

changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings

from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS

Eleftheria Deltsoy

Maria Papadopoulou

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EDITORS:

Eleftheria Deltsou
Maria Papadopoulou

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Are University Students Followers of the World's Semiotic Turn to the Visual?

George Damaskinidis | ARISTOTLE UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI | damaskinidis@hotmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines undergraduates' perspective of the role of visual literacy within the context of the world's semiotic turn to the visual. Recently, literacy habits have undergone dramatic changes and many educators have adopted a more systematic approach to visual education. Taking into account this tendency and the fact that the dominance of the verbal modes of communication has been challenged by non-verbal modes, an examination of university students' perspective of visual literacy to translation would involve looking for how they perceive the role of visual literacy in general and the extent to which they adopt a visual literacy perspective while translating multimodal texts. This examination involved triangulating data gathered from undergraduates' performance while translating multimodal texts from English into Greek. Evidence shows that although students did not have a clear view of the role of the visual in translation studies, they realized its importance for purposes of translation.

Keywords

higher education context , multimodal semiotics , multimodal texts , translation studies , translation education , visual literacy

Introduction

While the term 'visual' that appears in the title above could be referred to many things, in this paper it is particularly meant 'visual literacy'. Similarly, while the students mentioned above could study a variety of subjects, here I will specifically talk about translation trainees. A very basic definition of visual literacy is 'the ability to understand and produce visual messages' (Bleed, 2005, p.5). From the translators' perspective, visual literacy is defined here as a group of competencies that they should develop in order to interpret visual messages, when translating multimodal texts into another language.

The term 'visual literacy' was coined by Debes (1968) after his publication of a newsletter called *Visuals are a Language* in 1967. More than four decades later, there seems to be confusion about the meaning of visual literacy. Definitions may range from the very general, namely 'the ability to construct meaning from visual images' (Giorgis et al. 1999), to the very specific, namely 'screen language as the new currency for learning' (Bleed, 2005, p. 5). Bleed goes on to argue that when we consider new topics 'we are often biased by who we are' (2005, p. 6). For instance, the computer scientist may approach visual literacy from the perspective of technological developments, the artist may think of visual literacy as an opportunity to advance artistic expression, and the military officer may consider visual literacy as a means to analyse aerial photographs that will be used to make battle damage assessments. It would therefore be difficult to find a single definition of visual literacy that would reflect the use made of it by these three users.

Similarly, translators could approach visual literacy in such a way that would meet their own needs. Following the definition of visual literacy provided here, I propose that students who translate multimodal texts should think of visual literacy as the ability to interpret verbal and non-verbal semiotic elements for intentionally communicating the source text (ST) culture to the target text (TT) audience. Therefore, I will refer to the turn translators should make to the visual for their own purposes.

Assumptions of the turn to the visual

With reference to the turn to the visual, there is a strong debate around the multi-literacies concept, with some researchers (e.g. Lemke 1998) arguing that there are several distinct literacies (e.g. visual, print, computer). On the other hand, Snyder (2001) finds it difficult to separate them and talks about a mixture of literacies. She argues that visual, media and print literacies create complex, 'context-based domains'. In the field of translation, Oittinen (2008) argues that in order to translate films and picture books, translators do not simply need visual literacy, but something more particular, like media literacy.

Within this multidimensional environment, a reasonable question would be whether the new modes of communication can be approached using traditional models. Cohn (2003) suggests the opposite, namely that the exploration of these domains requires a grammar for the theoretical examination of the verbal, visual and audio languages.

Therefore, one of my main hypotheses is that translators require an array of skills and competencies that go beyond an ability to translate; for instance, the ability to use terminology (e.g. depth, focus, perspective, salience) in the description of photographs. These skills are reflected in (some of) the reading-as-a-multimodal-practice questions based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) metafunctions. This specialized knowledge is an important consideration when someone has to answer questions that involve the interpretation of visuals.

Competence in the analysis of visual elements would also help translators to make judgments about the appropriateness of the overall organization of multimodal texts (Smith, 2008). She argues that at the risk of it being considered as a direct intervention, or as *trespassing* on other professional fields, such a skill may not only facilitate the translation, but also the producers of texts. In the case of multilingual texts (e.g. technical manuals, brochures), where the same text is being translated into several languages at the same time, the translators could comment on the way the visuals should be arranged on the paper in relation to the different verbal components.

