

**A multimodal analysis of the
depiction of Sisi in the 2014
presidential elections campaign in
Western online newspapers**

Mohammed Abdel Mohsen Moustafa

**The Faculty of Arts
English Language and Literature department
Helwan University**

Abstract

The present studies trace the depiction of the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi- then a presidential candidate facing a sole opponent, Egyptian Popular Current leader Hamdeen Sabahi- in Western online newspapers. Images accompanying selected news articles handling the 2014 elections scene are investigated in light of Kress and van Leeuwen's semiotic and ideological approach to analyzing news articles images enunciated in their (1996 & 2006) treatises. The purpose is to reveal to how the presidential candidate belonging to the military institution was represented to the Western nonprofessional, illustrating to what extent he is regarded as the solution of the current troubles. The analysis shows that the gap between Sisi and his supporters, and the economic challenges confronting him are the main themes common among the images.

1. Review of literature

1.1 Media discourse analysis

The literature on the use of images on newspaper dates back to the nineteen seventies, with Barthes's (1977) insights into the way news articles images are used to share in delivering the meaning. He considers that "press photograph" has a message that is developed by "a source of emission, a channel of transmission and a point of reception" (p.16). The source of emission for Barthes is the ideology adopted by the discourse producer, while the point of reception is the recipient. As for the channel of transmission, it is the newspaper itself. Hall (1988) also has his significant contribution to that field, with a study entitled 'The determinations of news photographs,' in which he points out how news images share in relating the inner discourse of the newspaper to the prevalent social ideology.

Influenced by Fiske and Hartley's (1978) and Hartley's (1982) emphasis on the connection between the linguistic and visual aspects

of any news article, Fairclough (1995a) recommends the analysis of the “semiotic codes and conventions” underlying any text (p.24). Regarding that certain meanings are reflected through the choice of specific visual patterns, he assumes that the analysis of the visual part of any article can reveal implicit aspects that usually have ideological connotations.

1.2 The rationale for applying multimodal discourse analysis

O’Halloran (2008) maintains that multimodal discourse analysis is mainly interested in analyzing “meaning arising through the use of language and visual imagery in printed texts” (p. 443). She introduces “an integrative platform” of analysis that includes Halliday’s model of language metafunctions, coupled with a semiotic analysis model “to capture the expansion of meaning which occurs when linguistic and visual forms combine” (p.443). O’Halloran justifies her choice of functional grammar in her model by the fact that many theorists in the field of multimodal discourse analysis have based their own insights into that field on Halliday’s (1978 &2014) theory of functional grammar. Such theorists include Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), O’Toole (1994), O’Halloran (2004, 2005).

Despite the fact that the emphasis on the importance of analyzing images inserted in news articles has started in the nineteen seventies (Barthes, 1977), the studies that addressed the significance of image analysis are comparably limited, as Knox (2009) assumes. Perlmutter (2003) is among the theorists who analyzed the use of images in online newspapers. Recognizing the influence of the innovations in technology on the social, political, and cultural conditions of man in this era, he analyzed the influence of the Internet on the way news images are designed in his time. What was found is that the Internet may have allowed new ways for publishing images, but it has not changed the way they are evaluated.

Snyder (2008) assumes that, as words constitute our daily face-to-face communications, the other forms of meaning exchange through media discourse, including the visual information delivered by the multimodal aspects of such form of communication. He (2010) also regards that the visual information in any image-enabled communication cannot be ignored for the extremely important role

they play in “how we work and communicate, in both face-to-face and virtual environments” (p.1). In a similar vein, Machin and Mayr (2012) regard that not just the linguistic components of the text are worthy of analysis, but also the “visual features” the analysts “had been formerly overlooking through their desire to understand language” (p.1). Machin and Mayr add that in some cases the images embedded in a news article reveal some of the information the text conceals (p.9).

