



Visual Language of Communication: Comics, Memes, and Emojis

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Abstract— Emojis¹ are rapidly becoming an integral part of our written language (or the ‘typed’ language) if they haven’t done so yet. Memes and GIFs are not far behind since their inclusion into the keypad of our smartphones. The present paper employs a linguistic approach to discuss the widespread use of memes and emojis in everyday text communication. In this paper², I have argued that despite many differences in application, comics, memes, and emojis all have a distinct similarity of being ‘visual’ in nature. I have shown with examples that instead of competing to replace each other, these verbal elements (words) and visual (images) elements complement the text together. The textual and pictorial elements of such textual-visual language make writing an even more efficient process of thought representation and a wholesome means for communication.

Keywords— Comics, Memes, Emojis, Visual Language.

¹ An Emoji is a pictogram, ideogram or smiley (emoticons) embedded in the text and used generally in electronic messages.

² This paper includes excerpts of the post-analysis commentary from my PhD thesis titled “DC and Marvel Comics Universe and Raj Comics Universe: A Comparative Discourse Analysis.”

I. INTRODUCTION

Although the languages keep evolving all the time and language variation is a universal phenomenon, it is more accurate for the languages that exist solely in a spoken form than those with a script. That’s why a ‘script’ is vital for language standardization. At the same time, acknowledged written texts are often seen as the reference point for the standard use of language, and ‘writing’ in itself is perceived to be a scholarly activity. Perhaps, this unchanging nature of writing has made some scholars consider the written form of language to have an amount of piety attached to it (most ‘sacred’ languages are limited to the ritualistic use and written texts anyways).

Few developments in history have had a far-reaching impact on ‘communication through written means’. The invention of the paper, printing press, fountain pen, ball pen, the typewriter etc., may all fall within such historical developments in writing. However, writing has

changed like never before after the arrival of computers, smartphones, and the internet. In recent years, electronic mode of communication has facilitated the widespread use of writing through keypads/keyboards. And the insertion of emoticons³ and emojis on the keyboards has revolutionized the writing in general by adding pictorial elements to the writing system. By some definitions, even the glyphs and written words can be considered pictures, but they are way more abstract than the icon-like pictures used foremojis.

Emojis are not the first instance of using pictures for writing, though. In fact, writing evolved from the pictorial representation of ideas and thoughts. Superficial reading of the eighteenth and nineteenth century scholars and linguists like Karl Ludwig Bühler and Wilhelm von

³ Emoticons are ‘typographic approximations’ instead of picture-like emojis. Consider :) vs 😊

Humboldt (who considered writing an important part of the language) would suggest that languages like Chinese which use such pictorial script for writing also shows the absence of morphology or deficient in some ways, although this isn't true (Kwan 2001).

However, the emojis are neither the first nor the only example of 'blended' visual language that employs 'words' and 'pictures'. In fact, comics⁴ is considered to be a medium that has exploited and mastered the art of using pictures and words together in perfect harmony, so much so that it is considered by many as language in its own rights. And now, memes and emojis are also evolving for more creative and productive uses. There is no denying that these additions to traditional writing have been aided by the technology of the day, but the role of contemporary artistic and literary movements and philosophical traditions have also had a role to play in this.

As far as comics, memes, and emojis are concerned, there are various instances suggesting that they have been gained significantly from various modernist and post-modernist ideas, and we can learn more about the linguistic nature of these new ways of writing if we can contextualize them within the framework of a wider literary and artistic developments.

II. THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF COMICS

Since the publication of Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* in 1985 and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* in 1993, comics have garnered a lot of attention in academia. Comics have intrigued the academics across disciplines (linguistics, media studies, fine arts, education studies, literature and discourse studies, and even philosophy and psychology, among many others), and the umbrella term 'comics studies' is generally used to describe these academics investigation in the scholarly circles. One feature of comics that is an especially popular topic of discussion in comics studies is the language of comics. Some scholars have described the language of comics as a (sequential) art (Eisner 2008) (McCloud 1994), some have referred to it as a part of a visual language (Cohn 2013), and some have called it a system of visual, verbal, spatial, and chronological expressions (Groensteen 2007). But there is a general consensus among the scholars that the language of comics has a uniquely universal appeal to it. Thus, it shouldn't come as a surprise when this art is traced back to the Lascaux cave paintings and Egyptian hieroglyphs.

⁴'Comics' is used here onwards as a singular noun to refer to 'comics as a medium.'

