THE ROLE OF VISUAL METADISCOURSE IN ACADEMIC PRESENTATION

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Rezumat: *Acest articol se axează pe analiza valorii imaginilor, care generează multiple sensuri in comunicarea vizuală şi contribuie la decodificarea sensului al unei reprezentări vizuale şi la construirea identităţii autorului. De asemenea, se*

examinează posibilităţile imaginilor vizuale de a transmite multiple sensuri.

The 21st century has seen an unprecedented growth in digital literacy and technology, social media and in graphic and web design. This reality has become an integral part of any academic instruction and environment helping the audience to identify a presenter's/author's identity both verbally through oral communication and visually via graphic representation such as slides, infographics, posters, etc. This multimodal way of communication is more likely to build credibility among people and produce the desired effect while interacting during a presentation. According to Adami (2016), multimodality refers to "the combination of different semiotic resources, or modes, in texts and communicative events, such as still and moving image, speech, writing, layout, gesture, and/or proxemics". Following Sachs-Hombach (2019), multimodality refers to "the combination of different modes of communication and representation that are employed in a variety of aesthetic and functional contexts in contemporary media culture, including a range of art forms from novels and comics via films and television series to theatrical performances and video games". It literally means that we can apply different codes as interactive resources in visual representations to express meaning in context.

Nowadays, people have become more aware of the need for visual content and literacy. It is common fallacy to believe that purely academic presentation should be devoid of any image or any other type of visual representations. Cognitive scientists claim that people memorize pictures better than words, referring to this phenomenon as "the picture superiority effect" (Defeyter 2009: 265). It is actually the design of a slide or an infographics with all the visual discourse markers (colour, images, layout and typography) that communicates the point of an academic research in a precise and memorable way. It helps academics and researchers to be focused on essential things as "the way our eyes and brains work together allows us better to grasp and retain information through pictures rather than just through words" (Garr 2012: 18).

Obviously, visual constituents enhance the overall perception of the

information on the slides taking into account the professional and cultural expectations of the targeted audience in a certain social or academic environment. Thus, visual metadiscourse is said to "support readability and microstructural consistency" (Kumpf 2000: 404). Also known as "supra-textual effect of a document" (Kostelnick 1990: 190), visual metadiscourse "works with the rhetoric of the text to present to the reader a consistent whole" (Kumpf 2000: 404). Thus, Kumpf suggests ten categories of metadiscourse suitable for both online and hardcopy documents:

1. first impression;
2. heft;
3. convention;
4. chunking;
5. external skeleton;
6. consistency;
7. expense;
8. attraction;
9. interpretation;
10. style.

These categories should be interpreted as a whole, as together they form what is now called visual metadiscourse. Thus, the layout, tables, graphs, figures, diagrams, photos, font, colour, spacing, single-column page, bulleted lists, number of words on a page, one-sided printing, headings, table of contents, footnotes, the length of sentences and paragraphs in a text, etc. contribute to our first impression and to our desire to continue reading or listening to a text, or to put it aside. Our understanding of a written text depends on a large scale on how it is structured, designed and presented. How things are arranged and written on a page goes hand in hand with the propositional content and in such a way they exert varying degrees of understanding, persuasion and acceptance of a written text. However, teachers should not overstress the importance of visual metadiscourse as students may neglect the content at the expense of the graphical organization of a text and misunderstand the actual aim of different assignments.

Any academic or scientific presentation should rely on the relevance of content that must be made known to people. However, it is not enough to popularize one's own academic or scientific visions only, it is extremely important to be understood, be coherent and be remembered. Therefore, any presentation should contain three basic elements: scientific content, visual information and adequate delivery as "the goal of designing a great presentation is not to take bad scientific content and disguise it as great. The goal is to communicate great content in a clear, succinct, and inspiring way […] and respect your content by presenting it in the best possible light" (Carter 2013: 5).

It is generally assumed that visual metadiscourse constituents play an important role in the design of a slide or infographics and it is characterized by two dimensions pointed out by Hyland and Tse (2004): the organizational (interactive) dimension and the relational (interactional) dimension. On the one hand, the interactive dimension refers to the implicit and explicit organization and representation of discourse; on the other hand, it sets "the personal or impersonal tone in the text" (Hyland 2010: 128) and contains such markers denoting intimacy, commitment and attitudes.