Risku and Pircher (2008) describe the influence of this professional angle on translators' ability to fulfil the services that are likely to be required of them. The authors refer to a popular myth in technical translation that 'by using image-based forms of documentation, the time, effort and costs involved in translation can be saved' (ibid. p. 159). In one of their empirical studies, they examined how former translators who had moved to the field of technical communication acknowledged that working with both text and images was a new skill they should have learned during their translation training. In technical communication, translators have to decide on the appropriateness of a ST visual element in the context of a specific verbal element in the TT.

They also argue that images are a central point of concern in multimodal texts because they dictate the format of the document to a large extent. An understanding of the way the layout works would help translators to establish a better picture of the ST and gain an understanding of its constraints for the creation of the TT. In the marketing environment, if the translators themselves wanted to format the layout so as to accommodate a particular photograph or logo, they would need special skills to work with graphic tools. Thus, the question that is raised is whether these skills should be taught and practised regularly or simply allowed to be acquired in the course of time. These assumptions about the turn to the visual are based on a number of literacy theories that surround visual analysis.

Literacy theories for visual analysis

It seems to be clear that multimodal communication would require a systematic expansion of the concept of literacy, such as the one made by the New London Group (1996) through the term *multiliteracies*. In this group, scholars from various fields – education,

linguistics and sociology, among others – discussed the present state of literacy and possible directions for the future. The focus was on the changes imposed on the world and the new requirements for the people in order to become meaning makers in the ever changing community lives.

Until recently, Lemke (1998) claims, literacy assumed a transparent relation between the signifier and the referent. A similar transparency was also assumed between language and intended meaning, which privileged linguistic communication over non-verbal forms of communication and expression. He also claims that twentieth-century conceptualisation of what theories and teaching of literacy entail has not moved away from reliance on logocentric theory. That is, while children are learning to distinguish different semiotic resources (e.g., drawing from writing) they are only taught how to use written language. In teaching other modes, such as singing, drawing, or mime, they are not taught about the traditions and possibilities for combining these with writing and with each other. Additionally, the teaching of the four basic literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) revolved almost exclusively around verbal language.

Similarly, it is argued that, on the basis of the proliferation of multimodal texts within the new communicative landscape, that in the twenty-first century the traditional notion of literacy as consisting of the 'four basic skills' is inadequate. If we accept, then, that there is a new type of literacy that is not (solely) verbal in orientation then we need to adopt a systematic approach to the study of visual education (Lemke, 1998). A movement towards independence of the visual as a literacy skill is proposed by Avgerinou and Pettersson (2011), who argue that visual literacy is holistic, must be learned, is not universal and often needs verbal support.

Although researchers and practitioners disagree and do not present a common definition of visual literacy, they cite a number of researchers who agree with their argument that visual literacy exists. Visual literacy is also widely referred to as either a skill, a competency or an ability. Their holistic view of visual literacy is sometimes discussed with reference to the ambiguity of non-verbal modes of communication in contrast to verbal and technical descriptions, which must be as unambiguous as possible.

Avgerinou and Pettersson (2011) have also shown that competent school students had problems with understanding and analysing pictures. Moreover, since visuals are cultural products shared by individuals, their understanding is dependent on the individuals' access to the culture of production. Unless they are properly analysed and discussed, it is suggested that these visuals will not be properly understood and will remain ambiguous. Multimodal texts that are composed of several visuals could be problematic with regard to the literacy they require and may thus demand training or grounding in the relevant concepts. These developments therefore have significant implications for students of translation who are confronted with multimodal texts that they have not been systematically taught how to produce or consume, let alone translate.

This training is expected to contradict traditional 'translation [training] ... [that] tends to focus on the verbal dimensions of the text' (Torresi, 2008, p.64), where the term 'translation' is usually defined as a verbal-only practice without covering non-verbal modes of expression. For example, in the case of the change in the style of newspapers from prose to visual narrative, where the photograph is the central storyteller, translation trainers and trainees must approach this visual (the photograph) as a potential translation factor. I argue that this focus on the visual aspect of translation training may require the integration of teaching techniques that are not verbal-only but (also) based on a kind of visual grammar.

