

A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS IN THE MEDIA

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Abstract: This study attempts a semiotic analysis of David Cameron's photograph taken during the Brexit campaign. The aim is to help viewers decode and evaluate a photograph from the media by providing a few strategies as guidance. The approach adopted for this analytical research is inspired by Kress and van Leeuwen's *Reading Images-The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006). Firstly, the photograph functions in the same way as a sentence with the reader, in other words, it sends a message to the viewer. Secondly, the meaning of a photograph needs to be decoded by paying attention to the objects from the image and the connection between them. The conclusion is intended to help viewers understand that the relationship between objects is not at random but a meaningful one.

Keywords: Brexit, image, linguistics, semiotic, photograph.

1. Introduction

Semiotics is the study of signs and is one of the most important branches in communication. With the help of semiotics, it is interpreted the photography of David Cameron, the Prime minister of the UK, during the Brexit campaign. This was attached to a text in an article from Independent (June 16, 2016), an online newspaper. This research aims to help viewers take account of the approaches adopted by decoding and evaluating from media an image without paying attention to the text. Moreover, it will be paid attention to objects from the image which are not taken at random but on purpose, and these include colors, a building, a person, gestures, symbols, and the relation between these. In the field of semiotics are too many researchers who paid attention to the analysis of words, sentences or texts, but only a few who take account of the non-verbal language and the way this is interpreted in a photography, TV debate, film, etc. Firstly, the research opens with a discussion of the semiotic approach and the strategies used to decode and evaluate the objects from the image. Moreover, it will be taken into account of theories used by Saussure and Pierce of interpreting the sign according to Winfried Noth's *Handbook of Semiotics* (1995). On the other hand, Roland Barthes' strategies are more detailed and specific in the interpretation of the image, according to his book, *Image, Music, Text* (1977). In addition to the researchers mentioned, it will be added the strategies derived from Halliday's SFL techniques applied to the language of Kress & van Leeuwen from their written work *Reading Images – The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006). Secondly, the next section refers to the analysis of the image using the strategies mentioned previously for each object from an image, the relation between them and also their role in the Brexit context.

2. The Sign as a starting point

The definition of semiotics could be very simple; it is the study of signs. According to Jonathan Bignell (2002: 5), semiotics is a name that derives from Greek semeion and refers to sign. In other words, it is the study of "how signs communicate meanings". The semiotics techniques regarding this research will take account of the non-linguistics signs such as photographs even through analogy with linguistics Saussure suggested the fact that everything which communicates something could be

applied the same strategy of interpretation. For certain people, this includes not only signs but also drawings, paintings, pictures, and gestures. Firstly, structuralism is a method adopted by many semioticians to describe “sign system as languages”. Nowadays, semiotics crossed the line of structuralism and seeks the meaning of the sign in a social situation being allied with Marxist ideology. Regarding semiotics, there are different positions in their studies. For example, Umberto Eco says that “semiotics is everything that can be taken as a sign”. For the linguist Saussure, “semiology is the science which studies the signs as a part of social life”, while Pierce’s semiotics is linked to Logic and he states that “every thought is a sign”. For semiotics, the matter is not “what” of the meaning as for the semantics is, but “the how” of it (Chandler, 2007: 2).

Linguistics for Ferdinand de Saussure (cf. Noth, 1997: 60) is the composed sign of “a dyad”, in other words, two sides. The sign represents both the signified and the signifier with the mention that these are “mental entities”. In his theory, he adds the fact that the signified is “the concept of a sound or image” and refers to the way this is perceived by an individual. From a different point of view, Pierce (cf. Noth, 1997: 42) states that “the sign has a triple meaning”. Firstly, the representamen or “the perceptible object is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” and is there to indicate something to somebody. Secondly, the interpretant is the equivalent sign which is created in the mind of the person or what the meaning is. Lastly, the sign which stands for something is called object or referent (Noth, 1997: 42). The differences between Pierce and Saussure stay in the fact that the referent represents a real thing where it could not be said the same for Saussure (Chandler, 1997: 29). The Saussure’s model signified could be interpreted in three different ways as Pierce pointed out that a sign is an “icon, symbol, index or a combination of them” (cf. Chandler, 2007: 36). Pierce added that an iconic sign represents an object and he refers to a picture or a painting where they are seen as an icon. He admits that a photograph is both iconic and indexical. Firstly, the iconic is instructive, as describes the object. Taking the aspects, photos were forced to correspond to the objects at a certain moment and place. Secondly, they are indexical because it is taken into account “the effect of light”, which is a photographic emulation (Chandler, 2007: 43).