Visual metadiscourse conveys not only the visual constituents on the slides, but also projects the author's attitude towards the content and the targeted audience. It is also used as a device to interpret, reinforce, persuade or support a point of view, fostering the presenter's/ author's relationships with their listeners and readers. In such a way, the interpersonal or relational metafunction of visual discourse is fully realized.

The visual resources employed in visual representations organize the content, guide the users, attract their attention and establish direct communication between the author/presenter and the viewer. However, according to Kress and Leeuwen (2006, p.18), visuals form "an independent, organized and structured message, connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependant on it".

Relying on the semiotic theory of communication, we will apply Halliday's (1978) ideational, textual and interpersonal metafunctions and Kress and Leeuwen's (2006) dimensions in the analysis of visual metadiscourse of the following slide:

Fig. 1 Slide *Welcome class*

A close view at the slide shows that it includes a naturalistic view of the world depicted in real colors, which displays a classroom with a wall, a floor, empty desks and chairs, a whiteboard, a bookcase and a clock, a teacher who is smiling and holding a bouquet of flowers in her hands. This 3D image arrangement allows us to see the entire picture and realizes the ideational metafunction of the representational dimension. All the objects and the personalized image of the teacher are interconnected and they establish the theme of an academic environment, namely, the beginning of a new academic year or the beginning of a course in an online format, as there are no students present in the classroom.

The interactive dimension, seen as the interpersonal function, visually encodes social meanings into images through several visual aspects: the gaze, the social distance of the participant from the viewer, the power and authenticity or the angle from which the participant is seen by the viewer (Kress and Leeuwen's (2006)).

The gaze is important when people (or cartoon-like characters) in the image look at the viewers creating a certain link between the two at the

imaginary level. Thus, the woman from the slide is actually smiling, which invites students/viewers to establish relations of social affinity and a friendly environment. She is also looking straight at the camera projecting the idea of reaching each student directly from her class. However, her posture and the flowers in her hands indicate a festive mood, namely, the pleasure of seeing everyone again.

As for the social distance, it is obvious that viewers can grasp the woman's whole figure against the visible background and the imaginary social space creates an impression of formality.

The power relation between the represented participant and the viewer depends mostly on the degree of the angle, whether these are low-angle, eye-level or high-angle shots. In our case, the represented teacher is seen from a low angle, therefore she is said to hold the power in the teacher–class relationship.

Authenticity is derived from the realism encoded in the visual picture aimed at a certain audience and context. Reality is determined by such modality markers as: colour, contextualization, representation, depth, illumination and brightness. Figure 1.1 does contain most of these constituents made as a coherent whole and it represents an authentic picture of a real classroom. Students as viewers can conclude from the suggested context of the classroom some additional abstract meaning connected with the beginning of the academic year, enhanced by the text on the whiteboard "Welcome Class 2020!"

In the light of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) semiotic theory, all the textual and visual modes applied on a slide, infographics or poster, etc. are closely interconnected and their specific arrangement contributes to the fulfillment of multiple textual meanings. Very often it is the namely the image that carries the necessary information and dictates the layout of the text. Moreover, a slight alteration in the layout would completely change the relation between the written text and the image, and the meaning as a whole.

Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that academic, scientific, promotional, abstract, naturalistic and sensory domains of representation have different coding arrangement and structure and thus have different definitions of authenticity.

The compositional dimension is related to the textual metafunction,

which implies the whole compositional structure and how all the elements are linked together to represent unifying and complete meaning. The use and arrangement of a text in a visual representation play an important role in how viewers interpret the meaning. Thus, if the text is framed and aligned in the centre of a visual composition, then it provides core information and one can grasp the convergence of all the graphic and textual ideas at once.

Summing up, the slide from Fig.1 perfectly illustrates the point that in academic presentations there is always room for creativity when presenting new and old material in order to keep students engaged and to facilitate the process of understanding. It also simulates the classroom environment and helps to create an atmosphere of formal learning. In case an academic presentation is more scientifically focused, then the visuals in the slides should be differently conceptualized to render scientific ideas in a more explicit way.

Exploring visual metadiscourse in the classroom makes more visible the relationship between the use of multimodal constituents and the concept of verbal discourse which is broadened by visual components. Thus, authors/presenters give their viewers/readers the possibility to visualize a slide or an infographics and interpret different types of content. Both textual and visual multimodal strategies design the presenter's/author's identity, emphasizing the importance and role of visual metadiscourse in different communication contexts.

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