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Charles Forceville

Reflections on the Creative Use of Traffic Signs’ “Micro-Language”

1. Introduction

In a world where information is expected to be accessible ever more fast and efficiently, visuals – alone or accompanied by language (or sound, or music) – are an attractive medium for communication. It is thus hardly surprising that research on visual and multimodal discourse is on the rise.¹ Evidently, to help visual studies (and multimodal studies with a visual component) mature into a serious humanities discipline, it is crucial to be able to unveil patterns in the way visuals can communicate. Finding patterns requires first of all that it should be possible to identify recurring “building blocks” in visuals. Only if any recurring elements are found, it is sensible to ask whether any “rules” or “conventions” exist that prescribe how these elements can interact to create meaning – and how they cannot.

2. Visual Grammar?

In language we call the constituting building blocks its “words” or “vocabulary”, and the rules that govern the acceptable interaction between these words its “grammar”. Only if the same, or highly sim-

¹ E.g., Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2006; Carey Jewitt (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2014; David Machin (ed.), *Visual Communication*, Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2014; Nina-Maria Klug and Hartmut Stöckl (eds.), *Handbuch Sprache im multimodalen Kontext [The Language in Multimodal Contexts Handbook]*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016; John Bateman, Janina Wildfeuer, and Tuomo Hiippala, *Multimodality: Foundations, Research and Analysis – A Problem-Oriented Introduction*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017.

ilar, phenomena to verbal language's vocabulary and grammar occur in the visual realm does it make sense to say that visuals constitute a "language". Neil Cohn does not hesitate to adopt the term "visual languages".² I agree with him that in certain situations it is possible to say something about constitutive elements as well as about the way these can, or even should, be conjoined to convey meaning, but in my view Cohn goes too far in his claims. My reservations are by and large the following: there are innumerable entities and phenomena in the world, and they can be drawn and photographed and filmed in innumerable ways. Consequently, we cannot have a "visual dictionary" that specifies all the admissible building blocks in the sense that a verbal dictionary can more or less exhaustively list the words that exist, at a given moment in time, in a language, and provides their correct spelling. For this reason I counsel that when talking about the visual mode we use the concept of "vocabulary" with great caution. (Of course, there can be, and indeed are, domain-specific *thesauri* of visuals.)

Similarly, it is misleading to use the word "grammar" to refer to relations between visual elements, since this suggests a degree of precision in specifying the (non)acceptability of combinations of visual elements that is untenable. My proposal is to use the word *structure* instead of *grammar*, or else, as with "vocabulary", to use quotation marks ("grammar") to emphasize its metaphorical nature when applied to visuals. This is not pedantry: in my view it is to a considerable extent Kress and Van Leeuwen's over-stretching of the notion of a "grammar of visual design" that leads them to several serious misrepresentations of the way visuals can communicate meaning.³

Although the medium of visuals as a whole, then, has neither vocabulary nor grammar, there is evidence that certain *genres*, or certain visual phenomena within genres, dispose of qualities that one might nonetheless want to call a rudimentary "language" – that is, a

² Neil Cohn (ed.), *The Visual Narrative Reader*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

³ Charles Forceville, "Educating the Eye? Kress and Van Leeuwen's *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996)", *Language and Literature*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1999), pp. 163–178.

(very) limited set of elements with a specific meaning that can be combined with each other and with other elements only in restricted, rule-governed ways. Both Neil Cohn and myself have investigated the "language" of comics, and found recurring elements and patterns.⁴ Forceville and Clark have suggested that brand logos and pictograms constitute genres of visuals that have language-like properties.⁵ We could use the term "micro-languages" for closed sets with only a few items (a "micro-vocabulary") and just a few rules specifying the relations among these items and their relation with other elements (a "micro-grammar").

