

Intersemiotic Convergence in Multimodal Texts: A Cognitive Linguistic Approach

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We offer a cognitive linguistic treatment of a particular intersemiotic relation – intersemiotic convergence – which we characterise as an echoic relation held between the mental imagery (in the form of conceptualisations) evoked by the verbal expressions in a text and their co-text images. Analogous with co-speech gestures, we use the term co-text images to refer to images that occur sufficiently proximal to a given language usage within a multimodal text that the two forms can be analysed together as comprising a single semiotic unit or syntagm. In news discourse, the prototypical example of this and where we concentrate our analyses is news photographs and their captions.

Much of the existing research modelling intersemiotic relations is based on extensions of systemic functional linguistics with a focus on how the transitivity structures expressed in language may be repeated in co-text images (e.g. Lui & O'Halloran 2009; Royce 1998). In cognitive linguistics, intersemiotic relations are addressed in Forceville's (2008) model of multimodal metaphor. However, the focus here has been on the collaboration between modes in the expression of a metaphor rather than on the co-expression of a metaphor across modes. We show that cognitive linguistics affords a multidimensional approach to modelling intersemiotic relations where language and image can be seen to coincide with respect to various dimensions of meaning. Crucially, from a cognitive linguistic perspective, such convergence does not occur between the surface verbal and visual structures of the text but between the conceptual structures a verbal expression conventionally evokes and co-text images.

A key claim of frameworks in cognitive linguistics (e.g. Langacker 2008; Talmy 2000) is that the meanings attached to linguistic expressions, in the form of conceptualisations, are modal in nature. As such, they share a number of semiotic properties with images. For example, according to Langacker (2008: 75), "many expressions undeniably invoke a vantage point as part of their meaning". In multimodal texts we may then expect the viewpoint specification included in the meaning of a linguistic expression to be similarly instantiated in co-text images. For example, where transitive (attack) versus reciprocal (clash with) verbs, which involve frontal vs oblique angle perspectives respectively (Hart 2019), occur in news reports of violent interactions between police and protesters, co-text images may depict the interaction from corresponding viewpoints. We show how such intersemiotic convergence occurs across multiple dimensions of meaning, including viewpoint, metaphor, image-schematic patterning, and distribution of attention.

We argue that when language and image regularly converge in this way, this may be taken as evidence (i) for the modal properties of language and (ii) of multimodal constructional status. In relation to (ii), our analysis therefore makes important theoretical contributions to the framework of multimodal construction grammar, which has hitherto been focussed on the position of gestures rather than images within multimodal symbolic units (Hinnell 2018; Kok & Cienki 2016; Zima 2017; Zima & Bergs 2017).

Illustrative data for our analysis is taken from a convenience sample of online news texts covering a range of topics including immigration, political protests and inter-state conflict.

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