

Aspects of visual analysis for the EFL class

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Visual structures realize meanings as linguistic structures do also and thereby point to different interpretations of experience and different forms of social interaction... (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 2)

Introduction

The concepts of multiliteracies and visual literacy have become important in different areas of study, including Applied Linguistics and EFL teaching (Goodman & Graddol, 1996; Stenglin & Iedema, 2001; Royce, 2002; 2007), specially with the improvement of multimedia and electronic information sources. The term “multiliteracies” refers to competencies in the use of language, images, movies and computer-based resources to produce and interpret meanings; it concerns different literacy practices (particularly text/image relations and other hybrid forms of literacy) in different sociocultural contexts. As suggested by The New London Group (1996, p. 64), “a pedagogy of multiliteracies... focuses on modes of representation much broader than language” and these modes “differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural and social effects”.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) discuss the semiotic shift from the verbal to the visual in contemporary society and propose that educators should reconsider the meaning of “literacy”. These authors explain that “[g]iven the importance of visually displayed information in so many significant social contexts, there is an urgent need for developing adequate ways of talking and thinking about the visual” (p. 33).

With the theoretical foundation derived from systemic-functional linguistics (SFL), which is understood as a social semiotic perspective, research in multiliteracies has become a

focus of study, particularly since O'Toole's (1990; 1994) and Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996; 2001) studies. Thus, based on SFL, specially the work carried out by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996); Kress (2003); Callow (1999); van Leeuwen (2005) and Unsworth (2001), in this paper we analyze aspects of two images and suggest that such analysis may be used as a resource in EFL teaching. After briefly introducing some basic notions from systemic-functional linguistics and visual literacy, we will explore the selected images as illustration of the kind of visual awareness which may be fostered in EFL classes. We hope to provide an opportunity for teachers of English to consider the relevance of visual grammar in their classes so that they may propose additional learning opportunities for students.

A brief theoretical panorama: Systemic-functional linguistics and visual grammar

Systemic-functional linguistics (SFL) views language as a form of social action, as social semiotics, combining lexis, grammar, semantics and context. According to Halliday, language is functional, semantic, contextual and semiotic (. It is functional "in the sense that we are interested in what language can do, or rather in what the speaker, child or adult, can do with it" (Halliday, 1978, p. 16). Language is semantic as we use it to make meanings, to represent aspects of reality and to establish interpersonal links. It is contextual because we interact with people in different sociocultural environments, which influence our choices at the same time that these choices exert influence on sociocultural environments. Finally, language is semiotic since it is a meaning potential, that is, we choose what to say from the total set of options available.

It is important to understand these multiple dimensions of language –functional, semantic, contextual and semiotic – so that both teachers and students may also see that language does not refer to grammatical forms only, but that it is a resource to understand and produce meanings addressed to different people in different contexts.

SFL uses the term *context of situation* to refer to the configuration of the social context, composed of field, tenor and mode. Field refers to the on-going social activity; tenor concerns “the role relationships among the participants” (Halliday, 1978, p. 110), while mode is the role assigned to language, including the channel of communication and the medium.

In order to analyze a text or an image, we can use the context of situation to ask students about the specific characteristics of the pertaining context:

1. What is going on in this text or image? (field)
2. Who are the participants involved? How are they related? (tenor)
3. What is the rhetorical channel? (mode)

Or, as proposed by Meurer (2001):

- (1) how does this text represent the specific ‘reality’ it relates to?
- (2) what kind of social relations does this text reflect or bring about?
- (3) what are the identities, or the social roles, involved in this text?

Regarding the mode, we can ask:

- (4) How is the text or image conveyed: on TV, on paper, on the Internet?

From these variables, students are allowed to perceive and explore the relevant contextual factors involved in the text they are studying.