3. Visual Rhetoric in Creative "Traffic Signs"

Like pictograms, traffic signs constitute a good genre to investigate language-like qualities of visuals, as proposed by Forceville and

⁴ Cohn, *op. cit.* and Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013; Charles Forceville, "Visual Representations of the Idealized Cognitive Model of Anger in the Asterix Album *La Zizanie*", *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 69–88; Charles Forceville, "Pictorial Runes in *Tintin and the Picaros*", *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2011), pp. 875–890; Charles Forceville, "Creative Visual Duality in Comics Balloons", in Tony Veale, Kurt Feyaerts, and Charles Forceville (eds), *Creativity and the Agile Mind: A Multi-Disciplinary Exploration of a Multi-Faceted Phenomenon*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2013, pp. 253–273; Charles Forceville, Tony Veale, and Kurt Feyaerts, "Balloons: The Visuals of Balloons in Comics", in Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest (eds.), *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*, Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2010, pp. 56–73; Michael Abbott and Charles Forceville, "Visual Representation of Emotion in Manga: LOSS OF CONTROL IS LOSS OF HANDS in *Azumanga Daioh* Volume 4", *Language and Literature*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2011), pp. 91–112; Charles Forceville, Elisabeth El Refaie, and Gert Meesters, "Stylistics and Comics", in Michael Burke (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics*, London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 485–499; Dušan Stamenković, Miloš Tasić, and Charles Forceville, "Facial Expressions in Comics: An Empirical Consideration of McCloud's Proposal", *Journal of Visual Communication*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2018), pp. 407–432.

⁵ Charles Forceville and Billy Clark, "Can Pictures Have Explicatures?", *Linguagem em (Dis)curso*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2014), pp. 451–472.

Kjeldsen.⁶ In this earlier paper we concluded that traffic signs have three text-internal meaningful visual elements: their form; their colour(s); and, often, a stylized picture of an object or person (what Peirce would call an “iconic” sign) in it. In many cases, overall meaning furthermore depends on the fact that this visual information is often accompanied by verbal information in or underneath or above the traffic sign, turning it into a multimodal sign. Finally, one *pragmatic* element is always crucial, namely *where* the traffic sign is located. We could thus say that the micro-language of traffic signs has a more or less exhaustive number of meaning-carrying elements – and hence a micro-vocabulary – as well as certain rules specifying how these elements could be correctly used in relation with each other, thereby revealing a rudimentary micro-grammar. It is because of these genre-specific qualities, we argued, that the genre of traffic signs could also be used creatively to make rhetorical or even argumentative claims that need not be restricted to the domain of traffic.

In the present chapter I revisit this idea by elaborating on the way in which traffic signs function as (verbo)visual “speech acts”, analyzing new examples. Speech acts, or performatives, first theorized by J. L. Austin,⁷ are utterances that make something happen by the very act of uttering them. Examples are “declaring war”, “pronouncing two people man and wife”, and “promising”. Traffic signs function in the same way: they are thus a kind of (verbo-)visual “speech acts” (see Figure 1).

It is to be noted that none of these four types of signs allow for varying their *colour* without affecting the nature of the “speech act” they convey, but that Figures 1c and 1d (but not 1a and 1b) allow for some variation in their *form*. This is presumably no coincidence: ignoring the messages in 1a and 1b leads to more dangerous situations in traffic than ignoring those in 1c and 1d, and thus are strictly coded

⁶ Charles Forceville and Jens E. Kjeldsen, “The Affordances and Constraints of Situation and Genre: Visual and Multimodal Rhetoric in Unusual Traffic Signs”, *International Review of Pragmatics*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2018), pp. 158–178.

⁷ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

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both in terms of colour and in terms of *form*. In many cases, the traffic signs feature an iconic silhouette, or language, or both, to make clear what the traffic user is warned or informed about, or forbidden/permitted to do.

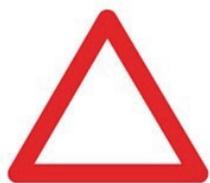


Figure 1a: "You are warned that..."



Figure 1b: "You are forbidden to..."



Figure 1c: "You are permitted/
/instructed to..."



Figure 1d: "You are informed that..."

