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Forceville, C.; Kjeldsen, J.E.

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The affordances and constraints of situation and genre

Visual and multimodal rhetoric in unusual traffic signs

*Charles Forceville**

University of Amsterdam

c.j.forceville@uva.nl

Jens E. Kjeldsen

University of Bergen

Jens.kjeldsen@uib.no

Abstract

Visuals are generally considered to be rich in information, but also to be open to many different interpretations. As a consequence, many argumentation scholars doubt that visuals can constitute argumentation (e.g. Fleming, 1996; Johnson, 2003, 2010; Patterson, 2010). In this paper, we argue that the rhetorical and argumentative potential of visuals and multimodal texts is strengthened if they belong to recognizable genres, genres being governed by discourse-internal factors as well as situational/pragmatic understanding. The genre of traffic signs can draw on specific genre conventions thanks to these signs' highly coded nature. As a consequence, traffic signs constitute an exemplary category to make the point that visuals and multimodal texts can function rhetorically or even argumentatively. We support our claim by first analysing a number of unusual instances of the genre and then discussing a few visual and multimodal signs whose argumentative potential no longer depends on specific traffic-related circumstances but crucially depends on the pretence that they are traffic signs.

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Keywords

visual and multimodal rhetoric & argumentation, genre-based creativity, traffic signs

1 Introduction

It is increasingly accepted within rhetorical studies that persuasive communication is not necessarily verbal, but can be partly or even entirely visual (Groarke et al., 2016; Kjeldsen, 2015a, 2015b). To function as an instance of persuasive communication both the rhetor and the addressee must be aware that the rhetor aims to influence the addressee. In most situations, this is clear to both parties, not least because such situations usually involve verbal language. Thanks to the existence of grammatical rules, claims can be formulated in propositional form. Moreover, rhetor and addressee often know each other: the lawyer tries to convince the judge or the jury, the politician addresses prospective voters, and the boss hopes to persuade her employees. But how is the persuasive nature of a message made clear if propositions are not made explicit through verbal language, if rhetor and addressee do not know each other, and if they are not simultaneously present? Our goal is to demonstrate, by examining a number of unusual traffic signs, that knowledge of genre conventions and awareness of the spatio-temporal conditions shared between rhetor and audience suffice for the former to influence the latter via a visual or multimodal message that the audience has not previously seen.

In section 2 we briefly address the issue of multimodality with reference to traffic signs. In section 3 we discuss the crucial role of situation and genre. Section 4 analyses some unusual traffic signs and signs pretending to be traffic signs in light of the theoretical assumptions presented. We then make some concluding remarks in section 5.

2 Multimodality, meaning, and traffic signs

“Multimodality” has become a popular concept within humanities research. Particularly scholarly work adapting Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has flourished (e.g. Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; Kress, 2010; Baldry and Thibault, 2006; Royce and Bowcher, 2007; Ventola et al., 2004, Ventola and Moya, 2009; Jewitt, 2014a; see also Elleström, 2010; Klug and Stöckl, 2016; Bateman et al., 2017). This paradigm has yielded many valuable concepts

and perspectives, and case studies in a wide variety of genres are examined. However, until recently much of this work was hampered by an overextension of the affordances of linguistic grammar to the visual realm (an issue elaborated on in Forceville, 1999a and Bateman et al., 2004), and by the fact that supposedly objective descriptions often depend on unacknowledged ideological presuppositions. Moreover, there is little agreement on what counts as a “mode.” Even the editor of a handbook on multimodality has to acknowledge that “what is counted as a mode is highly contingent and continues to expand as new modes enter the communicational landscape” (Jewitt, 2014b: 13). While this is not ideal for a field that aspires to constituting a discipline in its own right (see Forceville, 1999a, 2010 for more detailed criticisms), there is general agreement that “visuals” and “written language” are to be considered as two, often co-occurring, modes (Bateman, 2014; see also Forceville, 2006).

In much semiotics-oriented multimodal research, moreover, there is a strong focus on attributing meaning to signs mainly on the basis of discourse-internal meaning, paying insufficient attention to the context of use. By contrast, we claim that signs such as traffic signs can only be properly understood and explained by paying attention to the specific circumstances under which addressees are appealed to and the genre to which the signs belong (see also Bateman, 2008; Stöckl, 2015).