We mentioned above that in SFL language is seen as being functional in the sense that we do things with it. As a matter of fact, language is multifunctional because every time we

say something or we construct an image we produce three different types of meaning simultaneously: ideational, interpersonal and textual. These three strands of meaning are referred to as metafunctions, which characterize the semantic nature of language. One of the most important insights in SFL, besides the theoretical view that we simultaneously enact these three types of meaning, is that these meanings are directly associated to the three variables of the context of situation. Thus, ideational meanings relate to field, interpersonal to tenor, and textual to mode. In visual grammar, these different kinds of meanings correspond to the following terms:

Ideational → representational

Interpersonal → Interactional

Textual → compositional

The following diagram presents an overview of the most relevant elements for the visual analysis of these three strands of simultaneous meanings, as proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). Though in this paper we do not explore all the elements contained in the diagram, we include them just to indicate that our analysis is only illustrative. As shown in the diagram (Figure 1), the representational function is responsible for the depiction of actions and/or concepts in images.

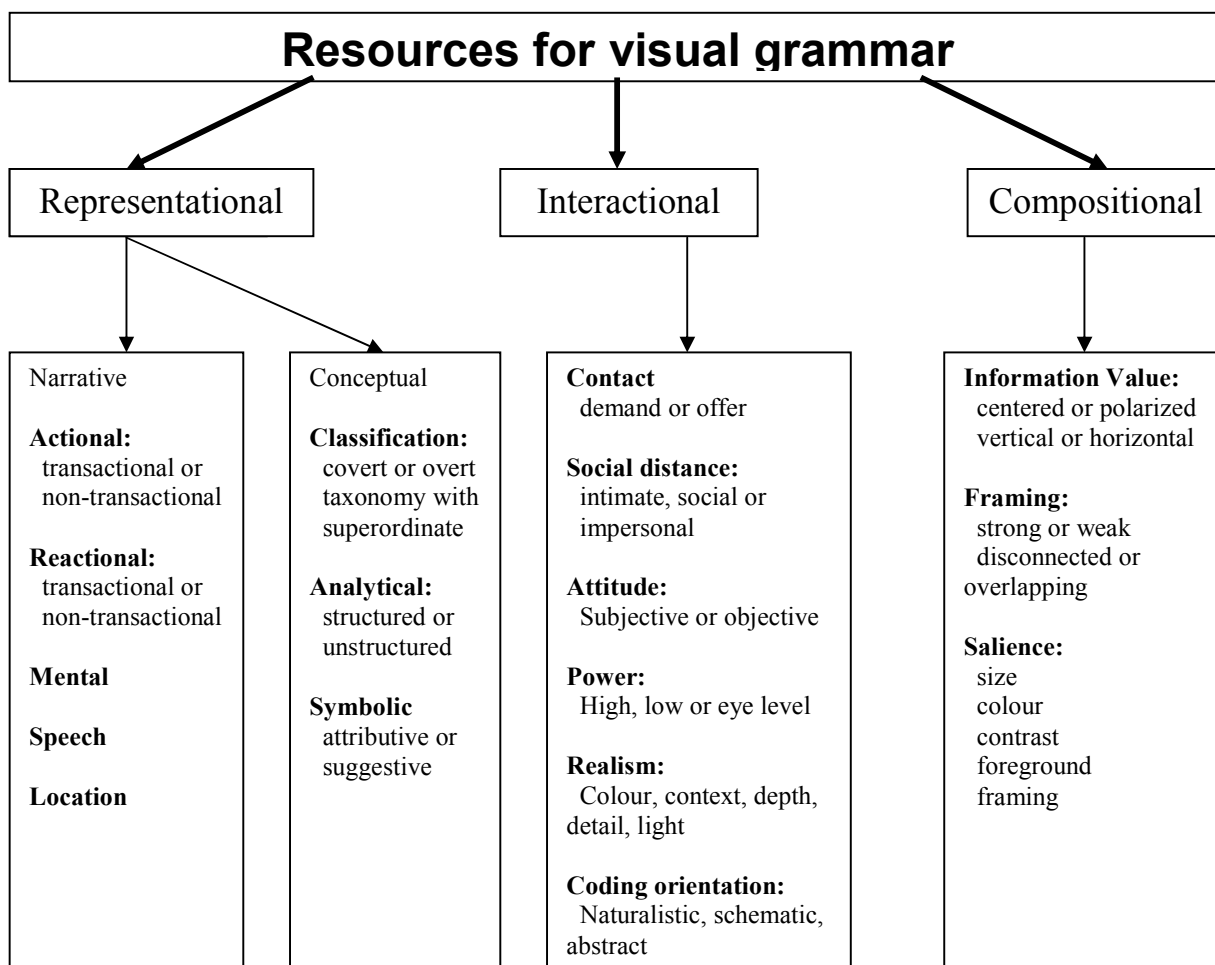


Figure 1: Summary of resources for visual analysis, based on Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996 (adapted by Böhlke, 2005, from Simpson, A. (2004) *Visual Literacy: A coded language for viewing in the classroom*. Marrickville, NSW. *PETA*, March 2004)

