first person appears to be environmentally-friendly, whereas the second one shows the indifferent attitude (*You don't want to know*). Since the carbon footprint is a very powerful tool to understand the impact of personal behavior on global warming as one of the main causes of environmental problems,

this comic strip appeals to the addressee's emotions to make him/her reconsider their violent actions towards nature.



[2, p. 23].

IV. CONCLUSIONS

THUS, the analysis of comic strips in the textbooks on ecology shows that the interaction of verbal and visual elements promotes the perception of a message as a whole unit. It is clear that pictures of vital ecological problems and use of everyday spoken English (interjections, contractions, question-response elements, and rhetorical questions) draw students' attention to environmental issues, charge them with environment-friendly ideology, make the message lively and develop recipients' figurative thinking.

FURTHER research needs on the comics describing environmental issues needs to focus on the role of visual metaphors and their interaction with linguistic surrounding.

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ILLUSTRATIVE MATERIAL

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