2. Previous research on multimodal discourse analysis

Noticing the increasing dominance of visual modes in modern media, Lirola (2006) analyzes two covers of free British magazines with the aim of introducing readers to new ways of understanding the pieces of discourse they are exposed to. Her model of analysis includes multimodal discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics. What the researcher concludes from the analysis is that the designer in each cover designed a complementary structure of language and images, a structure that harmonizes with the socio-cultural context in which it was designed.

Among the analysts who explored news discourse analysis, Knox’s (2007) study examines the communication patterns on the homepages of three online newspapers using texts, images, and both of them together in an integrated whole. The purpose of the study was to trace “genre-specific visual grammar for online newspaper home pages” (p.19). What is found is that news reporters choose the communication patterns that suit the social or political ideology, and texts are not adequate for achieving that purpose, so the engagement of the readers using selected images is inescapable.

O’Halloran (2008) introduces her model in the analysis of the combination of verbal and visual signs in advertisement, with a special attention given to the illustration of the ideational meaning of the images. The sample under analysis is an advertisement published in Singapore for raising awareness about AIDS. O’Halloran finds that despite the ultimate difference between the semiotic features of language and visual art, their expression strata share “the same metafunctional diversity” (p.451).

Najafian (2011) attempts to reveal the usefulness of social semiotics in revealing the social ideologies underlying the choice of specific verbal and visual resources. Two samples are drawn from Time- an American weekly news magazine. What the researcher found is that the signs in the selected advertisements carry different meanings that make it hard to decide which one is the intended meaning.

Castello (2013) analyzes the coverage of two different widely read British newspaper, The Guardian and Daily Mail, of the UK immigration case. A special attention is given to the narrative structure of the selected articles, news values, news actor representation, the driving social ideologies, and the accompanying images. Whereas Daily Mail exaggerates in its emphasis on the negative consequences of that issue, The Guardian aims at diminishing the public concern towards the increasing immigrants.

In an analysis of cartoons satirizing the police in Nigeria, Ayodeji, Moses, and Lawrence (2014) aim to reveal how the visual components in the selected cartoons are used to send a message to the viewers. Four cartoons were selected from TELL newsmagazine, Nigeria's independent weekly magazine, from its 2012 edition, based on their relevance to the same topic. The researchers found that the semiotic resources used in the selected cartoons, including colors, postures, gazes, and symbols, add much to the "semantic quality of the cartoons" (p.119).

Tracing the linguistic and non-linguistic elements used for political satire in Pakistani newspapers, Tehseem and Bokhari (2015) apply a multimodal discourse analysis to investigate face-saving and face-spoiling strategies in political cartoons. What is concluded is that government supporting and opposing media groups use cartoons to praise or attack individuals.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data

Six images- accompanying three news articles published on three different Western online websites- are investigated within Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2006) framework of visual signs analysis.

3.2 Model of analysis

Following the same classification of language metafunctions enunciated by Halliday (1978, 2014), Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) model their framework of grammar of visual design as encompassing three main meanings. The three meanings reflected by visual semiotics correspond to the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings of language, which are representational, interactive, and compositional, respectively. The three meanings and their functions are represented in some detail in the following table:

Table 1 *Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2006) grammar of visual design*

	Representational meaning	Interactive meaning	Compositional meaning
Corresponds to (in SFG theory)	Ideational metafunction	Interpersonal metafunction	Textual metafunction
Focuses on	Actions, actors, and circumstances	The relationship between viewers and subjects in the image	The information value of the elements in the image
Subcategories	Two types of meanings: (1) Narrative (2) Conceptual	Two types of relationships: (1) Demand (2) Offer	Three systems: (1) Information values (2) Salience (3) Framing

4. Analysis

This image accompanies an article by Fick and Morad (2014) published on Christian Science Monitor website on April 20, 2014.