Traffic signs are either monomodally visual or they are multimodal by drawing on the visual mode in combination with the (written) verbal mode. The *American Manual for Uniform Traffic Control Devices* defines traffic signs as “devices placed along, beside, or above a highway, roadway, pathway, or other route to guide, warn, and regulate the flow of traffic, including motor vehicles, bicycles, pedestrians, equestrians, and other travellers,” and specifies that they must meet the following conditions: “(1) fulfil a need; (2) command attention; (3) convey a clear, simple meaning; (4) command respect from travellers; (5) give adequate time for proper response” (cited in Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 190–191). Although there are differences across countries, the following conventions appear to have been adopted internationally. A traffic sign consisting of a red triangle with a white or yellow background and a (partly) black silhouette inside is a sign that warns against possible dangers (figure 1). Prohibitive signs are round, with a red border, a white background, and a silhouette inside, and sometimes a red or black diagonal across the silhouette (figure 2). A third category of traffic signs is usually round (but sometimes square or rectangular), with a blue background and white silhouettes: “Circular blue signs provide positive instruction, for example by emphasizing particular lanes or routes available to road users or pedestrians. Blue circular signs also provide manda-



FIGURE 1 *Warning sign:
Traffic lights
ahead*



FIGURE 2 *Prohibitive
sign: Do not
overhaul*



FIGURE 3 *Mandatory/
instructive
sign: Go left*

tory instruction, for example by informing a road user that they must turn left ahead¹ (figure 3). We focus on these three types of traffic signs.

Most traffic signs draw on the visual mode, but it is useful to distinguish three elements within this visual mode: the *form* (triangular, circular, square, rectangular); the *colours* (red, white, black, blue) and their distribution over the traffic sign; and, if present, the depicted *silhouette*. The first two suffice to convey the general meaning: “beware of ...” (triangle with red border and white background); “you must not ...” (round with red border and white background); and “you must/are encouraged to ...” (round/square/rectangular, blue background, white silhouette). These are conventionally coded signs—what Peirce calls *symbols* (Chandler, 2007: Chp. 1–2; Peirce, 1998: 4 ff.). The silhouette inside, by contrast, is usually (a stylized version of) an entity that resembles what it represents—a Peircean *icon*. Unlike the first two elements (form and colour of border and background), the appearance of the silhouette varies. It is the combination of form and colours (in a specific arrangement), then, that specifies the (sub)genres of these traffic signs as warning signs, prohibitive signs, and mandatory/instructive signs, respectively.

Such traffic signs may be accompanied by verbal text elucidating the visual meaning, in which case the traffic signs are multimodal. If the verbal meaning repeats and/or specifies elements in the visual meaning, the text “anchors” the visuals; if it complements them, it “relays” the visual meaning (Barthes, 1986: 28 ff.). For present purposes Barthes’ twofold distinction suffices; for more refined models of word-image relations, see Martinec and Salway (2005), Bateman (2014, unit 1), and Unsworth and Cléirigh (2014).

It may seem that conventionally coded signs such as traffic signs can be perfectly well understood completely independent of situation. A round sign, a

1 <http://www.drivingtesttips.biz/blue-road-signs.html>, last accessed 6 July 2017.

red border, and a white background, with the number 50 unequivocally *means* “maximum speed is 50 km per hour.” A red round sign with a white horizontal rectangle *means* “entrance forbidden.” However, even complete awareness of the codes governing these signs does not result in full-bodied meaning. Like indexicals in language, traffic signs refer to information outside the “text” proper. Something else besides an understanding of a traffic sign’s coded elements is required before the message put forward can be understood: an awareness of its location. The message in each case is, “you have to beware of x *here*,” “you are forbidden to do y *here*,” “you must/may do z *here*.”² Thus, even traffic signs require pragmatic knowledge of situation and genre in order to be understood.

