

Impact of Semiotics on Teaching Cultural Concepts: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis Study

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Abstract

Scientific research in applied languages plays a vital role in translating the relationship between language and different fields because there are many ways to convey information. It could be either through words or images in different discourses. Therefore, this study aims at analysing 15 cartoons or caricatures which are published on different media sources such as Pinterest, Twitter, Youtube, Facebook, The Progressive along with educational websites explaining cultural concepts. The cartoons or caricatures understudy represent feminism, orientalism, and imperialism. The analysis is based on a qualitative method applying Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) approach to show its importance in media analysis as it is a systemic way of studying not only language, but also different semiotic modes, especially the teaching of cultural concepts. The analysis shows that both lexical and visual choices could help in understanding cultural concepts. Moreover, it shows the importance of MCDA in the teaching of cultural concepts and in transferring the author's intensions from one culture into another.

Key Words:

Applied Languages, Cultural Concepts, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, Scientific Research, Semiotics

1 Introduction

Studying culture is very interesting and amusing because it helps in knowing different cultural concepts and learning more about different countries' traditions. Such knowledge could help in understanding the difference between people and comprehending the reasons behind some actions or different attitudes. Thus, culture plays a vital role in societies and identifies people around the world.

Nowadays, teaching cultural concepts involves critical thinking along with historical background or context. It provokes the exploration of diverse perspectives, understanding power relations, and analysing its impacts on societies as well as comparing between them in the past and the present. These concepts include feminism, orientalism, imperialism, etc. Teaching these concepts without involving visual representations like images of different types and videos could be uninteresting and boring for some students due to the presence of social media and other visual representation forms everywhere. It could be difficult for the teacher to attract their attention. As a result, associating social media with the process of teaching could be beneficial for both the teacher and the student. It could create a vivid connection between the teacher, students, and the topic of discussion. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to show the impact of using visual representations to facilitate the process of teaching in general and the teaching of cultural concepts in particular.

Moreover, this study focuses mainly on expressing the impact of verbal and visual representations portrayed in cartoons or caricatures (which belong to images) used in the teaching of specific cultural concepts which are feminism, orientalism, and imperialism in order to have a better understanding of these concepts and to link them to real life. This takes place through the application of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to 15 cartoons or caricatures published on different social media platforms and educational sites as well. These cartoons are analysed according to two main analytical frameworks; Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) social semiotics and its augmentation by

Harrison (2008) for analysing visual resources, and Hofstede et al. (2010) cultural dimensional model to discuss the cultural aspects found in each cartoon understudy. By integrating MCDA to the teaching of cultural concepts, students could be able to develop a deeper understanding of how meaning is conveyed through images in terms of colours, objects, labels, and narratives. They could also be capable of differentiating between cultural concepts and getting the meaning behind each one to be applied in their real lives or linked to real life experience. In addition, this approach provokes students to be more critical and more analytical through using critical thinking, searching for the context of use, and analysing the significance of use.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA)

According to Van Leeuwen (2015: 447), “multimodality refers to the discourse which implies more characteristics of communication apart from spoken discourse such as voice, gestures, facial expressions, or aspects of self-presentations.” MCDA on the first place follows the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in terms of expressing the relationship between language and ideology, power, dominance as well as social change. However, its aim or innovation is that it includes not only language, but also all semiotic modes which make up a social context (Machin et al., 2016: 303). In other words, it is concerned with developing the theory and practice of discourse analysis. Moreover, MCDA views other modes of communication as a means of social construction and considers not only visual, but also linguistic strategies that appear neutral on the surface, may actually be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events or persons for particular ends (Machin & Mayr, 2012: 9). Therefore, MCDA represents a shift focus on linguistic research. “Screening the meaning-making potential of individual semiotic resources and concentrates on theorizing the interaction between different semiotic resources in multimodal communication” (Djanov &

Zhao, 2013: 2). Furthermore, according to O'Halloran (2004: 1), MCDA, the analysis, and the interpretation of language use are contextualized in conjunction with other semiotic resources, such resources are simultaneously used for the construction of meaning. In addition to language use, multimodal analysis pays attention to the functions and meaning of the visual images, together with the meaning arising from the integrated use of semiotic resources.