However, in modern times, Rodolphe Töpffer is known as the 'father of comic strips.' The rise of Contemporary comics should be seen in the broader context of modern art movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Artistic developments made by modern artists (especially painters) and authors laid the groundwork for the comics in subtle ways. The influence of modernist ideas is visible on the art (or the language) of comics which is pretty much capable of accommodating all kinds of novel and abstract ideas (including the imagined/unimagined absurdity). While the discourse of early superhero comics, which helped popularise comics as a medium, was greatly influenced by the modern discourse on politics, scientific advancements, and technological innovations (Butler, *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction* 2010). The early success of superhero comics led to the further development of comics as a medium of narration and storytelling. But perhaps the most significant attribute that comics borrowed from the modern art movement was the addition of perspective to the art by the artist and one urge to involve the audiences in the art by making them a part of the process. Reading comics is considered to be reading in the broader sense, where images and words supplement each other. Images portray what is challenging to explain in words, and the words help eliminate the ambiguity regarding the plot points and story.

But, the blended use of imagery and words fulfils many other roles as far as the language of comics is concerned. For example, the abovementioned views of scholars on the language of comics don't answer how to define the 'single panel comics', which isn't followed by other panels in any sequence. McCloud is of the view that such examples should be referred to as 'comic art' at best rather than 'comic' because they both use the same language but aren't the same thing (McCloud 1994). For Eisner, what differentiates a painting and picture (or photograph) from a comic panel is the insertion of words in the latter. While a painting or photo seems like a still image of a moment, by inserting words and utterances through speech balloons and thought bubbles in a picture, we can insert the 'temporal element' because those utterances must exist in 'time' (Eisner 2008). Utterances that are part of such panels aren't simple captions for the picture, and they may serve different purposes on various levels.

Due to the complexity of comics' language, diversity in uses, and potential for creativity and productivity, comics are said to have a language of their own. This language has a significant attribute of using the verbal cues (words) and visual cues (imagery) together to achieve a better efficiency (although some panels exist

without words in specific contexts). In a way, comics and its language is one of the first successful examples of visual language at work, but it certainly isn't the last.

III. CAN MEMES BE AN EXAMPLE OF THE VISUAL LANGUAGE?

A meme is a unit of cultural information, such as a cultural practice or idea, transmitted verbally or by repeated action from one mind to another. Memes can be of many types like without captioned funny images, captioned images, videos and GIFs.

When Scott McCloud puts all the attributes of comics together to form a definition for comics - juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence- it sounds like describing a word or sentence. Because, letters are like abstract images that are deliberately put together in sequences to form meaningful utterances. However, there are other and more prominent attributes like semanticity, the arbitrariness of form and meaning, the speaker's knowledge of grammaticality, productivity and creativity, social transmission, linguistic functions and compositionality, which is common to all spoken and sign languages. A careful glance at the meme culture suggests that memes usually fulfil all the criteria of a language (Styler n.d.). Language itself is memetic by some definition.

Although our focus is on the memes in image formats here, these generalizations stand true for the video mems and GIFs as well. Many means are iconic, but some templates and meme forms can approach arbitrariness. For example, it is very common for a funny video clip to be repeated enough number of times that it becomes part of the collective memory of a group and when it is converted into a GIF (moving pictures in a loop without sound), and further into an image template with words, the group can still hear the original words/dialogue in their minds. And the process doesn't stop here, as we may also remove the words/subtitle from the image and even recreate the original idea in a much more abstract way once the meme has been repeated enough number of times. In the case of the language(s), this process is called 'lexicalization'. Memes can become more abstract and less iconic over time. Very concrete, iconic memes can detach from their form. So many meme templates are mostly iconic. Some required cultural or social knowledge and some have abstracted away from iconicity completely.

Speakers of the language know the correct and incorrect forms, and there are conventions that are by and large followed. Memers can also tell apart a good meme from a poor one (correct use of a template from an incorrect one), and hence there is a sense of

grammaticality. Templates can be combined to create new memes. Memes can be combined to produce new memes. New memes can be created for any situation, and we got a meme for everything. A new meme template can always be born. And memes can be generated to fill in any gaps. In this way, memes can be as productive and creative as any language and can be used to describe anything (given time)!

Language is compositional. Larger wholes are made up of smaller parts, each contributing part of the meaning. The captions in a meme themselves carry meaning, meme template and other stylistic elements can carry meaning and replacing any of them can change the meaning of the meme. Memes are compositional where every component is evaluable, each contributing meaning. These meaning components are productive and can be reused elsewhere.

Language is learned from others' language use, and thus, our language is dictated by the language we are exposed to; culture plays a part in it, and our language represents our social groups. Likewise, memes are culturally and socially specific, and memes also have subcultures and can tell facts about people from their meme choices. Memes are learned from other meme users, and our contextual knowledge and social environment determine how we understand them. Memes can also serve a basic linguistic function such as making simple assertive sentences, asking questions, issuing directives, expressing feelings, and even changing things about the world.