3 The rhetoric of traffic signs: A situational genre perspective

Because of the necessity of pragmatic knowledge of situation and genre, a rhetorical approach to the pragmatics of traffic signs is especially appropriate. As a study of pragmatic communication, rhetoric is characterized by paying special attention to context, situation, and genre. Furthermore, rhetoric not only deals with words, but also with visuals and multimodal communication. A great many rhetorical studies have examined the rhetorical functions of a wide range of visuals (Hill and Helmers, 2004; Kenney and Scott, 2003; Olson, 2007; Olson et al., 2008). Even though traffic signs at first sight may not seem rhetorical, they actually exhibit rhetorical functions. At least since Kenneth Burke (1969) rhetoric has dealt with symbolic communication in many different forms of expression. One of the most used textbooks in the field defines rhetoric as “the human use of symbols to communicate” (Foss, 2009: 3). The rhetorical aspect of traffic signs also becomes obvious in a situational genre perspective.

A genre, rhetorician Walter Fisher proposes, is “a category” (1980: 291). Steve Neale, a film scholar, implies something similar when he points out that the French word *genre* means “type” or “kind” (Neale, 2000: 9). As in art (see e.g. Altman, 1999; Frow, 2006) a genre in rhetoric, then, constitutes a collection of similar *discourses*. However, pragmatically and rhetorically a genre is more than a category. Genre has the same relation to discourse as Goffmann’s (1974) “activity type” has to events in the world. In order to be able to judge correctly the

2 The importance of this locative dimension is typical of *all* pictograms and logos—see Forceville (in prep.) for more discussion.

relevance both of a phenomenon in the real world and in discourse, one should attribute the right “activity type,” resp. “genre” label, to it. Only once one has done so—or at least *thinks* one has done so—an appropriate response or interpretation strategy becomes possible. Awareness and knowledge of an activity type enable a person to display socially desirable kinds of behaviour and avoid socially undesirable kinds. Similarly, categorizing a discourse as belonging to the right genre enables the audience to recruit the knowledge pertaining to the conventions governing the genre (for more on the relation between activity types and rhetorical genres, see Rigotti and Rocci, 2006; Van Eemeren, 2010). Belonging or not-belonging to a discourse genre is often not a matter of either/or. A discourse may be positioned anywhere on the continuum from being highly representative (“prototypical”) of a particular genre to being a very marginal specimen (Lakoff, 1987; Paltridge, 1995).

A rhetorical understanding of genre starts from the view that a genre is a recurrent rhetorical situation that humans respond to in parallel ways. This view was originally put forward in 1965 in Edwin Black’s *Rhetorical Criticism* (Black, 1978; cf. Campbell and Jamieson, 1978). First, Black writes, “there is a limited number of situations in which a rhetor can find himself.” Second, “there is a limited number of ways in which a rhetor can and will respond rhetorically to any given situational type.” Third, “the recurrence of a given situational type through history will provide the critic with information on the rhetorical responses available in that situation” (Black, 1978: 133). Three years later Lloyd F. Bitzer (1968) develops his own account of the rhetorical situation on the basis of Black’s situational view.³

In his seminal paper, Bitzer argues that “rhetorical discourse [...] obtains its character-as-rhetorical from the situation which generates it” (1968: 3), proposing that such discourse is “called into existence by situation; the situation which the rhetor perceives amounts to an invitation to create and present discourse” (Bitzer, 1968: 9). Such situations are rhetorical situations. They consist of three constitutive elements: (1) an exigence, which is “a problem or defect, something that is other than it should be;” (2) “an audience capable of being constrained in thought or action in order to effect positive modification of the exigence;” and (3) “a set of constraints capable of influencing the rhetor and an audience” (Bitzer, 1980: 23). Bitzer (1980: 28ff.) provides an example: you see at some distance an acquaintance who is deaf and blind. He is walking on the

3 Kathleen Hall Jamieson followed up the connection between genre and situation by pointing out that a rhetorical utterance not only grows out of the demands of a situation, but also out of previous genres (Jamieson, 1973).

sidewalk towards a deep pit that he is about to fall into (exigence and constraints). You see a woman a few yards from your acquaintance (audience) and alert her, so that she may guide the man to safety. She does, and the exigence has been modified by your warning and her action. The same kind of situation determines the need for most traffic signs: certain traffical circumstances, such as a dangerous curve, create an exigence (a potentially dangerous event). This exigence calls for communication (e.g. a traffic sign) addressing an audience that can modify the exigence (the driver passing the curve safely). In Bitzer's terms, then, a traffic sign can be considered a *rhetorical response*. While many rhetorical situations are modified or dissolved after rhetorical communication has taken place, the situations that pertain to traffic signs persist because the traffical circumstances creating the exigence persist. You may slow down when passing a dangerous curve, but it is still dangerous after you have passed by.