2.2 Social Semiotics

According to social semiotics, which was proposed by Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), meanings could be conveyed through both verbal and non-verbal language. The framework would analyse the meaning which is addressed through visual clues in pictures or images. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), meanings are divided into three types or metafunctions: representational, interpersonal, and compositional. Representational metafunction deals with how the story is represented in the image from the viewer's point of view (narrative representation) and what the viewer interprets from such narrative (conceptual representation). Interpersonal metafunction represents the features of the story to express the connection with the viewer in terms of the gaze (whether the characters look directly to the viewers or not), distance (which body parts are shown to the viewers such as the head only, the head and shoulders, the upper half of the body, or the whole body), and perspective of the participants and the visual text position (horizontal and vertical) to elaborate power relations. Compositional metafunction expresses the information value, the way the representation / image attracts the viewer's attention, and the connections between the representations through specific elements. Later, Harrison (2008: 65-68) proposed a clearer guideline for analysis to identify the elements for the analysis of visual resources as follows:

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|---------------------|--|--|
| 1. Representational | Structures | Processes |
| | Narrative:
Viewers
imagine a
story about
the RPs by
themselves. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action: The story is built from the RPs' actions. • Reactional: The story is built from eyelines between RPs. |
| | Conceptual:
Viewers
interpret
who or
what the
RPs
represent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classificatory: RPs are considered as group members. • Analytical: RPs are considered as parts of the whole concept/structure. • Symbolic: RPs represent themselves and also symbolize some ideas. |
| 2. Interpersonal | Feature
Gaze | Feature Processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demand: RPs look at the viewers directly to create a strong involvement. • Offer: RPs do not look at the viewers. |
| | Distance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intimate: Head only. • Close personal: Head and shoulders. • Far personal: Upper half. • Close social: Whole body. • Far social: Whole body with space around the RP. |

- Horizontal perspective
 - Public distance: Torsos of several people.
 - Front: The RP belongs to the viewer's group.
 - Oblique: The RP does not belong to the viewer's group.
- Vertical perspective (RPs - visual text and RPs – viewers)
 - High: The RP looks down - more power.
 - Medium: The RP has the same eye level – equal power.
 - Low: The RP looks up – less power.
- 3. Compositional Information value: RPs' placements suggest different information roles.
 - Given/New: RPs on the left half are given information while RPs on the right half are new information.
 - Ideal/Real: RPs on the top half are ideal while RPs on the bottom half are real.
 - Center/Margin: RPs in the center are important while others are subservient.
- Saliency: The way the RPs catch viewer's attention.
 - Size: Big RPs show great saliency.
 - Focus sharpness: RPs that are not focused show less saliency.
 - Tonal contrast: High contrast area suggests more saliency.

- Color contrast: strong saturated colors have more salience.

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Foreground/Background:
An RP in the foreground has more salience.

Framing:
The connections between RPs

- Framelines: lines in the pictures suggest the connections between the RPs.

- Pictorial framing devices: RPs are connected.

- Empty spaces: RPs are separated.

- Colors: more continuity in colors suggests stronger connections.

- Visual shapes: More continuity in shapes suggests stronger connections.

2.3 Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede et al. (2010) noted that within the larger culture of any country, various sub-cultural groups co-exist. Variations across different groups can be found along each value continuum. Hofstede et al. (2010) proposed six cultural dimensions: Power Distance (PDI), Individualism and Collectivism (IDV), Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), Masculinity and Femininity (MAS),

Long-term versus Short-Term Orientation (LTO), and Indulgence versus restraint (IVR).

Low Index	Dimension	High Index
Equality	1. PDI	Inequality
Collectivism	2. IDV	Individualism
Risk tolerant	3. UAI	Risk intolerant
Collaborative	4. MAS	Competitive
Short-term oriented	5. LTO	Long-term oriented
Normative repression	6. IVR	Free atisfaction

Cited from (Suphabornwornrata & Punksirikulb, 2022: 636).