Image 1

Image 1 appears complex, as it represents a collection of participants engaged in different forms of action. The analysis of the narrative representations of the image shows that the participants in the first two lines are Actors engaged in the unidirectional transactional action of raising their hands and making the V sign that signifies victory. The woman in black in the second line conforms to this pattern, but performs another unidirectional transactional action, of raising a campaign poster of Sisi, which is torn from the middle, separating his face into two almost equal halves. One active participant is the veiled young woman on the right margin, who appears to be chanting slogans vigorously, joining the participants in the first two lines in that non-transactional action.

All the participants are Reacters in a non-transactional reaction, as the object of their sight does not appear. The conceptual representations in the image include a main classificational process and a related analytical process. The classificational process shows Sisi, epitomized by his poster, as the Superordinate participants, while his supporters as his Subordinates. However, the glorification of his person is challenged by the fact that his poster, which he appears in civilian attire, is torn into two pieces. This is enhanced by the poster

of him with his military uniform, printed on the white t-shirt worn by a young man in the second line, which is partly obscured by the necklace extending from his neck.

Moving to the analysis of the interpersonal metafunction, the feature that is first noticed is that it is an 'offer' as none of the participants looks directly into the eyes of the viewers. The choice of depicting participants who do not reciprocate with the viewer overcomes any possibility for interaction between both parties, as the former seem more to be an object of information. The typical information acquired from the image is the state of hilarity among the few participants, appearing in the first two lines, for Sisi's participation in the presidential elections. Representing the joyful participants in close and medium close shots forges a relationship of closeness and intimacy that is limited by the diversion of their eyes away from the camera. To show the event lucidly and show an involvement with the whole scene, the image is shot in a horizontal angle. The power of the participants is shown by shooting the image from a low angle. The feature that catches attention most in terms of modality is the level of illumination, as the light is focused on the participants in the first two lines only, while those in the background are obscured by the dim illumination.

Coming to the textual metafunction, its most significant aspect is the placement of Sisi's image, both on the campaign poster and on the t-shirt of one of his supporters. Sisi's image on the poster that is torn from the middle in this case is the Given element, and consequently it does not arouse much attention. His photo on the supporter's t-shirt, on the other hand, is the New; however, being obscured by the necklace, the image does not appear explicitly enough to convey the image of the candidate, as it should be delivered to the electorate. This means that only a muddled image of Sisi is shown, aborting the possibility for filling the gap between him and the masses. Being in the middle position of the image, the two posters are also considered the Centre, while the supporters are the Margins. This confirms the importance given to the images by their placement in a high position to appear as the Ideal element.

Images 2, 3, and 4 accompany an article published by Spencer (2014) on Telegraph website on May 25, 2014- during the elections.



Image 2

Image 2 is a simple image with only one participant- the then presidential candidate Abdul Fattah El Sisi. He appears looking seriously and gesticulating in an attempt at convincing his interlocutor that does not appear. Analyzing the narrative processes of the representational meaning of the image, Sisi appears as a Reacter of a non-transactional reaction, as his Phenomenon, most probably his interlocutor, does not appear. His act of gesticulating can be seen as a non-transactional action with no Goal. As for the conceptual dimension of the representational meaning, the image shows one analytical and one symbolic process. Starting with the analytical, Sisi here is Carrier with a significant Possessive Attribute, which is his civilian garment that marks his abandonment of the military attire and his embracement of a new identity as civilian presidential candidate. Moving to the symbolic process, Sisi is engaged in a typical symbolic attributive process, as he appears front-on and at eye level, without performing a significant action.

As the main participants does not look directly at the direction of the camera, Image 2 is an offer. The viewer is not required to establish an intimate relation with the presidential candidate; rather, to look closely at his means of convincing his interlocutor and at the significant change in his identity. His serious look indicates the seriousness of the situation of the topic dealt with. For proximity and attachment, Sisi is represented in a close shot; add to that the horizontal angle of the image and the fact that it is at eye level, which aim together at showing the candidate in a simpler personal image that attracts the viewers while preserving his distinctive position.