Bitzer proposes the following "general characteristics or features" (1968: 9) that make a situation rhetorical:

- Characteristic 1: "Rhetorical discourse is called into existence by situation; the situation which the rhetor perceives amounts to an invitation to create and present discourse" (Bitzer, 1968: 9).
- Characteristic 2: "Although rhetorical situation invites response, it obviously does not invite just any response. [...] it invites a fitting response" (ibidem: 10).
- Characteristic 3: "Situation must somehow prescribe the response which fits" (ibidem: 10).
- Characteristic 4: "The exigence and the complex of persons, objects, events and relations which generate rhetorical discourse are located in reality, are objective and publicly observable historic facts in the world we experience, are therefore available for scrutiny by an observer or critic who attends to them" (ibidem: 11).
- Characteristic 5: "Rhetorical situations exhibit structures which are simple or complex, and more or less organized. A situation's structure is simple when there are relatively few elements which must be made to interact" (ibidem: 11).
- Characteristic 6: "Rhetorical situations come into existence, then either mature or decay or mature and persist" (ibidem: 12).

In this list of characteristics, the importance of the identity of the rhetor and the form of the rhetorical response remain rather implicit. We therefore propose to add two others, formulated by Benoit (2000):

- Characteristic 7: “The rhetor’s nature shapes rhetorical discourse” (ibidem: 180).
- Characteristic 8: “The means employed by the rhetor shape rhetorical discourse” (ibidem: 180).

Let us postulate, for the sake of discussion, that a rhetorical agent⁴ perceives a rhetorical exigence pertaining to traffic and seeks to influence the behaviour or attitude of any passing car driver in order to modify the exigence. The rhetorical situation can be specified according to the characteristics outlined above as follows: The agent responsible for putting up the traffic sign judges that it is in the interest of the driver to be informed about something pertaining to the traffic situation that he/she is not, or not sufficiently, aware of (characteristic 1). It is opportune to put up a traffic sign—not any other sign (e.g. a lighthouse or a brand logo) (characteristic 2). It is appropriate that the agent issues, for the occasion at hand, *this* traffic sign at *this* location (and not another traffic sign, or the same traffic sign at another location) (characteristic 3). The traffic sign pertains to a situation in the real world, not an imagined one (characteristic 4). Single traffic signs pertain to a single warning, exhortation, or alert (characteristic 5). The situation that creates the exigence comes into existence and matures simultaneously with the construction of the traffical circumstances (e.g. building a road) and persists as long as the circumstances exist (characteristic 6). Not every agent can put up traffic signs; the rhetorical agent needs to have the authority (or, as we will see, pretend to have the authority) to do so (characteristic 7). The traffic sign is a rhetorical response that conveys a warning, exhortation, or alert that always draws on the visual mode, sometimes complemented by the verbal mode (in which case it is a multimodal traffic sign). Traffic signs need to obey certain conventions, which determine and constrain their possible appearance (characteristic 8).

4 Case studies: Unfamiliar traffic signs and pretend traffic signs⁵

4.1 *Warning signs*

Consider the traffic signs in figures 4–6. Their triangular form, white background, and red border determine their categorization as warning signs. This,

4 In this paper we henceforth adopt this term rather than “rhetor” because the originator usually is an institution rather than a person.