Such a grammar has been developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) based on the idea that pictures having same kind of regularities with words and sentence syntax. They claim that by using this visual grammar, we could analyze images and their relationships to words. That is, pictures visualize and conceptualize a story by including activities, which have a certain purpose, and give information about the relationship of the characters or things appearing in picture-based stories. This grammar is about how meaning is constructed in visuals and what meanings are socially generated by reading these visuals. Of particular interest is their argument that the arrangement of elements in an image are governed by the same rules that apply to the ordering of linguistic elements in a written sentence.

In response to these new developments in grammar, analytical frameworks have been developed that demonstrate some approximate correspondence between visual resources and linguistic systems such as speech acts, mood, and person. Such frameworks (e.g. Harrison, 2003) employ systemic-functional (SF) linguistic models and a multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) perspective to analyse language and visual forms. Yet, this SF-MDA perspective has been met with some criticism. Sidiropoulou (2006), for example, argues against the readiness with which a language-oriented theory is applied to the description of non-verbal semiotic resources.

As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) have argued, multimodal texts function in a non-linear way, in which readers follow their own 'reading paths' to negotiate the various elements on the page. They also argue that texts 'impose a paradigmatics' on the reader in contrast to more traditional forms of linear text. Therefore, it might be difficult for the readers who do not follow the same reading paths to come to a consensus over the reading and interpretation of the same multimodal text. What Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) postulate is a distinction that should be made between visual grammar as a theoretical model for the purposes of semiotic analysis and a descriptive model of an actual set of interpretive processes carried out by viewers of images. Therefore, it is a matter of whether the readers of multimodal texts know and use these models.

According to Baumgarten (2008), this type of analysis of multimodal texts within the SF paradigm has focused on the visual aspects, disregarding the accompanying verbal

information and the potential verbal-visual interactions. This observation could be adduced in support of Smith's (2008) argument that there has been little research into the implications of visual aspects of the SF approach in translation. However, the relevant body of literature is growing fast; for instance, Séguinot (1994) issues a warning to translators to take into account various non-verbal aspects. She describes how the excessive use of white space employed by graphic specialists creates a layout which breaks up units of text, leaving an incoherent message, or how a particular typographic feature (e.g. Cyrillic letters) may evoke certain cultural (Slav) connotations. This warning is in line with Risku and Pircher (2008), who argue that the layout helps the translator to establish a better picture of the ST and to deliver important constraints for the creation of the TT.

Nevertheless, such a freedom of choices (i.e. use of layout or typography) should be treated with caution, especially in cross-cultural translations. For example, in the area of intercultural technical communication, Risku and Pircher (2008) argue that the layout of the ST may impose certain constraints for the creation of the TT, because the client wants to keep as close to the original layout as possible, or because the layout is handled by a graphic designer who is not familiar with the TT. For example, Chinese cultural realities in relation to photographic culture in many ways contrast with *westernized* ones. Smith (2008) also argues that the left-right organisation is limited to those cultures where the writing system moves from left to right. Thus, great care should be taken when applying Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) left/right orientations and given/new information to the different reading paths of East Asian cultures. But even in Western cultures, such orientations may not always work.

In the next section, these theories are put to test in a small scale qualitative study with undergraduates in the field of translation.

University student's perspective of the visual as a semiotic mode in translation

In this section I will briefly present part of the results of a small scale study whose purpose was to gain a perspective of university students, and in particular translation trainees, of the role of visual literacy in translation. I set up a qualitative action research at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki with thirty two fourth-year undergraduates from the four foreign language department. The experiments involved students translating a text, video-recording them, completing questionnaires and retrospective interviews by the researcher.

The answer to the question that appears in the title of the paper was informed by the conceptual framework (described very briefly in this paper) of visual literacy (in particular, multimodality), semiotics and translation. Multimodal semiotics provided the perspective through which to examine the way the students described semiotic resources, what they said about and did with the visual means of communication, and if/how they focused on the latter.

The study allowed the examination of the way the students described semiotic resources, what they said about and did with the visual means of communication, and if/how they focused on the latter. This examination also involved students' ability to interpret verbal and non-verbal semiotic elements for the purpose of intentionally communicating the source text culture to the target text audience. The students' adoption of the role of visible/invisible translator was taken as an indicative factor of their (un)willingness to co-examine verbal and non-verbal elements. Another issue was the examination of students' ability to understand a particular model of visual grammar and apply it to the translation of an English multimodal text into Greek. This text is actually an advertisement which consists of a short verbal element, an accompanying photograph and other elements (the company's logo and website address). A key point of reference was students' perception of the image as an autonomous type of text. Related to this last point was students' ability to examine issues such as the development of the image or the materiality of the ST and how they might affect the target readership. ST verbal information modified, added in or removed from the TT was also an indication that the visual material might have been a translation factor for the students.

