

Reading Meaning through the Visual Images: Social Semiotic Approach to TELL Magazine in Nigeria.

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Abstract

Several studies have been carried out on verbal communication but with the recent trends and development of communication in conveyance of meaning, the importance of the cover-pages of news magazine in the print media deserves to be given attention. Hence, the employment of social semiotic approach of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006)'s Multimodal Discourse Analysis to four selected editions of TELL magazine. The purpose is to present a shift from the usual study of visuals in line with the semantic indicators to an examination of visual images in isolation. The research brought to the conclusion that the visual images such as pictorials, colour, signs, posture, distance and symbols go a long way to convey meaning in print media especially, news magazines that need to attract the attention of the public.

Keywords: Advertisement, media, multimodal, images and context.

1. Introduction

Communication has various purposes in the society, although language is the primary tool for communication apart from symbols, signs, e.tc. To Hasan (2013:101), 'communication is as essential as food or water to living species of higher'. He further submits that communication is the means of existence of all living organisms. The uniqueness of communication in media can never be over emphasized. No wonder, he also posits that Mass Communication is any mechanical device that multiples messages and takes it to a large number of people simultaneously. It is through mass communication that millions of people could be reached which includes print media, electronic or digital media and new media.

TELL magazine belongs to the category of print media as the media cover newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, fliers and the likes. It is an independent weekly magazine established in 1991 and by 2007 had a circulation of about 80,000. BBC News once described it as one of Nigeria's most respected Business magazines. The magazine features political, social, economic and religious situations of Nigeria with national and international coverage.

Information or messages are transmitted in print media especially magazines through different modes such as pictorials, symbols, graphic, colour, tables apart from the lexical items. As far as a news magazine is concerned, the most important part is the cover page as marketers place much emphasis on how goods are packaged because it serves an avenue for capturing the attention of prospective customers. No wonder, most magazines come out in bright outlook. The cover pages create meaning when there is focus on the pictorials or images through qualitative interpretation. The cover pages could either be of pictorials of actual life events, place, thing or people, or illustrations that are meant to reflect major stories or features in an edition. This is a one of the responsibilities that a photojournalist is saddled with as Hasan (2013:723) submits that:

A photojournalist is a visual reporter of facts....This responsibility is paramount to photojournalist. At all times, we have many thousands of people seeing through our eyes and expecting to see the truth .Most people immediately understand an image.

He goes further to state that despite manipulation of pictures and illustrative images, the truth must still be maintained just as the public place trust in the reporters to tell the truth. This art of producing visual representation of a real or object is usually regarded as graphics in Mass Communication.

When talking about the interpretation of texts in new magazines, it is also important to consider interpretation of visual meaning together with the text, or even in isolation from text material. This paper is concerned to foreground the crucial importance of social semiotic approach of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to meaning making in cover pages of news magazine, it will also consider the argument that multimodal analysis of images should be approached in isolation from the linguistic texts.

2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)

Discourse analysis has passed through different stages of transformation since it developed from the springboard of sociolinguistics. The multimodal discourse approach as an emerging field is a product of the transmutations of discourse analysis. Synder (2009) defines 'multimodal discourse analysis as the study of the intersection and interdependence of various modalities of communication within a given context'. It is in consonance with this that Linda (2005:1) posits that 'multimodal analysis, integrating analysis of data from the viewpoint of different modes involved in meaning construction (verbal, visual, auditory e.t.c) has become popular in recent years'. The modality are employed in the creation of meaning, at the same time, it needs to be given automated analysis to unravel meaning in discourse. It is along this reasoning that Iedema (2003) submits thus:

Often oriented to finished and finite texts, multimodal analysis considers the complexity of texts or representations as they are, and less frequently how it is that such constructs come about, or how it is that they transmutify as (part of larger) dynamic processes

On modality, Linda (2005:17-18) presents some concepts that represent modes thus:

- i) Colour - colour are signifiers instead of signs.
- ii) Composition - it helps analyse the position and its corresponding meaning of images and texts in a discourse.
- iii) Saliency - how dominant an image or information is and how it draws the most attention of the view.