5 All traffic signs are originally in colour, as described in the body text.



FIGURE 4

Warning: Prostitutes

[HTTP://WWW.WAYSANDSTEPS.COM/DO-YOU-KNOW/WEIRD-TRAFFIC-SIGNS-IN-THE-WORLD/](http://www.waysandsteps.com/do-you-know/weird-traffic-signs-in-the-world/)
(LAST ACCESSED 30 DECEMBER 2017)



FIGURE 5

Warning: Drunken people crossing

[HTTPS://GOEDGELOVIG.WORDPRESS.COM/2010/06/](https://goedgelovig.wordpress.com/2010/06/)
(LAST ACCESSED 6 JULY 2017)



FIGURE 6

Warning: Sunbathing grass snakes

[HTTP://WWW.RTVOOST.NL/NIEUWS/DEFAULT.ASPX?NID=219004](http://www.rtvoost.nl/nieuws/default.aspx?nid=219004) (LAST ACCESSED 30 DECEMBER 2017)

combined with their location at the side of the road, conveys “beware of ... here!” (and not, for instance, “it is forbidden to ... here!”). If the black silhouettes had appeared in a sign with a different form/different colours, different interpretations might have been considered, such as “close-by there is a brothel/childcare centre/zoo.” The nature of what the driver is to be made aware of is conveyed both visually, in the form of the black silhouette, and verbally, in the text (separate from the traffic sign in figure 4, and inside it in figures 5 and 6).

All three traffic signs would at first sight seem to be straightforward cases of Barthes’ anchoring, in which the verbal information specifies the information (here: the denotation) in the visual mode. That is, although in anchoring verbal text and visuals pertain to the same information, there is not complete doubling of information in the two modes.

For argument's sake, let us first imagine that the rhetorical agent had only provided the verbal information, say in black letters on a white rectangular sign (as in figure 4). To begin with, this might not have been interpretable by drivers who do not master the language used (Italian, English, and Dutch, respectively), for instance some tourists. In the case of figures 5 and 6, moreover, the notion of "warning" would no longer be there, as the verbal phrases ("drunken people crossing" and "sunbathing grass snakes") are as such purely descriptive. In figure 4, "attenzione" loses some of its warning status if provided only verbally. Rather than "watch out that you do not collide with prostitutes standing dangerously close to the road side," the message might, under certain circumstances perhaps be misinterpreted as an alert: "if you should want a prostitute, this is where you can find one." Even though "drunken people" and "sunbathing grass snakes" in figure 5 and figure 6, respectively, are co-referential with the specimen depicted in the silhouettes, what would moreover be lost in a language-only version is the *manner* of crossing of the drunken people—namely (possibly) crawling and—and the *manner* of lying still, possibly sleeping, of the grass snakes—who are thus even more vulnerable to traffic accidents than when walking/moving.

By contrast, let us now imagine that the rhetorical agent had only provided the visual information (actually, the traffic sign in figure 4 also occurs without verbal text). In a purely visual mode, the traffic signs would still make clear (thanks to the triangular form, the white background, and the red border) that the rhetorical agent *warns* the driver against something, this something being represented in the black silhouette. Using the visual mode is thus attractive to the rhetorical agent because this reduces the risk of misunderstanding by a driver unfamiliar with the language. In addition, the red-bordered triangle is arguably visible from a longer distance than any text would be readable, which means that the driver is warned earlier than s/he would in case of an exclusively verbal text.

However, using only the visual mode also has drawbacks. Notably, the rhetorical agent would have to disregard the danger that a first-time viewer fails to recognize the black silhouettes as a prostitute, a drunken person crawling, and a grass snake, respectively. Some first-time viewers would probably be at a loss as to the precise nature of those creatures. Are drivers warned, in figure 4, against people standing close to the road? Against women standing close to the road? Against thin women with handbags and high heels standing close to the road? In figure 5, are they perhaps warned against playing children? Against babies? Against people searching for lost contact lenses? In figure 6, drivers might wonder why they would need to be cautioned against coincidentally killing snakes; it is only the verbal specification "*grass snakes*" that (hopefully) alerts them to



FIGURE 7 *Prohibitive signs at entrance “Park Kruidtuin,” Mechelen, Belgium*
 PHOTO TAKEN MAY 2008 BY CHARLES FORCEVILLE

the fact that these are innocent animals deserving protection rather than being killed by driving over them.

Since the visual and the verbal mode each contribute information that is not (unambiguously) available in the other mode, the three examples discussed therefore arguably verge towards Barthes’ *relaying* type. Summarizing, via the visual mode the rhetorical agent warns against certain creatures (women, crawling people, snakes); via the verbal mode the rhetorical agent specifies the status of these creatures (prostitutes, drunken crawling people, grass snakes). In all three cases, the rhetorical agent intends to influence the addressee’s (here: the driver’s) behaviour. The intention, or message, could be verbalized as “it is in the interest of your own and other creatures’ safety to reduce speed and be extra circumspect to avoid colliding with living creatures of various kinds that might unexpectedly appear on or by the road you are driving on.”