Because of the highly coded "speech act" the traffic sign templates present, it is possible to deploy them for humorous purposes, or even to persuade viewers to adopt ideas, or undertake actions, that are not related to behaviour in traffic. In Forceville and Kjeldsen (*op. cit.*) we discussed some examples of both. An example of a "traffic sign" in which a rhetorical point is made is Figure 3. We are all familiar with Figure 2, an "instructive" sign indicating a footpath. Figure 3, by varying on Figure 2, makes the point that it is odd that the adult and child on the official sign by default seem to be male, exposing this gender bias by depicting the two humans as female. Even though this traffic sign probably was an embellished actual sign in the real world (rather than a photoshopped version of a picture of such a sign), from a rhetorical perspective its precise location does not matter much anymore: unlike in Figure 2a, one can relocate the sign to make a more general point: "it is wrong to (standardly) use the male variety of the species as the default to depict 'people'."

Figure 4a, an art work by Carlos No, makes a proclamation in a less playful manner. In order to understand the point, one must first of all recognize the silhouette within the sign as a group of refugees. The traffic sign then means: "forbidden to refugees". The "forbidden

to” is entirely conveyed by the category of traffic signs to which this one belongs. It is to be noted that if one were to manipulate the colours in 4a to result in 4b, the meaning would change into something like “refugees are welcome here”.



Figure 2: Standard traffic sign “this is a footpath”.

Figure 3: Manipulated footpath sign.⁸

Figure 4a: Forbidden for refugees, art work by Carlos No.⁹

Figure 4b: Manipulated version of Figure 4a.¹⁰

But it turns out that not all communicators making use of traffic sign’s “micro-language” are in full command of its code. In particular, the “forbidden” sign appears to be regularly used in situations where a “warning” sign would be more appropriate. Consider Figure 5, a sign featuring a stylized depiction of a face with a raised index finger in front of the mouth, thereby signaling: “it is forbidden to talk here”. Whereas this traffic sign may occur in a traffic-related situation (for instance in certain coaches in a train), this is not necessary; one can also imagine encountering it, for instance, in a library, or in a church. It is to be noticed, however, that what is forbidden is *not* what is depicted in the iconic silhouette (namely: be silent!). As it stands, the sign is a kind of visual “double negation” (I owe the observation to Paul Boersma). This “double negation” is arguably also found in Figure 6. One can imagine an environmental activist living in a house just before a gas station might plant it into her garden to

⁸ Art by Petra McKinnon, see <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/571886852654505100>.

⁹ See <http://www.artsblog.it/galleria/carlos-no-europe/3>.

¹⁰ Thanks to Pieter Manders for creating this version.

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remind car drivers about to fill up. The silhouettes of Figures 5 and 6 would have been more "grammatical" in the triangle of Figure 1a: "you are *warned* that you must be silent here" and "you are *warned* that (over)using gasoline amounts to mankind committing suicide".

I submit that the café table with a male, red devil and a female, black angel in Figure 7, too, has the wrong form. Since these icons, when used together, are conventionally used to signal bad temptations and good advice, respectively, the meaning could be something like, "in this café you are exposed both to the bad and the good" (pleasant versus excessive drinking? interesting contacts versus people who want to seduce or deceive you?). There is some freedom of interpretation here, but this freedom is constrained by (1) the fact that this is a prohibition sign; and (2) its location in a café. But surely this café table is not meant to issue a "thou shalt not ..." message. Rather, it suggests something along the lines that *here* (i.e., in this café) there are both bad and good things that may attract your attention. A warning sign would have been more suitable (but a triangular café table is probably inconvenient ...).



Figure 5: *Be silent.*¹¹



Figure 6: *Using gasoline is committing suicide.*¹²



Figure 7: *Devilish temptation and angelical good advice. Café table Budapest, April 2018.*¹³

¹¹ Retrieved from the internet, provenance unknown.

¹² See <https://www.drive2.ru/b/2488336/>.

¹³ Photographed by Luc Pauwels, whom I thank for permission to use this photo.