Scholars interested in the MDA are preoccupied with investigating how the above listed modes construe meaning in discourse. Within the domain of MDA, there are different approaches as Norris (2004) recognizes two approaches to multimodal interactional analysis: Norris approach, and Baldry and Thibaults approach. (see Abuya and Akinkulere, 2012:220). The social semiotic approach allows researchers to examine semiotic resources are employed to produce both communicative artefacts and events, and to interpret them ... in the context of specific social situations and practice (Van Leeuwen 2005), as Messaris and Abraham (2001:25) observe that '...visual images may have the capacity of conveying messages that would meet with greater resistance if put in words, but which are received more readily in visual images'. The theoretical foundation of social semiotic approach to multimodal discourse analysis has its root in the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which views language as a social semiotic (Halliday 1978). No wonder, Olowu (2012) submits that:

Kress and Van Leeuwen's contribution to the field of semiotic lies in their recognition of visual language as an underrated of communication which up till now has been subordinate to verbal language. They suggest that as technology facilities, the sharing of visual information, a way and means of understanding visual communication is more important than ever.

The major concern of social semiotic approach to MDA lies in unraveling messages foregrounded in visual images which becomes possible thanks to linguistic insights, proposed by the linguist Michael Halliday (Halliday, 1978). Thus, its application to cover pages of TELL Magazine, as it is observed that an effective cover page is meant to catch human's eye and convey the idea behind the magazine on one single page.

3. Statement of Research Problem

Several works have been done in recent time on multimodality of discourse in advertising, religion and even, media: Olowu (2012) examines the MDA of Women Mirror Magazine through which he describes the modes employed in religion magazine, while Abuya and Akinkulere (2012) investigate the way multimode assist children in understand Bible stories through illustrations, Linda (2005) bothers on MDA of advertisements of Hongkong charity organizations, and closely related to this research paper is the work of Ariyo (2013) which focuses on paronama of TELL Magazine. But more importantly, Akinkulere and Abuya (2013) multimodal analysis of selected cover pages of TELL Magazines basically focuses on interpretation vis a vis the linguistic text of the magazine. Despite these, it would seem that no much effort has been made to apply social semiotic approach to cover pages of TELL Magazine without recourse to the linguistic text. Hence, considering the importance of cover pages to new magazines, this paper intends to fill this gap by making a further development on MDA through the social semiotic approach to meaning on visual images solely.

4. Aim and Objectives Study

The paper was primarily meant to apply multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) to selected cover pages of TELL magazine with a view to achieving the following objectives:

- i. identify the features of visual images employed in selected cover pages of TELL magazine.
- ii. describe the ways messages are communicated through the identified features.
- ii. relate the meaning communicated through the features to the social context.

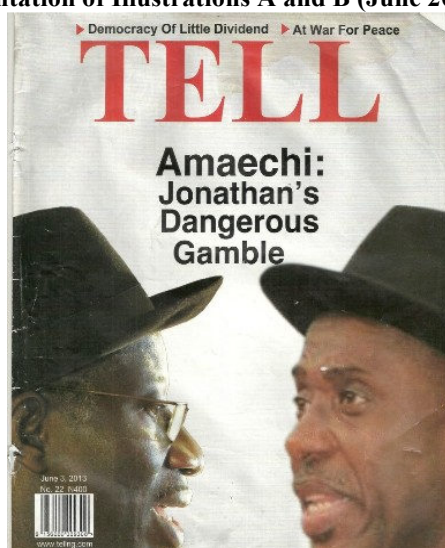
5. Research Methodology

For the purpose of this study, four editions of TELL magazine were selected from June and July 2013 editions in order to be recent, as the magazine features issues that currently affect the social, political and economic situations of the country. Also, the magazine is on weekly basis, the first two editions of each month were selected and the cover pages were scanned. The choice of the TELL magazine is premised on its richness in the use of colour and visual images. It was observed that two of the four editions are true life pictures while two others are illustrative pictures. The analysis will be done using Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006)'s Multimodal Discourse Analysis through the framework of Social Semiotic Approach. Recently, it has been successfully applied to all sorts of visual information in religion magazine and children Bible stories. Hence, its relevance and applicability to this research paper. The selected cover pages are labeled Illustration A- D.