In many ways, memes can be understood to have a language of their own - very much like the comics where visual elements (images) are complemented by the verbal elements (words) and therefore, presenting another example of image-text based visual language (although memes benefit greatly from its electronic platforms where they are circulated and sometimes their dependency on words can be substituted by other elements). Memes are very much like a modern device where an old piece of cultural information can be repeatedly used out of context to produce intended effects.

IV. EMOJIS: BRINGING VISUAL ELEMENTS INTO THE VERBAL

While comics and memes can be understood as media using a blended visual language where Images are complimented by words, emojis are examples of the use of a visual language where visual cues (pictures/images/drawing) complement words in writing (or typing). Unlike the spoken language, where the speaker's speech can be complemented by their intonation, hand gestures, and other visual cues, these extra-linguistic

elements are hard to replicate in written language (without using a lot of extra words). For example, a speaker's emotions (happy, sad, nervous etc.) and intended meanings (humour and sarcasm etc.) can easily be interpreted and understood by their tone, facial expressions, and body language, among other cues. Although we have punctuations like the question mark (?), the Exclamation mark (!), and ellipsis (...), their functional capabilities - although efficient enough- are limited, leaving scope to read between the lines. Consider the following text conversation;

Karan: *Big day tomorrow, eh?*

Arjun: *Yeah...I am a bit nervous,tbh!*

Karan: *Good luck for tomorrow!*

If we had to guess what is going on here, our first guess would be the simplest one: 'Arjun is nervous because of an important upcoming 'event', and Karan is wishing him luck for the same!' It is unlikely to infer more from these three sentences unless we know more about the context of this text conversation.

Contextual information may include the nature of the relationship between the participants of this text conversation, the type of the 'event' they are talking about, or the tone of these utterances, at the very least. Even for the participants themselves, who might well be aware of their relationship and about this upcoming event, there is no certain way to figure out any 'underlying intentional meaning or emotions' behind the utterances, if there are any. Now, consider this;

Karan: *Big day tomorrow, eh?*

Arjun: *Yeah... I am a bit nervous,tbh!*

Karan: *Good luck for tomorrow! 😊 ;)*

What changes here? Just by insertion of an emoji for the cheekiness⁵ suggest that this conversation is not very serious and the relationship between the two participants of them is quite casual. It might be possible that Arjun is nervous because of some excitement rather than fear (like getting married the next day or a proposal, perhaps!). Now consider the following in contrast,

Karan: *Good luck for tomorrow! 😞*

Just the insertion of one emoji changes the tone of the whole conversation. This emoji⁶ suggests something serious is going on (like Arjun's office is going to fire

some of his staff, and he is worried about possibly getting fired himself etc.). Now consider the following;

Karan: *Good luck for tomorrow! 😊*

Insertion of this particular emoji suggests a possible sarcasm as if Arjun is being worried needlessly (either Karan believes that Arjun is going to be fine or that he couldn't do anything anyway - hence needless) in contrast with the following;

Karan: *Good luck for tomorrow! 😞*

Here, Karan sounds genuinely worried (like, some important result is due tomorrow), as opposed to the following, where he seems to be just wishing him luck,

Karan: *Good luck for tomorrow! 😊*

Interestingly enough, we seem to have an emoji for every situation, context, or feeling that can be expressed through words. At the same time, we might sometimes struggle to find the correct word to describe an emoji. In a sense, emoji seems to have become such an integral part of our written mode of communication that we find them irreplaceable in the text-conversation (where we can not use extra-linguistic cues physically). It is like accommodating the visual elements to our normal texts for clarity or emphasis. We also find that unlike comics and memes, where words are used to emphasise or clarify the interpretation of adjacent images, the role is reversed in the case of emojis. Still, ultimately, they all contribute their part to the visual language of communication.

V. CONCLUSION

Nowadays, we have new form of written language(s) like C++, Java, python etc., which is used to communicate with computers. At the same time, the pictorial elements (which were considered primitive) are making a comeback to the written mode of communication. Modern societies are making divergent use of both of these variations in the written mode of communication. Amidst all the unpredictability in this world, which is witnessing rapid technological advancement at a rate never seen before, we can safely assume that this crossover of text and images in each other's domain isn't to stop anytime soon. When used appropriately, they show us the true potential of visual language. Although all of the examples discussed above (comics, Memes, and emojis) can all claim to be a language on their own; there is no denying that when visual elements like images and verbal elements like words are used together, they become complementary to each other. Using such a blend of visual language would produce something that can be called art and literature at the same time.

⁵ 😊 Often conveys a sense of fun, excitement, wackiness, buffoonery, or joking.

⁶ 😞 often convey a sense of frustration or annoyance more intense than suggested by 😊.

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