Jonathan Bignell (2002: 14) notices the differences between an image and a sentence, mentioning that in a sentence the words are coming one after the other, from left to right, but also could be changed their place. Similarly, objects from a photograph, an object the same as a word could be changed or omitted. In contrast to the photograph, during the time the words are changing instead of the objects from a photograph do not. The relation between them regarding language functions brings into existence two messages of the image, “the anchorage” image that refers to the language used to elucidate a photo and “the relay” (Martinec and Salway, 2005: 343) regarding the text attached near the photography. Only by looking at an image it will be seen a polysemantic interpretation implying a lot of signifiers and obviously, a floating chain of signified which one can be interpreted or not according to viewer background. After the symbolic message is got, the linguistic message becomes an interpretation. Sometimes the anchorage is the principal ideological function that gets a certain signified and avoids others. If the connotative meaning is cast away, there is no contradiction and is not any interpretative meaning left, a denotative message. This happens if it is not included at the level of the identification where lines, forms, and colors can be understood by everybody. For example, in the UK the blue represents the conservatives, and even in such circumstances from a photograph can be interpreted more than just a simple letter. A denotative message is called utopian as the connotative meaning is removed and becomes “radically objective” (Barthes, 1977: 42), a paradox of the image. The connotation of the image is seen in strategies used by the photographer, in the framework taken where can be identified features from a certain cultural code with the help of anthropology, such as: “framing, distances, lighting, focus speed” (1977: 44). The framework of a picture can be infinitely

interpreted, here are included “the scene, object, landscape” which are called “the style of the reproduction”. The signifier of the photo is a treatment of it due to the photographer who acts from ideological or aesthetic reasons and directs it to a certain group of people with a certain culture (1977: 15). Besides, a few researchers such as Martinec, Salway, Kress and Van Leeuwen in the field of media starting from Barthes analysis, adapted the strategies used by Halliday to linguistics and converted them to apply to the image similarly or attached to those of Barthes. These clarify much more in detail including functions to photographs or the objects from an image.

3. An Analytical Framework

On June 16, 2016, Prime Minister of UK, David Cameron (see Annexes, figure 1) organizes the referendum to consolidate the relationship with members of the conservative party, this happens after six conservative members left the parliament and others are going to do same. Whatever the circumstances of Brexit are, they are very similar to the period when as prime minister was Harold Wilson and recently over 41 years later, Cameron is doing the same. Starting with 1973 after on the 1st of January 1973 when the UK had joined the European Economic Community, in the UK were tensions regarding this, and in 1975 it was a referendum to renegotiate the relationship with the Europeans.

The strategy adopted to interpret the photograph (Fig. 1) for this research starts from Barthes’ anchorage in which stands for the interpretation of the objects such as a lectern, a man, a fence, the door with number ten on it and the building expressing denotation. If they are staying for a man who represents his class, the objects get certain codes, they become connotative and this could be interpreted in different ways as the Prime Minister (Fig. 1) who may be confused with anybody else. This is possible for one who does not know PM and pays attention only to the image. Same as the writer, the photographer leads interpretation in his interest and this could differ in many ways, from the political ideology of newspaper to the financial supporters. Colors used in this photograph (Fig. 1) are the cold ones, blue which express in a situation like Brexit an equilibrium and peaceful atmosphere related to Prime Minister’s suit which fits with his gesture in a central point that means instigation for people to vote against Brexit.

Special attention during the analysis of the photography (Fig. 1) should be given to ‘the objects’ or ‘squares’ which are building the syntax of image. From the photography, the objects could be arranged in a certain way which depends on the photographer’s interest or taken as they are. The objects are important for the fact that they always render a message as they can be inferred and can be made the links between ideas. Maybe, objects do not persuade, but a lot of meanings could be got from it. The distance taken between background and foreground is medium, approximately 4 meters and stands for the social zone. In other words, it is an ideal distance for a person to address a large group of people. This means that the photographer has the interest to take the picture at that distance. Paying attention to the photography (Figure 1), another question could be why he didn’t turn the camera horizontally; obviously, the fence and the building would have been left out. The Prime Minister is standing in a middle position between the EU and his people trying to convince them for their interests. Moreover, as in the back is the building, there could not be sun and the light of the photography did not come from one side to be seen as a shadow on one of the sides or to be darker. As a result, the photographer had no interest in taking a bad image.

The Prime Minister’s setting is of great importance as he is in the foreground. In the background, the building with the door, bricks, street, sidewalk and also the lights from the glass above the door means that it is not alone in contrast to his loneliness (Fig.2). Moreover, the contrast between the foreground and background is about the light which is focused on ‘the blue square’ or PM. If the actor, in this case, is the Prime Minister, one should ask himself: ‘what is he doing?’ His oblique

position with the ground and his gestures imply a process of taking action. The building stands for modernism, for globalization, in contrast with nature, a symbol of isolation, primary instincts or populism. On the one hand, PM's position of 'blue square' expresses order and equilibrium and the small squares which become 'a big black square' implies also the other participants in the Brexit. The position of the PM or 'the blue square' is bigger than one 'black brick', but he is forced to take account of 'the big black square' or the wall which could be his government and conservatives, parliament or even his people. While blue color stands for equilibrium and peaceful atmosphere or party's color, black color stands for tradition, old times, but also for primitive urges which represents populism. As he is not in a building and is outside, it is interpreted as neutrality regarding the votes, and this is strengthened by the emptiness of any EU's or UK's flag. Besides, it should be taken notice of the fact that between 'the blue square' and the wall is a fence and only one door. The oblique position to the unclear colors of red-brown and grey, the big wooden square of lectern without symbols of the UK and the shield between a lion and a unicorn express an unshaken position of remaining in.

