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A semiotic study of social distance and contact in Natalie Tjota's American pictorial story

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Abstract--The study investigates the social semiotics of contact employed by Natalie Tjota in her pictorial story "Berry Bunny Learns about COVID-19" which is taken from the internet website of the New York City School Library System. That is achieved by following Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). It aims at discovering the effect of social distance on human behavior. Besides, it tests the impact of social distance on mood and emotions. In accordance with these aims, it hypothesizes that social distance can play an important role in conveying information, creating certain moods, and even influencing the decisions people make. The findings of the analysis validate the hypotheses of the study.

Keywords--Social semiotics, Semiotics, Social distance, COVID-19, Pictorial story.

Introduction

Etymologically speaking, the term "semiotics" stems from the Greek root "seme", as in semeiotikos, which means an interpreter of signs. Semiotics is a science that focuses on the interpretation of signs and how these signs work (Cobley and Jansz, 1999:4).

Semiotics is the field that studies the life of signs within society. It would be a part of social psychology and hence of general psychology. It is termed semiology (from Greek semeion 'sign'). Semiology, in turn, would elucidate what constitutes signs and what laws govern them. Since science does not exist yet, no one can say what it would be, but it has a right to exist, a place staked out in advance (Jewitt, Bezemer and O'Halloran, 2016:17). Besides, Saussure clarified that the

study of signs can be divided into two branches: the synchronic and the diachronic. The former refers to the study of signs at present and the latter to the analysis of how signs change in form and meaning over time (Beasley and Danesi, 2002:26).

Semiotics is concerned with the study of sign systems. There are no big differences between semiology and semiotics. The former emerged from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the latter is associated with the work of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who gave it the name "semiotics" (Lyons, 1978:96). Eco defines semiotics as "everything that can be taken as a sign"(1976:7).

It is devoted to the study not only of what individuals refer to as "signs" in everyday communication, instead, it involves anything which "stands for" something else. However, contemporary semioticians do not study signs in isolation. For them, sign is a part of semiotic "sign – systems" (such as a medium or genre). They study how meanings are formed and how reality is represented. Besides, signs can take different forms such as images, sounds, words, gestures, and objects (Chandler, 2007:2).

Social Semiotics

Social semiotics is a term used to represent an analytic tradition that derives from the works of the linguist Michael Halliday's *Language as Social Semiotic* (1976) and cultural theorists Bob Hodge and Gunther Kress' *Social Semiotics* (1988). It is used to refer to several approaches which associate semiotic range with social dimensions. In turn, such approaches can be used to analyse the full range of signifying systems and practices that establish all forms of culture (Bal, 1991:73).

Social semiotics is a synthesis of several modern approaches which aim to study the social meaning and social action. The most common one is semiotics. Semiotics aims to study our social resources that can be used to communicate meanings. It was established as part of the effort to find a scientific basis for linguistics. It is used to study all systems of signs and symbols (including gestures, pictures, even hairstyles) and how such systems can be used to communicate meanings. Linguistics covers one special case of language and so is part of semiotics. The name "social semiotics" is used to recognize the new synthetic theory from more traditional approaches to semiotics which is termed formal semiotics. In turn, formal semiotics is primarily interested in the systematic study of the systems of signs themselves. Social semiotics includes formal semiotics and goes on to ask how individuals use signs to create the life of a community. Social semiotics is not new in trying to unite the study of human behavior, specially meaning-making behavior (speaking, writing, reasoning, drawing, gesturing, etc.), with the study of society. There is a long tradition of doing this in cultural anthropology and ethnography. Although many anthropologists and ethnographers have taken the role of language too much for granted, they have still made great contributions to the study of symbols and symbolic actions (Lemke, 1990:183).

Social semiotics is the study of the social dimensions of meaning, and the power of human processes of signification and interpretation (known as semiosis) in shaping individuals and societies. Social semiotics focuses on social meaning-making practices of all types, whether visual, verbal, or aural (Thibault, 1991:54). These different systems for meaning-making or possible "channels" (e.g. speech, writing, images) are known as semiotic modes (or semiotic registers). Semiotic modes can include visual, verbal, written, gestural, and musical resources for communication. They also include various "multimodal" ensembles of any of these modes (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001:80).

Social Distance

The visual resources are also used to determine the social distance between the viewers and the represented participants. Social distance is concerned with the kinds of social relations between participants. It is influenced by different sizes of the frame. Size of frame is related to the size of signs whereas social distance is related to the distance between the represented participants and the viewers. The size of the frame refers to the use of shots, namely extreme close-up, close-up, medium close shot, medium shot, medium long shot, long shot, and extreme long shot. Besides, the choice of distance is believed to have different social relations between represented participants and viewers (ibid). These are summarised as the following:

Table (1) Size of Frame and Social Distance

Frame size	Characteristics	Social relation
Very close up	The face of head is only Visible	Intimate
Close shot	The head and shoulders are visible	Intimate
Medium close	The area from the head to the waist is visible	Personal
Medium shot	The area from the head to the Knees is visible	Impersonal
Medium long	The whole figure and the space around it is visible	Social
Long shot	The human figure occupies about half the height of the frame	Formal and impersonal
Very long shot	The torsos of at least four or five people are visible	Strangers

Methodology

In the light of the theoretical review presented in the previous sections, the analysis of social distance is going to be carried out through a qualitative analysis following Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design concerning the type of social distance utilized in the following pictorial story. The qualitative research method focuses on descriptive and explanatory results obtained from the collected data.