Figure 8 has the correct form, but violates traffic-sign grammar by being blue with white letters instead of red with white letters. It was undoubtedly not lack of knowledge about the “code” that plays a role here. This Hawaiian sign appears on private property – and on Hawaii it is unlawful to use official traffic signs on non-public premises; hence, apparently, the adaptation.

The “traffic sign” in Figure 9 is a forbidding sign which, by virtue of the iconically depicted photo camera, presumably has something to do with photographing. Without the text one could easily envisage coming across it on a spot where one is not allowed to make photographs – but as a matter of fact the sign is placed in front of a photo shop, and therefore would be expected to invite or instruct people in a positive way about photographs, as the accompanying (Dutch) text indeed corroborates: “passport photographs – immediately ready”. In this case, the sign should have been of the *informative* variety (cf. Figure 10).



Figure 8: Traffic sign on private property in Hawaii.¹⁴



Figure 9: “Traffic” sign in front of a photo shop (Haarlem, The Netherlands) offering a passport photographing service.¹⁵



Figure 10: Manipulated version of the “traffic” sign in Figure 9. (Thanks to Pieter Manders for creating this version.)

Even though their “grammar” may be faulty, all of the above examples intend to make rhetorical points. This is not the case with

¹⁴ See <http://nowiknow.com/they-blue-it/>.

¹⁵ Photo by the author.

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manipulated traffic signs such as the “forbidden entry from this side” signs in Figures 11a–d.



Figure 11a: Street art by Clet Abraham.¹⁶



Figure 11b: Traffic sign in Budapest, April 2018.¹⁷



Figure 11c: Florence, Italy, photographed by Nick Phewing.



Figure 11c: Florence, Italy, photographed by Nick Phewing.

These signs are clever and funny – but they do not manifest any persuasive power, nor are they ostensibly intended to do so. Their creativity is purely formal – although it is in principle always possible that when used in different circumstances (i.e., by changing the prag-

¹⁶ See <https://www.amusingplanet.com/2013/01/altered-street-signs-by-clet-abraham.html>.

¹⁷ Photographed by Luc Pauwels, whom I thank for permission to use this photo.

matic dimension of their meaning-making), they *do* make a point. I propose they are best described as “visual puns”.

4. Concluding Remarks

Having considered the quasi-traffic signs above, let me draw a few brief conclusions. In the first place, the genre of quasi-traffic signs enables the creation of persuasive messages, even without the use of language. In the categorization of performatives, or speech acts, that Austin proposes, they would be “exercitives”, which pertain to “the giving of a decision in favour of or against a certain course of action, or advocacy of it”.¹⁸ The quasi-traffic signs can fulfill this role because they transform and adapt visual templates that already have a clearly coded meaning. Something similar can be done in the genre of critical anti-advertisements, so-called “subvertisements”.¹⁹ More generally speaking, many genres (e.g., advertisements, political cartoons) have such strong conventions that visuals alone may suffice to make rhetorical or argumentative points.²⁰ In the second place, it is clear that not everybody uses the template well: sometimes the wrong, or not the best, “speech act” template has been chosen, making for an ambiguous or confusing message. In Austinian terms, we could say that they “misfire”, more specifically representing “mis-executions”, the latter manifesting “wrong formulas”.²¹ Thirdly, the examples show that the quasi-traffic signs constitute a genre that arguably has both a “vocabulary” and a “grammar”, the former consisting of colours, forms, and icons (the icons, to be sure, exempli-

¹⁸ Austin, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

¹⁹ Assimakis Tseronis and Charles Forceville, “Arguing Against Corporate Claims Visually and Multimodally: The Case of Subvertisements”, *Multimodal Communication*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2017), pp. 143–157.

²⁰ See Assimakis Tseronis and Charles Forceville (eds.), *Multimodal Argumentation and Rhetoric in Media Genres*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017, for other genres in which the visual component plays a central role in persuading people.

²¹ Austin, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–17, 36.