Illustrative visual analysis

To illustrate how to use some of the elements displayed in Figure 1 in the analysis of images, we examine some of the meanings conveyed in Figures 2 and 3. Looking at Figure 2, we can see that the Brazilian doll Susi (see Almeida's 2006 study,) is represented as

performing an action: she is walking and carrying her purse and her luggage. Thus the representational resource used is narrative and actional: narrative because there is movement, an event in progress, and actional because somebody is doing something. More specifically, Susi (in this case, the Actor, the participant who is being represented) is seen in a transactional structure in the sense that, besides walking, she is performing the action of carrying her purse and pulling her luggage.



Figure 2 Susi doll, from Estrela's website

The picture, taken from the website of the toy manufacturer *Estrela* (Almeida, 2006), also presents a naturalistic image in a specific setting: we see objects such as the airplane, the air hostess' uniform and the bags with clearly defined colors. We see the air hostess Susi walking on a lane towards probably the airport lounge after descending from the airplane, seen on the background. This whole scene creates an effect of being real, as if the doll were effectively acting as an air hostess, and could move around, simulating human-like behavior. As an advertisement, the image provides a stimulus for the intended audience and potential buyers of the doll.

Within representational meanings, besides narrative structures as exemplified in the Susi picture above, images can also be conceptual. Figure 3, an ad taken from the cover of the Australian magazine for women *Shop Till You Drop* (discussed in Heberle, 2004), illustrates a conceptual representation. In this picture, there is no setting and Gisele could be anywhere. She represents a concept: a concept of beauty, elegance, femininity and sensuality. The participant, Gisele, is posing for us, the viewers, not carrying out any specific action, different from what happens in the Susi ad. Gisele is placed in the foreground, shown to the viewers.



Figure 3: Gisele Bündchen, cover of *Shop Till You Drop*

Let's move now to interactional meanings, which concern the kind of contact, social distance, attitude and power in relation to the represented participant and viewers (see Figure 1). In terms of Figure 3, we see that Gisele is looking directly at us. In visual analysis, as proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen, due to her gaze direction at the viewers,

we say that Gisele is demanding a reaction or response from them. On the other hand, in Figure 2, since the doll is acting as if in a professional stance, not looking directly at the viewers, we say that instead of demanding a response from them, she is displayed for contemplation, as an offer.

Regarding social distance, still part of interactional meanings, Figure 2 is a medium shot, which shows the head, shoulders and the upper part of Gisele's body only. This interactional structure suggests a personal relation with the viewers, which is further enhanced by "the tilt of her head and the poise of her body", to use O'Toole's (1994, p. 8) reference to *Venus*, in Botticelli's *Primavera*. In this represented interaction, Gisele exerts some power over the viewers, encouraging them to read the magazine or to consume products connected to her image.

In terms of compositional meanings, which refer to "[t]he way the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 181), we can say that in Figure 3 Gisele is smoothly integrated with the verbal meanings in the cover, with different font sizes, colors and shapes which stretch over her arms and her partly exposed belly. Compositionally (see Figure 1), this is an integrated whole, with Gisele and the catchy headings on the cover of the magazine foregrounding visual and verbal information of different salience.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, drawing on SFL and visual grammar, we have briefly examined some aspects of visual analysis. We conclude by suggesting that this kind of analysis may be integrated into EFL teaching, thus stimulating our students to become aware of the verbal-visual synergy in contemporary society. Most importantly, this may contribute to an understanding that images, like verbal language, also create representations, interactions by means of compositional resources and thus, influence people's views of social practices and contexts. Understanding verbal language and images as meaning-making resources in different contexts allows us to suggest that an EFL class can become a site for the exploration of diverse sociocultural manifestations.

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