3. Methodology

3.1 Data

A qualitative analysis was applied to 15 cartoons from different free online media sources which are Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, WordPress, The Progressive, and English Learner (an educational site). They were collected under specific criteria for educational purposes to explain some cultural concepts such as feminism, orientalism, and imperialism. Firstly, feminism focuses mainly on understanding the mechanisms of gender inequality in different domains. Such inequality represents a kind of discrimination between males and females in domains like career. Secondly, orientalism teaches the Eastern culture, language, lifestyle, people, and history. This concept represents discrimination from a different perspective. Such perspective is ideology because it focuses on showing the difference between the East and the West. Finally, imperialism explains the consequences of when a country extends its power and dominance into other territories in order to have political as well as economic gains and profits such as the spread of its language to be the main language of interaction in such territories. Such concept shows a different kind of discrimination on a higher level which is the political one. Therefore, those cartoons are common in showing discrimination on different levels; the social, the cultural, and the political one. Those cartoons were selected because images could be interactive and compositional. In other words, images could do things to or for

the viewers/ students as the position of the image and the written text could be meaningful. They must be multimodal. They were chosen so that students could relate the cultural concepts to the caricatures under study. For the current preliminary study, the cartoons were arranged in examples (1, 2, and 3). Example (1) explained feminism. Example (2) elaborated orientalism. Finally, example (3) illustrated imperialism.

3.2 Procedures of the Analysis

The analysis employed a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis approach (MCDA) to 15 cartoons or caricatures. For the present study, three samples were selected from each set. First, the analysis implemented Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) social semiotics and its augmentation by Harrison (2008) for analysing visual resources to show the message conveyed by each cartoon. Then, through applying Hofstede et al. (2010) cultural dimensional model, the cultural aspects could be discussed and elaborated more.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Example (1)- Cartoon expressing feminism.



http://englischlehrer.de/texts/gender_equality.php

In terms of visual resources analysis, the representational metafunction portrays a man and a woman in a running race, waiting for the start signal. There is a man, the referee, holding a starter pistol to start the race. There are many hurdles in front of

the female runner while the male runner has two lanes which are empty with no hurdles. The finale banner has the sign “Career”. So, this race symbolises the career path of both a man and a woman. The hurdles represent the obstacles that a woman faces during her career path. The other two empty lanes of the running track, where the male runner can use, express the fact that he has more than one option or opportunity to reach his goal. The referee represents the manager, who can be found in any business environment. All these resources correspond to the verbal or the lexical resources “Career” and “That’s a bit unfair, it’s it?” The use of the tag question expresses the female runner’s exclamation, hesitation, and being less confident as well. Therefore, the narrative can be easily interpreted by the students because there is a kind of gender inequality or discrimination in the workplace or the career path.

The interpersonal metafunction can be seen in the RP’s gaze, distance, and perspective. It deals with analysing the elements found in the cartoon to express the cartoonist’s message. In example (1), the RP shows an offering look in terms of gaze because the two male figures (the referee and the male runner) are not looking at the viewer. On the other hand, the female runner has a demanding gaze towards the hurdles because she is looking directly at them. In terms of distance between the participants, the close social interpersonal metafunction presented indicates that they are part of this world and that they are supposed to be sharing it as the participants are represented in their whole bodies. In addition to the distance, the front horizontal perspective shows belonging to the same group. But the way the participants look at each other means that they have medium vertical perspective showing equal powers. On the contrary, the presence of the hurdles in front of the female runner only indicates the opposite to having equal power. It indicates inequality in terms of choices and opportunities.

It can be noticed that the use of colours is meaningful and significant. There are four colours used in the cartoon: white, pink, blue, and black. Each colour has a specific stereotype in terms of gender and power. First, the pink colour is always associated with females as a gender stereotype. Also, it is the colour of the female runner's outfit, and the running track as well. Moreover, in some contexts, the pink colour indicates creativity and imagination. Therefore, the significance of using the pink colour as the colour of the running track is to provoke creativity and imagination to be able to win the race which symbolizes the "career" at the end. Second, the blue colour stands for males as another proof of gender stereotypes. In this example, the male runner's outfit includes two colours, which are blue and white to signal professionalism and responsibility. These are the characteristics required in the workplace to maintain a good career. Moreover, the referee's outfit is in white with a black bow tie to show power and control because he is the one who controls the start of the race. Finally, the colour black represented in the verbal resources or the lexical resources as "career" and "That's a bit unfair, it's it?" expresses formality and mystery as well. This could be implied when the female runner asked a rhetorical question out of curiosity if it was fair to have all those hurdles on her way and the male runner had two empty lanes!

In terms of cultural dimensions, it is very clear that this is masculinity and femininity. Hofstede et al. (2010) summarized that a masculine society is goal-driven, competitive, and assertive while a feminine society values quality of life. Moreover, Hofstede et al. (2010) mentioned that there are differences between genders within the same culture which is a gender gap or gender discrimination between women and men. Therefore, this cartoon is a good example to show gender inequality and could act as the base to help the teacher in elaborating the concept of feminism.