The most striking element in terms of modality is the vagueness of the background. The focus here is on Sisi, with the illumination directed at his face and other body parts, and the aim is to discard any other element in the image to grant him absolute attention. However, the absence of brightness of colors in the background, in addition to dark color of Sisi's attire, make the whole image look relatively dim. The placement of Sisi on the left side of the image makes him the New element, another method of making him the focus of attention. This is further confirmed by his occupation of nearly the whole frame.



Image 3

Image 3 is a simple image with no participants, except for Sisi, as represented by his campaign poster. The most noteworthy element is that the long poster is extending from the top of a plain-shaped building in a seemingly impoverished quarter. The narrative aspect of

the representational meaning of the image does not show any action or reaction processes, except for the non-transactional reaction of Sisi in his poster. The conceptual aspect, however, represents the presidential candidate as the Superordinate agent in a classificational process of overt taxonomy. The image also represents a symbolic attributive process, with Sisi as the Carrier, and the plain-shaped buildings, which are connected to him by his look in their direction, as a Symbolic Attribute. The choice of adding an image that includes his poster that is shot in an impoverished area where no real supporters are shown can be interpreted in two ways. The first is as an ironical hint, to enhance the fact that people in such areas usually care about earning their living more than about politics; hence the relative pointlessness of hanging Sisi campaign poster at such area. The second is that the candidate has not been involved yet with his supporters, despite the fact that the poster is launched by the popular campaign to support Sisi, as the note beneath his image, on the red stripe, says.

Moving to the interactional element in the image, this element is not sustained by any show of interest in communicating directly with the viewers. The poster of Sisi shows his face turned to the left direction, without a contact with his viewers, which shows the article producer's intent to direct the attention of the viewers only to the informational aspect of the offer image. Shooting the image from an oblique angle increases the feeling of detachment. The bright poster that contrasts with the pale colors of the two buildings can also be seen as a source of hope for improvement amid poverty.

The placement of the two buildings on the left side of the image and Sisi's poster on the right assigns the former to the role of the Given, while the later to the role of the New. The position of the two buildings signifies the economic and civic reform required to be implemented in Egypt, with the aspiration that Sisi may initiate that reform.



Image 4

The complexity of Image 4 is evident in the representation of several participants with different actions. The image, shot on the historical Kasr el Nil Bridge, shows the manifestation of support for the presidential candidate performed by two women and two children, who are the main Actors, with some Accompaniments on the two sides of the image occupied with some different issues. Starting with the woman on the right side, she is an Actor of the transactional process of holding Sisi's campaign poster, her Goal, and of the non-transactional process of raising her thumb, in a sign of approval and consideration of Sisi. The other woman in the center of the image is engaged in the same the transactional process, and of a similar one of carrying a young child, who is also an Actor of the transactional process of holding the flag of Egypt, on which a statement of supporting Sisi is inscribed. Differently, the young boy in a military suit is engaged in the non-transactional process of making the V sign of victory, in a confirmation of the feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment shown by Sisi supporters in expectation of his victory. He performs another non-transactional process, which is hanging his tongue out, in an attempt at provoking the opponents of Sisi and military rule.

The main participants of the image are engaged collectively in a classificational process of single-levelled overt taxonomy, with Sisi, represented by the campaign poster, as the Superordinate, while the participants are his Subordinates. However, the sense of superiority and elevation is counteracted by the low position of the poster. The young child on the right side of the image is also a Carrier of a symbolic attributive process. His military suit, the Symbolic Attribute, signifies a high estimation of the military institution, and an implicit acceptance of the rule of a leader belonging to it.

The young child single handedly looks directly at the camera. Appearing nearly from the waist, this child is the sole participant represented in a medium-close shot, while the two women are represented in a long shot. This means that the young child in the military suit, still unwise enough to visualize the situation and realize his action, is the focus of the photographer, as if used as a representative of Sisi's supporters in this limited parade. Sisi is represented in a close shot, but unlike the poster in Image 4, he is a position higher than that of the emblem of the flag of Egypt, which is a sign of his elevation and distinctive position, albeit his face is also turned away from the viewer.