The students did not have a clear idea of the role of visual literacy in TS. One reason for this was probably the fact that the students' training in translation did not include several visual-related courses. The total number of translation courses taken by the students by far outnumbers the visual-related ones. In addition, the fact that most students had difficulty identifying which courses were visual-related makes their categorisation as visually (il)literate more problematic.

Another reason could be the tendency to ignore the image during the translation process, which suggests that the visual element had no (significant) role to play. While the students were looking for words with potential translation difficulties, there was no indication that they related them to a visual element. Most students just took a quick look at the photograph and then put it aside when they began their translation. This is a strong indication that it is almost impossible to tell what was involved when students read the photograph while translating. This is further enhanced by the fact that both think aloud protocols and video-recording analysis did not reveal any activity that could be attributed to image-oriented translation.

The tendency to ignore visual elements was also evident in the students' declaration that their training, as a whole, did not include the visual as a potential factor. On the other hand, the students acknowledged that MST is dependent on (literacies) skills that went beyond their training and educational background, such as the semiotic analysis of non-verbal elements. This was quite evident in the image-based questionnaire and in their difficulty to understand what they called 'technical terms' (e.g. vector, perspective, visual angle, validity of the message). In fact, most students claimed that they would have performed much better had they been trained in visual analysis. Moreover, one

student suggested recruiting students from a cinema university department as participants in the hope of being better prepared to analyse visual elements. This shows an awareness of the inherent difficulties in translating multimodal texts.

The students acknowledged that the image-based questionnaire gave them the opportunity to take a closer and more systematic look at the various visual elements. However, the TAPs conducted in pairs showed that the discussions around the students' answers to the questionnaire did not involve any translation concern. In the first retrospective interview, most of the students stated that they looked for words that posed potential translation problems without relating them to the photo.

The students' multiple interpretations of the data-text, as a result of the various verbo-visual interactions, refute the argument that most pictures are capable of several interpretations until anchored to one by a caption. Students' reading of the caption of the data-text seems to obscure rather than anchor the meanings of the photograph. Their claims that the aircraft meant nothing to them suggest that students challenge the issue of the autonomy of the image as an integral 'visual text' within a larger multimodal text.

According to the retrospective questionnaire, for the majority of the students, the reading of the data-text did not involve potential interactions with its visual semiotic elements. However, they acknowledged that the retrospective interviews helped them to realize that there were such interactions, at least in the way they were presented by the researcher.

Conclusion

In order to fully appreciate the students' perspective of the role of visual literacy in translation, someone would have to take into account three main limitations of this research. Briefly speaking, the type of participants, certain methodological aspects, and the teaching approach.

Firstly, the students were not translation trainees, but they had simply taken a number of courses in translation, and the assumptions of their academic background was based on their statement and not on a cross-examination of the translation courses offered by their university. Secondly, the research design, the data collection techniques and the absence of external evaluators/coders give a particular view of students' performance which, although triangulated, requires further empirical investigation. Thirdly, the research was mainly a teaching task while also incorporating an aspect of an awareness-raising task; that is, it adopted a structural practice approach to the formal instruction of rules, and at the same time the students were encouraged to look for regularities and formulate rules for themselves. It remains to be examined further possible combinations of these two approaches.

Bearing in mind the limitations briefly described above, their translation studies were dominated by logocentric theories. The verbal element was the main mode of communication of concern during their translation tasks which made any multimodal approach to translation a secondary issue.

The research design placed the students within a particular educational framework of translation development. In their eyes, the research appeared to be an innovative and high-quality training programme, in the form of a research-based crash-course. Most of them admitted that they had the opportunity to reflect on their performance in image analysis and engagement with an instructor to develop their translation skills for multimodal texts. The students admitted that their perspective of image-text relations in translation was altered in an unprecedented way. This is evidence that the visual was not integrated closely in their literacy habits.

The research was viewed by all students as ultimately beneficial because it enabled them to reflect on their own attitude towards the potential impact of the non-verbal semi-otic mode on translation. Consequently, many made a shift in their translation approach and tried to move away from the established practices they had been taught thus far. A fair amount of additional empirical studies, from different perspectives, would shed more light on students' perspective of the visual in translation and other subjects as well.

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