



Role of Color and Visual Grammar in Memes and Adverts

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Abstract

In the context of visual images, the three main semiotic modes are the objects depicted, any text included, and the chosen color scheme. The process of analysing objects as part of visual grammar and text reflects well established concepts, but color has proved harder to create a clear analytic structure. This study looks at a series of posters, some developed as memes using quotes, some as conventional adverts to consider how the three modes interact and the role of color in the overall design. This found that there were some systemic differences in the dominant semiotic mode following the overall goal of the image and that the role of color was often the least important individual mode.

Keywords: Visual Grammar, Advertisements, Memes, Color, Semiotic Interpretation

INTRODUCTION

Visual images especially as a form of advertising have always had a degree of multimodality (Dastjerdi et al., 2012) often combining an image with text even in its earliest forms of a poster or page in a publication. In addition, color either as background to emphasise part of the image or to attract attention has always been part of such designs. These three modes interact and Kress and Leeuwen (2020) argue that with “the visual is always in constant interaction with one or more of the other modes” (p. 6) and seek to identify how this interaction builds up the overall meaning and how it is interpreted by a viewer. The growing reliance on online media has amplified the relative importance of the visual parts of an image as the main means to attract attention (Roberts & Philip, 2006) especially if it is placed on a social media site where many potential viewers may pay relatively little attention.

The traditional model of advertising is to ensure the viewer realises they are missing something and then can identify the product as the solution (Fennis & Stroebe, 2020). Hence, for example, the concept of thirst might be used to frame the problem and a given drink is then identified as the solution. In a political context, this could shift to seeking to show an another party is the problem and how the preferred party will resolve this (Sanz, 2013). However, increasingly visual images are being used as a form of meme where a slogan or quote is added over an existing image. The use of a background image as a placement for generated text and such ‘memes’ are increasingly common as a

communication device on digital media (Kaschek et al., 2006; Marchenko, 2020). Here the intent is not to emphasise the product but the text, even if the modes remain interactive and may well be chosen to be supportive of the desired message (Marchenko, 2020).

This study explores the use of color and also how that interacts with other elements of the image and any supporting text. The specific focus is a series of memes and adverts for coffee. This framing was chosen to explore whether there were differences in semiotic modes between them (in particular around the use of color).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meaning making when presented with a visual image relies on three elements. How the individual semiotic modes are interpreted (Jewitt, 2005; Martin & White, 2005), how they are combined through the process of intersemiosis (Iedema, 2003; Lim, 2021; Zahrani & Alhuthali, 2024), and the way in which this total image is interpreted through resemiosis (Iedema, 2003).

At the level of the individual mode, the semiotic interpretation of text is a well established field (Halliday, 1978) and such a grammar needs to take account of three main aspects of the social world (ideational function), actions and interactions (interpersonal function) and the semiotic entities (textual function) (Halliday, 1978). Visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) supplements this by identifying three major meta-functions, representational, interactive, and compositional meaning (Deng, 2023).

However, color is clearly an important part of the meaning making and also an area that is less well studied and where there is less clarity in how to interpret its role in the overall message (Harutyunyan, 2015; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Even more than text or images, culture plays an important role (Dohaei & Ketabi, 2015) in that a given color might have very different meanings dependent on overall culture or specific context. Thus, in many West European states, red is often used as a warning (and often as an instruction to stop) but it also has connotations of being a strong or powerful color (Roberts & Philip, 2006). Hence, a viewer needs to make a judgement as to which role the red is playing.

In practice, each of the modes of text, image and color has limits to what it can describe, but also they are rarely used in separation. Consequently, in text, the textual function may focus on the individual grammatical units, but even this has an ideation element, in that there is no universal grammar (and even within languages such as English there are often major differences across countries). So, the process of interpretation is always important and open to multiple perspectives and rules. This is amplified when multiple modes are in use and their interaction becomes important. In social semiotics, this process of complementation (Cuyckens et al., 2021; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) shares much with the concept of intersemiosis (Sonesson, 2017) as it captures the overall meaning making process (O'Halloran, 2023) as different modes are brought into the process. In this respect, the different modes (Liu, 2023) can be mutually supportive (they all share a similar meaning), bring in different aspects (some modes may add something missing elsewhere), or be contradictory whether by choice or poor design.

Which mode dominates (or if they all share a similar weight in meaning making) reflects both the goal of the designer and the type of audience it seeks to attract. If the advert is to be placed on an online platform such as Tiktok or Facebook, then an important goal is to readily attract attention. A conventional high street poster or advert in a newspaper (even if it is also digital) may well focus more on the implied message. Kress & van Leeuwen (2020) argue that, especially in on-line, digital, environment, increasingly image is coming to dominate in part as it is a medium that suits visual design but also due to the need to attract possibly very transient attention.

However, the more that image is central then, in turn, interpretation becomes more complex (or variable) as images are more culturally based than text. What is readily lacking is a formal grammatical structure to read the image and this makes the variable semiotic resources of the social group more important as they need to recognise the intended meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). In this sense, grammar is not the formal rules that structure text but how the depicted elements combine. This visual grammar has general principles that apply as much to an advert as a classical painting but, critically its not a universal grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Similarly, is an image readily understood by the target audience, whether it is rendered in a way that is expected are both themes in art appreciation, but also influence whether an audience will understand an advert or poster.