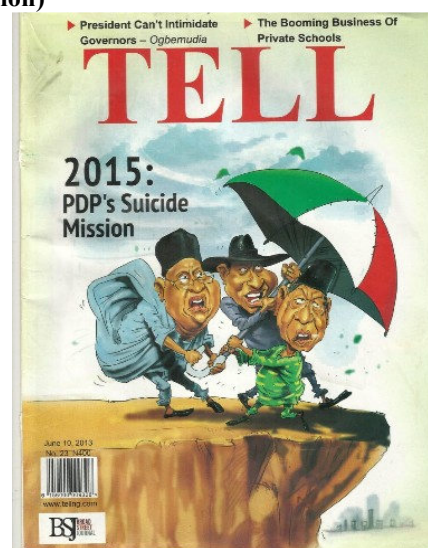
6. Presentation of Illustration and Discussion

This section is on data presentation and discussion. As earlier mentioned, each selected cover page will be analysed and discussed in close reference to the relevant and appropriate modes employed in the course of producing the cover pages through the social semiotic approach of MDA.

6.1. Presentation of Illustrations A and B (June 2013 Edition)



A



B

6.2. Interpretation of Illustration A

The interpretation of illustration A entails the visual components that are significant for meaning. According to the position of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) that colour is 'entirely different from language'. There is the use of colour 'white' as the background which stands for nobility as there are images of two people on it. Hence, the two people must be noble men. In the social context, the first image is a real picture the President of Federal republic of Nigeria - Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, while the second image is the picture of the Chairman of Nigerian Governors' Forum (NGF) - Chibuike Amaechi of Rivers State. There is the employment of black colour on the heads of both them. Black colour depicts leadership as it is the colour of their caps.

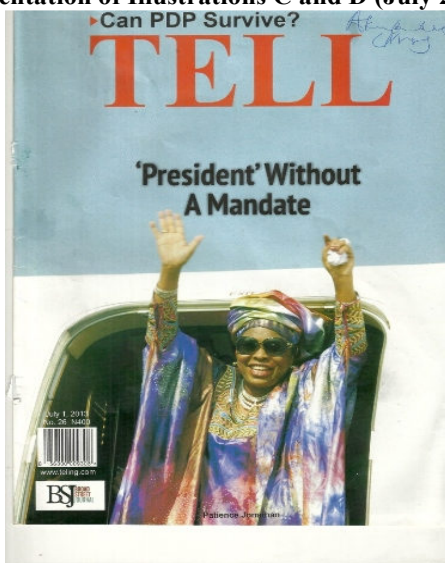
We have also observed that the cover page is rich in the use of symbols. The image of 'head' and 'the wearing of caps' are symbolic as it could be interpreted as leadership, as such, a leader of a community is also be referred to as 'the head' of such community. The wearing of same style of cap by the two leaders means that they have something in common, as they are from the same ethnic group and they have common aspirations because there are speculations within the physical context that Amaechi is eyeing presidency while Jonathan is nursing re-election ambition. Also, the choice of a picture of Jonathan with glasses depicts that there could be the possibility of hidden motives especially on his indirect influence on governors to frustrate the re-election bid of Amaechi as NGF Chairman. The manner by which both of them opened their mouths shows that they have a lot to say against each other. In our interpretation, the position of the two heads cannot be overlooked as it is highly significant for meaning. In fact, while Amaechi is looking directly into the eyes of Jonathan, Jonathan is looking downward, this demonstrates that the president is not sincere or guilty of undue influence on NGF election which his candidate of choice- Jonah Jang (Plateau State Governor) lost. This could also be interpreted as a look of defeat.

