

Chapter 13

Humour in Visual–Verbal Code–Pairing in Selected Comments on the Facebook Forum

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ABSTRACT

Visual verbal texts can be interpreted from the perspective of multimodality and intertextuality. This chapter investigates the manner in which visual-verbal code-pairing in texts becomes humorous within specific contexts and the role of incongruity as a major ingredient of humour. Adopting a combination of visual semiotics theory, incongruity theory and superiority theory, the author analyzed 50 purposively sampled humorous texts on Facebook for the meaning and humour inherent in them. The author demonstrates that the two parts to the visual-verbal humour may constitute a composite whole, forming the unexpected portion, while the background to the joke serves as the expected.

The views and content expressed in this chapter are those of the author but not necessarily of the publisher and may contain some explicit ideas and concepts.

1. INTRODUCTION

A code is a mode of communication used in conveying a specific idea to people with whom one shares the same culture, background or knowledge. It is a ‘social convention that links signs with meanings’ (Potts 1996: 21); and ‘consists of both signs and the rules and negotiations determining the context and the style of those signs as well as the possible combinations in order to build up more sophisticated messages’ (Parsa & Parsa, 2002: 36). A code can be verbal, visual, gestural or symbolic. It is verbal when it is spoken or written, visual when it is an image or a picture that conveys meaning (e.g. a cartoon), gestural when body movements are used (as in sign language) and symbolic when signs and symbols are used as icons representing specific ideas.

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In multilingual societies, more than one language occurs among many codes used for communicating different messages. The codes may be spoken/written language, sign language, drum language, etc. However, there may be overlapping of languages and codes, such that both can be said to operate as language or code, since both are means of communication. For instance, verbal communication is a language code.

Codes are used in face-to-face communication as well as in online interaction. In virtual communities, the means (or codes) of communication, as should be expected, are also many and varied. The major means of communication on the Internet are written words, photographs/images, smilies/ emoticons, video/audio clips, etc. Sometimes, however, any of these may fall short of a poster's needs at a particular point; hence, forcing a recourse to the use of multiple or supplementary codes to convey intended messages. More importantly, posters on the web often use their creativity to conjure up images/pictures that approximate the ideas they want to express and for them to be understood by other readers. For instance, an image can take different forms: it can be an authentic photograph of an individual, a caricature of a person or just a cartoon. Sometimes, photographs may be edited, such that the head, nose, ear or mouth is bigger or smaller than the body; a photograph can be twisted to any form, using computer simulation (photoshop), just to communicate different and specific ideas or information.

Part of this creativity is what can be described as *visual-verbal code-pairing*. Visual-verbal code-pairing is a phenomenon where images and written words are creatively merged to give composite meaning in discourse (The concept is further explained in Section 3). In this sense, an image that represents an idea (visual) is used and supplemented with written words (verbal). In other words, neither the image nor the expression can be sufficient in the context in which both can be used; hence the collaboration.

The aspect of visual-verbal code-pairing in communication had, until now, escaped much rigorous scholarly scrutiny; and this study is a probe in this direction. Hence, this study deals with two codes co-occurring in a text, one pairing with the other and completing/balancing its sense. In other words this study deals with the combination of an image (in form of photographs, cartoons, caricature, etc) and written expressions (largely in the English language) which are used to communicate specific ideas. In addition, one of the different functions of visual-verbal code-pairing is its use for humour. In this paper, we shall be dealing with how visual-verbal texts become humorous within specific contexts and the role of incongruity as a major ingredient of humour. Hence, the focus of this paper is to see how visual-verbal code-pairing is deployed to achieve humour on the Facebook Forum.

2. THE FACEBOOK FORUM

The Facebook Forum is a virtual community established by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 (Delise, 2012). It is one of the very prominent social networks on the Internet (others are Twitter, Instagram, Nigeria Village Square, 2Go, Badoo and Nairaland) with over 800 million active users by 2011 estimates (Delise, 2012). The forum requires would-be members to register with their names and photographs. Members of the Facebook forum do a lot of things on the forum. These include posting information, thinking aloud about things that affect them, advertising, announcing events such as convocation, burial, wedding and naming ceremonies, connecting with friends and chatting with them openly or in private (through messages), passing comments on social events, etc. A topic can start with just a story, a picture or a video clip. Facebook members can access it from their various homes and pass comments on it. Such responses or comments can also be in different forms, usually through written words or pictures. The pictures can

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