The appearance of the Prime Minister is another factor which could influence the audience perception, behavior and personality due to his suit by sending a positive message regarding his personality and implying a certain respect which also includes associations with reliability, trustworthy, intelligence, capability, etc. Having baggy or wrinkled trousers or jacket could also be interpreted as things done in a hurry or incompetence. In the case of David Cameron, according to *The Independent* (June 16th, 2016), his clothes are from Savile Row tailor Richard James or another tailor called Geoffrey Golding which could cost between 2000£ to 3000£ for a suit. In the photograph presented (fig.1) could be easily noticed the fact that his suit is very stylish and his hair is combed, his sleeves express the pressure, as if it could be noticed even if he has his arms bent and the suit may have been ironed in the morning, they are wrinkled at the hour suggested when the picture was taken around 14:00 pm in June. It was a tough day after long discussions. In contrast with Jeremy Corbyn who states that he pays not more than 550£ for a suit, this after he was criticized in the media for his sloppiness (Fig. 3&4).

The door was chosen closed not as isolation of everybody, but for looking at Britain's interest and strengthening PM's speech. Moreover, the number ten if it is searched in Collins Dictionary (2011) refers "to 10 Downing Street, London, which is the official home of the British Prime Minister". The lectern is also 'a square', but without symbols of the UK which were present at each event, it gets another meaning and this was done on purpose. Regarding the symbol, the lion expresses power, authority, royalty; the unicorn expresses the purity, pride, intelligence, boldness, etc. The shield which has on it four squares represents the four countries of the UK. The shield expresses defense and protection, and only mentioning the meaning of symbols needs no interpretation that their missing stands for egalitarianism, Europe, the same community, etc. (Fig. 2).

The Prime Minister's mouth opened implies a reaction to the fact that a vote pro-Brexit could be a disaster for his country. The clenched fist expresses a symbol of unity and stands for a dynamic action against Brexit which is directed to his electors to do the right thing, but it could also be interpreted to blame and be rude to those who have different opinions from him, for a possible fail. His head up, in contrast to the head down which stands for weakness and tiredness, expresses the fact that he is confident in what he is saying, while the directed eye contact expresses sincerity.

The journalist's interest is the newspaper to be bought by both sides of the political spectrum, on the one hand by remainers and on the other hand by pro-Brexiters, as *Independent* is known to be against Brexit. The photography (Fig.1) increases the interest in the different types of readers. Moreover, taking account of the PM's gestures from photography, the signifier stands for an important

decision to be made and curiosity arising about what the text is. In other words, the photography stands for an 'imperative clause' used as "vote remain" (Independent, June 16, 2016).

4. Conclusion

The study of semiotics has demonstrated that without strategies used by the researchers of this field it would be very difficult to interpret an image. These are applied not only to non-verbal language but also to words, sentences or texts. Consequently, if the viewer reads the newspaper, the journalist's purpose is partially achieved only through the presence of the photography which has the role of the hook. This also depends on the person's ideology or knowledge of interpreting the photography or the text. Moreover, the viewer's interpretation will reflect also the position taken regarding the subject. That is why the researcher should have a neutral position regarding the context of the subject and evaluate according to the clear evidence found. Much more interesting research would be if the analyst would survey the photography from the newspaper to the way people interpret the image.

According to these defining characteristics, there is no need for other interpretation that the context of the photography stands not only for a man, a building or British people but also for EU countries submitted to law and order, living in a world where evolution and globalization is inevitable, where wars have been changed with economical wars. Moreover, in the case of isolation, the UK or any other country is condemned to turn back one hundred years ago. In the case of Great Britain, being an empire, it would be impossible because that status was lost.

expressing grief at the place where J. Cox was murder (*Sputnik International*, June 29, 2016).

Annexes



Figure 1 Prime Minister delivers an EU referendum-related speech in Downing Street, London (*Independent*, June 16, 2016).



Figure 2 Cameron gives his resignation speech on June 24, 2016 CREDIT: XINHUA/BARCROFT (*Telegraph*, June 24, 2016).



Figure 3 Photograph of Prime Minister D. Cameron & J. Corbyn



Figure 4 The photograph of J. Corbyn giving an interview after he was asked resignation (*Labourlist*, 27 June 2016).

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