4.2 *Prohibitive signs*

Now consider figure 7. It shows, again, traffic signs with red borders against a white background, and black silhouettes in them. Contrary to the signs discussed in figures 4–6, however, these are round. The traffic code thereby categorizes them as prohibitive signs, effectively conveying “you must not ...” As always, the location of the sign—here: at the entrance of a park—is pragmati-

cally important; all of these pertain to activities, the rhetorical agent counsels, that people are *forbidden* to perform in the park. Recognizing the silhouettes in the centre of each sign depends partly on their being Peircean icons and partly on pragmatic knowledge of the world. The rhetorical responses of the agent are intended to regulate the behaviour of the visitors of the park, specifying what actions they should abstain from: picking flowers, feeding young birds, ice-skating, playing ballgames, igniting firework.⁶

4.3 *Mandatory/instructive signs*

Next, consider figures 8–10, blue signs with white silhouettes, which are coded as mandatory or instructive traffic signs. The rhetorical response the agent presents with the intention to influence the envisaged audience's behaviour can be phrased roughly as follows: "you are only permitted to drive here if your vehicle is a non-motorized one" (figure 8); "you should wear facial protection when working here" (figure 9); "You should switch on your headlights here" (figure 10). When their location is taken into account, they are presumably comprehensible to a first-time viewer—although figure 10, even if positioned at the entrance of a tunnel, might be baffling for some people.

4.4 *Pretend traffic signs*

The highly coded nature of traffic signs also entails that rhetorical agents can use the genre creatively. The multimodal sign in figure 11 is supposedly one that exists in the real world. While the visuals of the police car, the wheelchair, and the skull are visual metonyms of the words "jail," "hospital," and "morgue," respectively—and thus arguably not essential for the agent's rhetorical response—the pictures cue the concepts in a more grimly vivid way. More importantly, however, the text "go ahead/drink and drive" conveys information that is not presented visually. Note that the use of the white-on-blue colour code is an important visual aspect. It is the colour that communicates that this is not a warning sign, but a mandatory sign. This means that the rhetorical agent, in a heavily ironical manner, "encourages" the driver to "go ahead/drink and drive," actually making precisely the opposite claim, namely that, in the interest of their own and others' safety, drivers should abstain from participating in motorized traffic after having consumed alcohol.

6 Perhaps only the second one in the first row is ambiguous. Should one not feed ducks? Or not disturb them?



FIGURE 8

Instruction: Non-motorized vehicles only (Indonesia)

[HTTPS://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/ROAD_SIGNS_IN_INDONESIA](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Road_signs_in_Indonesia) (LAST ACCESSED 6 JULY 2017)



FIGURE 9

Instruction: Wear a face-protecting device

[HTTPS://NL.PINTEREST.COM/PIN/537969117964098973/](https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/537969117964098973/) (LAST ACCESSED 6 JULY 2017)



FIGURE 10

Instruction: Turn on headlights

[HTTP://WAGONERSABROAD.COM/DRIVING-IN-SPAIN-SPANISH-ROAD-SIGNS/](http://wagonersabroad.com/driving-in-spain-spanish-road-signs/) (LAST ACCESSED 6 JULY 2017)

Figures 12 and 13 are photoshopped, and hence non-existing, traffic signs. In figure 12, the green background colour codes this as an informative sign, typically used to indicate distances to destinations. While this creative traffic sign mimics the exigences that normal traffic signs are meant to address, it is obvious that it breaks the genre rules of such signs and presents unlikely situational circumstances. By doing this the agent of the sign attempts to make addressees aware that it is not really a rhetorical response to a traffical exigence, but to some other exigence. We may even say that the sign puts forward an argument about a general social issue. This argument, or rhetorical response, is subtly conveyed, requiring careful consideration of the three black silhouettes left of the wheelchairs: the first one is the conventional pictogram for “ladies’ toilets,” the second for “men’s toilets,” whereas the third shows a hybrid between the



FIGURE 11

Instruction: (Don't) drink and drive

[HTTP://WWW.DANGEROUSROADS.ORG/RANKINGS23/4195-THE-WEIRDEST-ROAD-SIGNS-IN-THE-WORLD.HTML](http://www.dangerousroads.org/rankings23/4195-the-weirdest-road-signs-in-the-world.html)
(LAST ACCESSED 6 JULY 2017)



FIGURE 12

Information: Toilet service

CREATED BY LUCIANOMORELLI.