Example (2)- Cartoon to explain orientalism.



<https://everydayorientalism.wordpress.com/2020/04/29/teaching-orientalism-through-art-practice-othere-the-virtual-exhibit/>

In terms of visual resources analysis, the representational metafunction shows a part of a map that includes some symbols or landmarks to support the viewers in recognising the countries and which part(s) of the world are portrayed. On the top of the cartoon, there is a crown, the Eiffel Tower, Pergamon Museum, Big Ben, and the cross. On the bottom, there is the desert, the pyramids, a woman covering her face, a camel, palm trees, a lamp, and two swords. The verbal resources help in understanding the symbols or concepts mentioned. The use of nouns and adjectives supports in comprehending the message portrayed by the cartoonist in explaining the concept of orientalism. Such concept is related to elaborating the differences between people, histories, and cultures. For example, investigating the use of nouns and adjectives as “Developed”, “Progress”, “Civilization”, and “Explorers” in accordance with the other landmarks of countries and the colours attract the RP’s attention to relate the top part of the cartoon to Europe. While the nouns and adjectives used in the bottom of the cartoon as “DESERT”, “OLD”, “Magic”, “DANGER!”, “NOMAD”, “Oriented”, and “COLONIZED” along with rest of the symbols and colours are related to Africa and Asia. In other words, the message conveyed by this cartoon is to express the

meaning of orientalism in terms of showing the difference between the Eastern and the Western cultural representations. According to this cartoon, Europe is represented as the land of civilisation and safety while Africa and Asia symbolize being colonised, dangerous, and uncivilised. The reason behind this is the presence of two swords which signals violence and war. Moreover, the presence of the camel indicates unsafety and being uncivilized because the camel is used as a means of transportation and is found in deserted places. Therefore, there is a kind of discrimination between cultures.

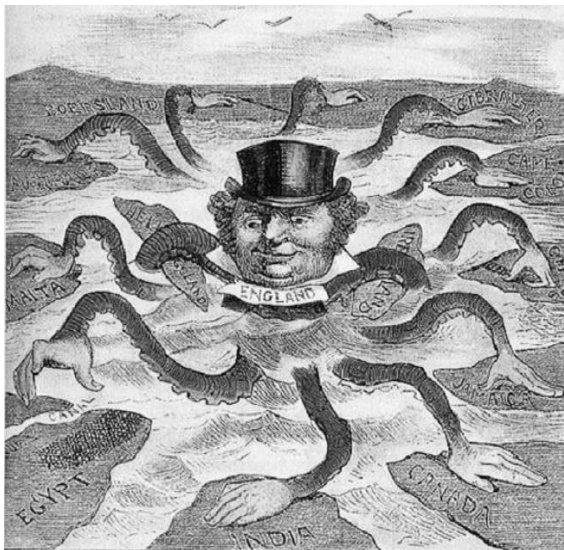
The interpersonal metafunction can be seen from the RP's gaze, distance, and perspective. In example (2), the woman is having a demanding gaze toward the viewers as she is looking directly to the viewers. Her close personal, showing the head and shoulders, is to attract viewers' attention to be able to understand the message conveyed. In terms of perspective, the cartoon includes both horizontal and vertical. For the horizontal perspective, it is a front because the viewer could belong to either of the parts of the world. For the vertical perspective, the civilized part is more powerful than the lower part expressing a high vertical perspective.

The compositional metafunction is found in the analysis of colours because colours can help the viewers, who are the students in relating the cartoon to one of the culture concepts. The colours of the civilised part of the world are white, pink, blue, and black. Each colour has its significance. The white colour which is the dominant colour as an indication of peace and safety. All the verbal or lexical resources are written in black which indicates power. The colour of the crown is pink to show royalty, wealth, and the identity of the gender of the ruler was a female at that time. The blue colour under the noun "progress" indicates professionalism and it is associated with a male figure. On the other hand, all the colours which represent Africa and Asia are yellow, pink, orange, green, brown, blue, and black. The dominating colours are the hot ones, which means there is anger and violence. The yellow colour indicates danger. However, it is associated with the noun "Desert",

which represents the desert, that is hot in weather and lacks habitants. Also, the yellow colour is associated with the pyramids in this cartoon which means in Egypt mourning because the pyramids used to be graves of ancient kings and their families. The adjective “Old” is written in black to show power, death, and mystery which are the characteristics used in representing the pyramids. The orange colour means change and movement because it is linked to the adjective “Oriented”. The pink colour indicates creativity and imagination, especially when it is connected to the lamp and the noun “Magic”. Moreover, the adjective “Colonised” is written in pink to indicate that this part of the world is wealthy and has many luxuries. The colours green and brown indicate growth, new beginnings, and belong to Earth. The adjective “Danger” is written in blue to give the contradictory representations of this colour which are professionalism, responsibility, and peace.