6.3. Interpretation of Illustration B

The colours of the umbrella: green, white and red are pointer to a political party in Nigeria- Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). But, in comparison to the colour of Nigeria flag; green, white, green, the red on the umbrella means

that the party is posing danger to the nation as a result of crisis imploding within it. The same black colour of the three caps, despite, different styles show they have common aspiration for leadership position within the party. The sky blue background shows the imminence of rainfall while the brown colour shows a dry land that lacks vegetation. Hence, they are on a land that is poor in terms of leadership while hoping for rainfall of true leadership. There is the use of three images that are illustrative which indicates the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. This is further solidified with the attire they put on as 'Agbada' is associated with the Yoruba people, the cap on the second person symbolizes the Ibo people while the third person is dressed like an Hausa man. The way they hold the umbrella demonstrates struggle as they are not ready to share the umbrella, although, the middle man which illustrates President Goodluck Jonathan has upper hand, this shows that he has a greater influence in the party than the others. Interestingly, in their struggle for power and leadership, the direction of the second and third men is dangerous for the party as they are tending towards an edge or bank of a river, which might culminate to total collapse of the party. Still, the first man is trying to salvage the umbrella, although there is evidence of whirlwind blowing his 'Agbada'. In the social context, major issues rocking the boat of the PDP are the election of NGF and the leadership style of the National Chairman of the party-Bamanga Tukur which led to attack and counter attacks, and these are about tearing the party apart.

6.4. Presentation of Illustrations C and D (July 2013 Edition)



C



D

6.5. Interpretation of Illustration C

From the illustration, there is the use of multi colours for the attire of the First Lady of the Federal Republic of Nigeria- Dame Patience Jonathan. The multi colours are bright, as such these depict royalty, fashion, affluence. Also, the colours of the cloth coupled with red colour of the fingernails and lips demonstrate extravagance that the First Lady demonstrates in the social context. The white colour of the beads, handkerchief and aeroplane shows royalty, while the dark colour of her glasses implies hidden motives and agenda.

On the employment of images, the plane stands for affluence, since poor people can hardly afford flight. At the same time, the flowing gown with gold, beads, and wrist-watch portray wealth. Her bold smile under a dark shade implies that she is smiling over her covert influence in the political involvement in crisis rocking NGF and PDP in Nigeria. Her style of hand wave shows she is not sincere as she is opening one palm while the second is closed.

6.6. Interpretation of Illustration D

In the fourth illustration (D), there are illustrative images of about eight people in celebration mood. Their clothes are of various attractive colours which signify wealth and affluence. Three of the participants are younger and do not look as fat as the five others that represent oil cabal in Nigeria. The black colour of the three boys' trousers and red scarf tied by one of them represent danger as they run errands for their masters that make fortune out of the national wealth.

The image of oil well on the high sea, and one of the men sitting on pipe while twisting the control demonstrate that they are illegally tapping the national resources in Nigeria. Also, their smiles, chicken, bone, tobacco pipe, big beads, cups and bottle of wine signify their extravagance ways of life as their boys raise hands to hail them. This illustration represents those into illegal bunkering in Nigeria, and how they are making fortune out of it without being made to face the law. The position of the five big men in a circle implies that they belong to a cliché and have a strong connection or influence in government. No wonder, they are not being challenged or

brought to book.

7. Conclusion

From our analysis, the visual images presented in our discussions are very rich in meaning. It is observed that illustrations A- C relate to the theme of politics in Nigeria while illustration D bothers on the theme of economy and politics too. There is no doubt, the issues of politics and economy are sensitive and germane to the growth of any developing country like Nigeria. The TELL magazine has been able to feed the public with information not only through lexis but visual images on issues that are current and revolve around the polity and development of Nigeria. There is no better way to bring to fore messages which ordinarily might be difficult to express employing lexical items than the employment of images.

As noted by Busa (2010), postures, position, gaze, and distance are significant for meaning in illustrations. Therefore, we have been able to prove that images could be read just as linguistic texts are read (Abuya and Akinkulore 2012). In view of the fact that previous studies on social semiotic approach have focused on interpretation of visual images in relation to associated linguistic texts (see Olowu 2012, Ariyo 2013, Akinkulore and Abuya 2013, Abuya and Akinkulore 2012), we, hereby recommend MDA though social semiotic approach to all forms of images and illustrations without direct relation or dependence on linguistic text for meaning but social context solely, though, we acknowledge the fact that the linguistic text is part of the context but this could be considered as such if the particular linguistic text under reference does not accompany visual images. This research paper has successfully presented a shift from previous pattern by interpreting visual images of cover pages of selected editions of TELL magazine in relation to the social context solely.

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