[HTTP://WWW.FREAKINGNEWS.COM/TRAFFIC-SIGNS-PICTURES---1645-4.ASP](http://www.freakingnews.com/traffic-signs-pictures---1645-4.asp) (LAST ACCESSED 6 JULY 2107)



FIGURE 13

Prohibition: Forbidden to refugees

CREATED BY ARTIST CARLOS NO.

[HTTP://WWW.CARLOSNO.COM/EN/PORTFOLIO/EUROPA/](http://www.carlosno.com/en/portfolio/europa/)
(LAST ACCESSED 6 JULY 2017)

men's and the ladies' pictogram, cueing gender-neutral toilets. Undoubtedly it is significant that the men's toilets are only 8 miles away, whereas women need to travel 12 miles for their relief and the gender-neutral toilets are located at an even longer distance of 33 miles. In this traffic sign visual and verbal elements are *both* necessary to make the point, making this an instance of Barthesian "relay." The rhetorical response of this satirical traffic sign, then, triggers an exigence pertaining to gender, and could be read as an argument about the need for society to ensure that more gender-neutral public toilets become available.

Finally, figure 13, a work of art by Carlos No, signals "forbidden to refugees." In an era in which the huge numbers of refugees from the Middle East and Africa seeking access to Europe constitute a major challenge to the political ethics of Western countries, we understand this "traffic sign" as a social exigence, forcing us to ponder the issue whether, and if so how, and to what extent, Western countries really want, or are entitled, to refuse access to refugees. Such moves as in figures 12 and 13, from reading the sign as information about how to act in

traffic to reading it as an argument about a more general social issue, can still only be understood if one pays attention to the conventions of the traffic sign genre.

5 Concluding remarks

The central point in this paper is that for traffic signs and pretend traffic signs to function and be understood pragmatically as multimodal instructions it is necessary for both the rhetorical agent and the audience not only to be familiar with the relevant genres and multimodal codes, but also with the rhetorical situation and physical location of the sign. Like Bitzer (1980: 21) we consider rhetoric as “a functional, or pragmatic, communication and thus a critical mode of functional interaction in which the chief interacting grounds are persons on the one hand and the environment on the other.” This holds for both rhetorical agent and audience.

After reviewing certain traffical circumstances a rhetorical agent, that is, aims to create a fitting rhetorical response with the intention to influence the behaviour or attitude of the envisaged audience. This rhetorical response involves the following elements, of which (3) and (4) are optional:

- (1) information in the form of a traffic-related message (what in Relevance Theory would be called “ostensive-inferential communication”; see Forceville, 2014: 53–54 for discussion). In order to work ostensively, the audience needs to recognize the sign as belonging to the genre of traffic signs;
- (2) coded visual information pertaining to the traffic sign’s form and the colours used in it;
- (3) more or less stylized visual information that appears in the form of “silhouettes” in the centre of the traffic sign. These are often “iconic signs” (in the Peircean sense): they depict phenomena that resemble their real-life counterparts;
- (4) verbal information within or in close proximity to the traffic sign. This information either fine-tunes or complements the visual information in element (3);
- (5) the specific physical location in which a sign is encountered (“the rhetorical response applies *here*”).

Provided the audience possesses the pertinent genre knowledge (element 1), the combined form-and-colour of traffic signs (element 2) presents a fixed and specific meaning. This is *coded* information, which must be learned, and it is a

key element in the kind of response advanced by the rhetorical agent. In fact elements (1) and (2) suffice to function as visual equivalents of *speech acts*, specifically those of “warning,” “forbidding,” and “instructing.”