The woman on the left side of the image is the Given element, as her action is almost expected and normal. The position of the child in the military suit, the New element, on the other hand, is more striking, as this way, he is employed as a model of those led by others to embrace the ideology of the military rule without being convinced. Expectedly, Sisi's poster is the Center element, owing to both his social rank and the significance of his position in this context.

Images 5 and 6 accompany an article published by Fick and Kalin on Reuters website on May 29, 2014- shortly after announcing Sisi's victory.



Image 5

Image 5 represents the same celebrative atmosphere of Image 4, but women participants majorly occupy it. The image is considered complex, as the participants are engaged in different forms of action. The transactional action is also restricted to carrying the flag of Egypt and the campaign posters of Sisi and shooting the event, while the non-transactional action is shown in clapping hands in celebration of the victory of Sisi. There are many Accompaniments engaged in a non-concerted action.

The conceptual aspect of the representational meaning of the image is more significant, as Sisi's campaign poster is chosen as the Superordinate element, as is also obscured by an external shadow. The manifestation of such pattern in both pictures may be because of the lack of clarity of the prospects of his rule, or of his limited direct contact with his supporters, the Subordinates in the image.

Only the woman clapping her hands on the left side and the young woman shooting in the background of the image show a direct eye contact with the viewers. The intended obscuring of Sisi's face in the poster in the center of the image and covering of a part of his face in the poster upwards represent the only two violations of neutrality in the image.

Sisi's campaign poster in Image 5 is the Center element, as it is in Image 5. The obscurity of his image, however, creates a barrier between the president-elect and the viewers of the image. The Given and the New elements of the image do not differ in their nature, as the left and right sides of the image are both occupied by celebrating participants.



Image 6

Image 6 does not show much significant action, as the main focus is on the election campaign poster of the president elect Sisi hanging in front of the headquarters of the Egyptian Stock Exchange. Definitely, the purpose of adding that image to the article corresponds to its focus- the economic challenges Sisi faces as he comes into office. Epitomized by his image, Sisi is the main participant, but his action is limited to just smiling at the viewers of the poster. This post shows several elements that aim at creating a rapport between Sisi and his supporters, including the eye contact between him and the viewers and appearing in a close shot in the image taken at an eye-level angle. Sisi's figure is overshadowed by an external factor that may obstruct his attachment to his supporters.

It is noticeable that the clearest two participants appearing in Image 6 are a man and a woman moving before the Stock Exchange building while holding their mobile phones. Both participants in this case are Actors of the transactional action of talking on their phones. None of the passersby looks at the poster, despite being elevated as the Superordinate element in a classificational process. The poster is

also the Ideal element by being placed in the upper side, but there is no correspondence between what it represents and the Real elements. The vagueness of the situation is further promoted by the oblique angle of the image.

5. Findings and discussion

As the analysis has shown, the main theme propagated by the selected images is the obscurity of the coming president of Egypt and his detachment from his people. The campaign poster is always obscured factor, as shadow in images 1 and 6, which supports such assumption. The elevation of the campaign poster in images 3 and 5 represents Sisi as the Superordinate element. However, unlike images 1, 4 and 5 that show him in the same position, the lack of reciprocity from the surrounding environment counteracts the sense of his superiority, as there are no Subordinates.

The widest population of Sisi's supporters is of women, as images 1, 4, and 5 show. The common feature among such women is being veiled. The focus on such women has two significances: the support of women with a noticeable religious background to Sisi and the meager presence of the future power of Egypt- the youth- in the scene. This is best shown in image 4 occupied mainly by two women with a baby and a young boy wearing a military uniform, without understanding either the point of supporting Sisi or the symbol the uniform signifies.