Cultural dimensions are mainly associated with power distance (PDI) in terms of inequality between the East and the West. Moreover, the uncertainty avoidance (UAI), the East is a risk tolerant. Therefore, the students are now able to relate this cartoon to orientalism because it expresses a comparison between the East and the West in terms of civilisation, progress, safety, power, and creativity.

Example (3)- Cartoon elaborating imperialism.



<https://progressive.org/latest/kaplan-s-cure-middle-east-imperialism/>

For the representational metafunction, this cartoon portrays an octopus with a head and hands of a man, swimming in the sea which has many islands. Each island represents a specific country. Most of the octopus' hands are approaching the islands except for one. This island has the name "EGYPT", and the hand of the octopus-man is trying to approach. This is significant because it means that England "the octopus-man" is trying to maintain its power over. There are other islands which are squeezed under the arms of the octopus-man. In terms of the verbal or lexical resources, there are names of countries such as "ENGLAND", "CANADA", "MALTA", "INDIA", "JAMAICA", "IRELAND", "EGYPT", and others. This octopus-man symbolises England or the UK. The sea and islands stand for the world's countries. The arms of the man represent colonisation. Therefore, the message conveyed in this cartoon is to show how powerful, superior, and dominating the UK is as an explanation of imperialism. It shows the last kind of discrimination which is the political discrimination.

The interpersonal metafunction can be seen from the RP's gaze, distance, and perspective. In example (3), the octopus-man is having a demanding gaze because he is looking directly at the

viewers and the islands. He has an intimate distance represented in showing the head because the head is the master of thinking due to the presence of the brain. There is the horizontal perspective that is a front because it shows that England is part of this.

The message represented in this cartoon is well expressed through colours. It helps the students to guess the cultural concept understudy. There are three colours which show how simple and meaningful the cartoon is. These colours are black, red, and brown. The black colour of the hat represents power and dominance while in the names of the countries shows death and evil. This is significant because death took place when England ruled over those countries as a result of wars or conflicts. Also, the hat represents the traditional outfit of the English man. The red colour indicates violence because invading a country is an act of violence. The brown colour is the colour of ground, however in this context, it expresses being helpless. Therefore, students are going to link this to the role of England or the UK globally.

Cultural dimensions are mainly associated with power distance (PDI) in terms of inequality on the level of countries' dominance or superiority because England is having more power over the rest of the countries mentioned in the cartoon. Therefore, in terms of imperialism, England extends its power over the countries and its language as well. Furthermore, it is related to Masculinity and Femininity (MAS) because England, in this example, is represented by a man to show that the masculine society is goal-driven, competitive, and assertive. At the end, students are able to relate this cartoon to the concept of imperialism.

5. Conclusion

For the analysis of cartoons or caricatures explaining cultural concepts, there are many semiotic elements used to convey the meaning. These elements include verbal resources (lexical choices) represented in words or phrases and the visual representations in colours, actions, narratives, and other elements. Through each

element, meaning could be powerful and memorable, especially in the teaching of cultural concepts. This happens because each element is chosen correctly and carefully to meet the requirement of the cartoonist and to attract the viewers' attention to understand the message conveyed.

The analysis of verbal resources or lexical choices helps in understanding the message expressed in the cartoons under study. The use of nouns and adjectives is significant in the elaborating each cultural concept. The use of utterances helps the viewers in guessing the purpose underlying such utterances. Therefore, for MCDA, it is obligatory to have verbal resources portrayed in cartoons, images, or photographs to be able to express and show its impact on understanding the message.

The analysis of colours is significant in understanding cultural concepts because each colour has a story or a kind of a stereotype. However, in cultural aspects' teaching, colours have different connotations which are understood through linking the other elements together to have a complete idea of the concept under study. Therefore, the application of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis approach could be beneficial in transmitting the meaning of the cartoonist easily to all recipients or audiences.

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