The silhouettes (if present) in element (3) depict the subject or focus of a traffic sign’s specific “speech act.” By virtue of their resemblance or “equivalence” to phenomena in the real world (by constituting Peircean icons), silhouettes in traffic signs provide an “ease of acquisition” (Gombrich, 1982: 283) that facilitates comprehension. For this function of the traffic signs to be recognized, users must either be familiar with these Peircean icons (i.e. they must have previously learned their meaning), or spontaneously understand their signifieds on first encountering them.

In order to ensure comprehension of the rhetorical response, the rhetorical agent often supplements the visuals of the traffic sign by verbal texts (element 4), which particularize the referents of the silhouettes or add other crucial information that is not offered in elements (1), (2), and/or (3). In the former case, such multimodal traffic signs feature Barthes’ “anchoring;” in the latter his “relay”—although the border area between these two is fuzzy.

The traffic sign’s location is a crucial pragmatic factor for the really existing traffic signs discussed: it is the spatial equivalent of Bitzer’s insistence on a response’s *timeliness* in a rhetorical situation (characteristic 1). It is telling, though, that the pretend traffic signs in figures 11–13 that verge towards making rhetorical claims are (far) less dependent on the precise physical location where they appear. It is, in fact, their functioning as “speech acts” that is essential for ascribing rhetorical status to them.

A more general conclusion we want to draw is that studies pertaining to the rhetorical role of visuals need to distinguish between strongly coded and weakly coded (elements of) visuals (Eco, 1979: 214). Unlike weakly coded visuals, whose meaning needs largely to be inferred by combining them with contextual information, strongly coded elements of visuals have very precise, explicit meanings. Moreover, visual elements sometimes can singlehandedly encode a *genre*, which helps specify meaning. To the extent that visual elements are coded; belong to conventional genres; and appear in specific locations (either in the physical world or in texts), they can partake in propositions (Kjeldsen, 2007, 2012, 2015c; Forceville, 2014; see also Forceville and Clark, 2014). This, in turn, entails that such visual elements do not only play a role in rhetorical discourses but also in argumentative ones—that is, in discourses constituting “a communicative and interactional (speech) act complex aimed at resolving a difference of opinion before a reasonable judge by advancing a constellation of reasons the arguer can be held accountable for as justifying the acceptability of the standpoint(s) at issue” (Van Eemeren, 2010: 29). Unlike

the actual traffic signs, which in no way “aim at resolving a difference of opinion before a reasonable judge,” the pretend traffic signs in figures 11–13 certainly move into this direction. Figure 11 could be said to argue multimodally that one should never drink and drive, because this may well lead to legal punishment, injury, or death. The argument in figure 12 might be phrased as: society needs to build more ladies’ and gender-neutral toilets, since people who want to use these have the same rights as people preferring men’s toilets (and should therefore not be obliged to travel further to reach them). More generally, it may be taken as an encouragement to be more tolerant toward gender ambiguities, or toward the LGTB community. And figure 13 may be used to claim that Western societies should not want to enforce laws (similar to the strict traffic code) that bar refugees.

Given the five elements (or variables) that we have summarized above, it should be possible to do empirical research drawing on the “speech act” character of traffic signs. If one were to create (or collect) a number of novel, creative instances of such signs, one could systematically test groups of participants’ interpretation by:

- (1) manipulating the form-and-colour codes (e.g. changing the colours in figure 13 to white silhouettes against a blue background, still on a round sign, would supposedly change the meaning into “refugees are welcome here”);
- (2) varying between purely visual and multimodal versions for first-time viewers—since this helps show to what extent silhouettes function as self-explanatory Peircean icons (for some further thoughts about this, see Bounegru and Forceville, 2011: 223);
- (3) (virtually) manipulating the context of access of the signs, since the latter may further steer their “speech act” character due to “embedding-genre” conventions. It is bound to make a difference, for instance, whether one comes across such a sign on the road, in an art gallery, in an advertisement, or in a political cartoon. Indeed, it would be interesting to examine whether creative variations of traffic signs which were presumably made for purely aesthetic and/or humorous reasons—a search via google images provides numerous examples—might acquire rhetorical meaning when re-contextualised in specific situations (for further thoughts, see Forceville, 1999b, 2005; Kjeldsen, 2018.; Tseronis and Forceville, 2017a, b).

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