The significance of image 6 is its selection by the article producer, being hanging in front of the headquarters of the Egyptian Stock Exchange in Cairo. It highlights the economic challenges the new president would face, albeit the appearance of Sisi in his military uniform conveys the strictness of the military institution in their dealing with problems threatening stability of the country. The lack of interest from the passersby is a common theme, as if intended by most of the news agencies covering the event.

6. References:

- Ayodeji, O., Moses, K. & Lawrence, E. (2014). Satirizing the Nigeria police force: a multimodal discourse analytical study of selected cartoons of TELL newsmagazines. *Research on humanities and social sciences*, 4(2), 119-27.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-Music-Text*. London: Fontana.
- Castello, D. (2013). *Immigration Articles in Two Newspapers: A Multimodal Discourse*. (MA thesis). University of Birmingham, United Kingdom.
- Fairclough, N. (1995a). *Media discourse*. London: Arnold.
- Fick, M. & Kalin, S. (2014, May 29). Egypt's Sisi wins election, faces economic challenges. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/29/us-egypt-election-idUSKBN0E70D720140529>.
- Fick, M. & Mourad, M. (2014, April 20). Former army general favorite in Egyptian presidential race. *The Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2014/0420/Former-army-general-favorite-in-Egyptian-presidential-race>.
- Fiske, J. & Hartley, J. (1978). *Reading Television*. London: Methuen.
- Hall, S. (1988). The determination of news photographs. In S. Cohen & J. Young (Eds.). *The manufacture of news: Social problems, deviance and the mass media* (pp.226-43). London: Constable.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K., Matthiessen, C. M.I.M., & Matthiessen, C. (2014). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hartley, J. (1982). *Understanding news*. London: Methuen.
- Knox, J. (2007). Visual-verbal communication on online newspaper home pages. *Visual Communication*, 6(1), 19-53.

Knox, J. (2009). *Multimodal discourse on online newspaper home pages: A social-semiotic perspective* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia.

Kress, G. & Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge.

Kress, G. & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: Grammar of visual design* (2nd Ed.). London: Routledge.

Lirola, M. (2006). A systemic functional analysis of two multimodal covers. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 19, 249-260.

Machin, D. & Mayr, A. (2012). *How to do critical discourse analysis: A multimodal introduction*. London: Sage.

Najafian, M. (2011). Advertising social semiotic representation: A critical approach. *International journal of industrial marketing*, 1(1), 63-78.

O'Halloran, K. L. (Ed.) (2004). *Multimodal discourse analysis: Systemic functional perspectives*. London, Continuum.

O'Halloran, K. L. (2005). *Mathematical discourse: Language, symbolism and visual images*. London and New York: Continuum.

O'Halloran, K. L. (2008). Systemic functional-multimodal discourse analysis (SF-MDA): constructing ideational meaning using language and visual imagery. *Visual Communication*, 7(4), 443-475.

O'Toole, M. (1994). *The Language of displayed art*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Perlmutter, D. (2003). The internet: Big pictures and interactors. In L. Gross, J.S. Katz and J. Ruby (Eds.) *Image Ethics in the Digital Age* (pp.1-25). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Snyder, J. (2008). *An Exploratory Approach for Modeling Image-Enabled Discourse*. Short Paper in Working Notes for the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AAAI) Fall Symposium on Multimedia Information Extraction, Arlington, VA, November 7-9, 2008.

Snyder, J. (2010). *Applying multimodal discourse analysis to study image – enabled communication*. School of Information Studies, Syracuse University.

Spencer, R. (2014, May 25). Mubarak's old guard stand behind Sisi in run for Egypt's presidency. *Telegraph*. Retrieved on May 15, 2015 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/10>

853999/Mubaraks-old-guard-stand-behind-Sisi-in-run-for-Egypt-presidency.html

Tehseem. T. & Bokhari, Z. (2015). Spoiling or the saving faces in Pakistani newspapers: A multimodal discourse perspective on analyzing political cartoons. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 4(2), 1-14.