Data Analysis

Berry Bunny Learns about COVID-19 by Natalie Tjota



Picture 1

The Berry Bunnies are depicted in the very close shot (or extreme close-up) which shows the head of the represented participants. As such, it is all that the viewers could see about them. This means that there is an intimate relationship between the image and the viewer. No direct contact was made between the represented participants and the viewer. The image addresses the viewer indirectly. The viewer is the subject of the look. The contact here is an "offer" contact since it offers the represented participants as items of information or as objects of observation.



Picture 2

The Berry Bunny is shown at the medium close shot. This far personal distance cuts off the represented participant approximately at the waist. It aims to construct a personal relationship between the represented participant and the viewer. The look of Berry Bunny is directed towards the computer. There is no visual contact between the represented participant (the animal) and the interactive participant (the viewer). Consequently, the contact here is an "offer" contact since it delivers the depicted participant as an item of information or object to be observed.



Picture 3

The image is portrayed at the close shot. This close personal distance shows the head and shoulders of the represented participants. It aims to construct an intimate relationship between the represented participant and the viewer. The look of the animal points to the left side of the image. It does not allow any kind of relationships to be created among participants. There is no visual contact between them. As such, it is considered as an "offer" contact.



Picture 4

There are four represented participants in this image. They were suffering from corona's symptoms. Three of them were depicted at a very close shot. This close distance only shows the participant's face. It aims to form an intimate relationship with the viewer. While the represented participant, who was suffering from breathing difficulty, was portrayed at the medium long shot. This far social distance shows the full figure and the place around it. Consequently, it aims to make formal and impersonal relationships with the viewer. The represented participants do not look at the viewer directly. There is no visual contact between the represented participants and the viewer. So, contact may not be established. This type of image is called an "offer."



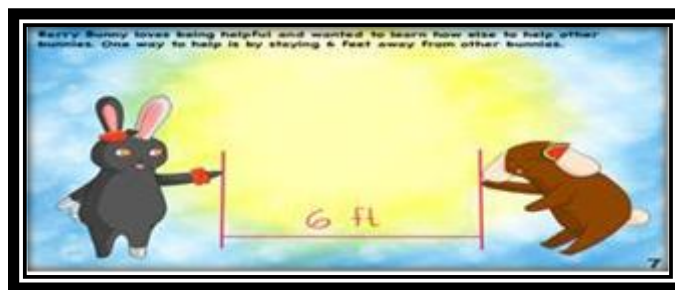
Picture 5

Barry Bunny is portrayed at the medium long shot. This long social distance shows the whole figure of the represented participant and the space around it. As a result, there is no intimate relationship with the viewer. There is no visual contact with the viewer. The represented participant does not look at the viewer directly. Hence, contact is not established. This kind of image is called an "offer."



Picture 6

The image is depicted in a long medium since it shows the whole figures of Bunnies. Hence, it does not make a relatively intimate relationship between the image and the viewer. The represented participants do not create direct eye contact with the viewer. This image addresses the viewer indirectly. The participant's gaze is not directed at the viewer. Hence, there is no direct connection between them. This kind of image is called an "offer". It offers the represented participants to the viewer as items of information or as objects of observation.



Picture 7

Berry Bunnies were practicing social distancing. They were depicted at the medium long shot which shows the full figure of the represented participants and the place around them. So, it does not make an intimate relationship with the viewer. When the represented participants do not look in the direction of the viewer, no direct connection is made. There is no visual contact between them. This image addresses the viewer indirectly. It is called an "offer" since it offers the represented participants to the viewers.

Three represented participants are depicted in this image. The left and right represented participants look at the viewer with a smile. Therefore, the contact is performed. This kind of image addresses the viewer directly. This image is called "demand" since the participant's gaze demands something from the viewer. The middle participant does not look in the direction of the viewer. The represented participants are depicted at the medium long shot because it shows the full figure of the represented participants. Hence, this long distance does not make an intimate relationship between the image and the viewer. There is no visual contact between them. Consequently, this image is an "offer."

Conclusions

1. The types of visual strategies utilized in American pictorial stories concerning COVID-19 are image, word, and color. Each one of these visual strategies is characterized by the use of various components that form the visual structure.
2. For image, it has the following types: contact, social distance, modality, perspective, and framing. To start with the contact, it is either an "offer" or "demand". The high percentage of an "offer" contact shows that the participant gazes away from the viewer. In such a case, the participant is offered as an object of information. For the categories of social distance, medium long shot seizes the higher percentage as the viewers can see the whole figure with space around it. By employing a long shot, a far social distance is suggested. At far social distance, the phenomenon in the image is presented in an objectively and impersonally manner. The image presents the objects for the viewer's contemplation, leading the views to think about the possible reasons behind such phenomenon as well as to find out effective and practical solutions to such issues.

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