This means there is perhaps even more interaction between the speaker and the receiver (Deng, 2023) in visual grammar than in the interpretation of text. Thus the image chosen in the poster can be literal or draw on a shared cultural image (which was for example common in religious art before mass literacy). Equally, an image originally meant say to advertise a film may be repurposed for other purposes including humour or as part of a political process (Chen & Gao, 2014). In this sense, the audience has to both recognise the linkage and agree with the designer that it is appropriate which, again, relies on the social aspect of any interpretation.

Color, in turn, is both critical in the construction of the image and in framing the overall image. There are some rules, but the cultural interpretation is very important (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). So, in many instances red is used as a warning or indication of danger, but it can also be used to indicate strength. In many cultures black is used as an indicator of mourning or sadness but sometimes white fills this role. In effect, even more than text and image, there is a lack of readily existing grammar to interpret the role of color (Roberts & Philip, 2006). Kress and Leeuwen (2020) suggest that while color is often a separate mode it cannot be mapped onto Halliday's (1978) structure except in so far as certain colors (or combinations) reflect ideation in the form of corporate or national branding or common cartographical norms (such as using blue to designate water). Even in the context of maps, there are more often very local differences such as how transport lines are represented on different city maps.

The consequence is that an analysis of color depends in part on association, in other words, what the viewer typically links it to in a particular circumstance. However, equally important is how the color is made up using variously a "scale that runs from light to dark, another the scale that runs from saturated to desaturated, from high energy to low

energy, and so on" (Kress and Leeuwen 2002, p. 355). In other technical aspects, attributes such as dark/dull/light are formally reflected as hue, lightness and saturation (Harutyunyan, 2015).

The effect is that while it is possible to discuss the use of color in meaning making, it is, even more than images and text. It is contextualized. Even at the level of individual color in a given cultural context, there are no absolute rules (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) that can be applied. Even the commonly used taxonomy originally developed by Halliday (Halliday, 1978) needs to be caveated when used in practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

The focus of this study is on the use of color, but this has to be placed in the context of any text and images included (Dohaei & Ketabi, 2015). As noted above, there is a relatively well developed framework to explore the meaning making of text and images, but this is lacking in respect of color. Not least, as stressed (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) the role of color is very contextual and also interplays with other semiotic resources.

To explore how color interacts, eleven images were selected where an advert had had its original text replaced. In effect, these are all memes in the sense that the original design sets the scene for the chosen text. Four further images are considered with the original advert structure retained. Here, it is feasible that the three building blocks (text, images and color) might be more integrated and combined to project a desired image. The focus is not to discuss how the text and image are used in isolation, but to consider the three modes in combination with a particular focus on how color is being used.

The approach is essentially descriptive in that each image is analysed in its three components and these, in turn, are mapped onto text and visual grammar already studied. One goal is to consider if the discussion about color can advance the current understanding, in particular, whether the color is more integrated in some instances than others.

FINDINGS

Memes

Figure 1 shows a cup of coffee in a green cup on a wooden table (Adobe Stock, 2024). The overall image is made up of text on the left hand side, a green cup and a light brown background color. In this case the text and image are equally important, not least in how they refer to each other. The coffee matches the standard of being well made with color being less important.



Figure 1: Life is like a cup of coffee

Figure 2 comes from a website that offers a range of coffee related quotes that can be placed onto any chosen image (Fresca Coffee, 2024). In this case, only two semiotic modes are present (text and background) and text clearly dominates as the background color only exists to frame the chosen words.

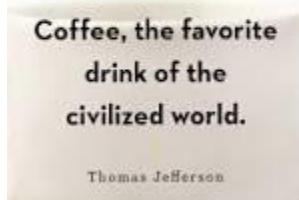


Figure 2: Coffee, the favourite drink

Figure 3 also comes from a website that similarly provides text that can be added to a suitable image (Damien., 2024). This is much more complex in composition, not least the font is not clear (making the text hard to read), there is a cup of coffee foregrounded, but the color usage is fragmented between brown, dark grey and light grey. The logic may be that the relatively confusing composition reflects the text suggesting that clarity can only be achieved once someone has had a cup of coffee. An alternative reading is that this is simply a poorly designed picture.



Figure 3: Life without coffee

Figure 4 is also drawn from a collection of quotes that can be used. It is hosted on pinterest (Museuly, 2019). The composition is simple with white text on a dark background and a cup of coffee in the foreground. In this case, text and color are the most important modes, presumably with the dark blue/black background indicating a bad mood till someone has drunk their coffee? Alternatively, the dark background may have been chosen simply as it then makes the text and main image clear.



Figure 4: A coffee a day

Figure 5 is taken from the same website as figure 3 (Damien., 2024) and again is complex in its composition. The text uses the same font and this time as white on a light grey background (so again not easy to read) and the overall image is dominated by the dark red coffee cup as the dominant semiotic mode. The goal is to match the meaning of the text to stare at something intently with the dark red perhaps invoking the concept of lust through the use of red in the foreground. This could be seen as a complementary image with color and text playing a key role rather than the image of the coffee cup as such.



Figure 5: I want someone

Figure 6 is again from a website that provides quotes around coffee drinking (Quotefancy, 2024). The dominant color is grey, either dark for the rocks or light for the background sea and sky. The intention seems to be that an image of where land falls away into the sea carries a suggestion of something being 'missing'. Of course, if the viewer happens to like cliffs and seascapes, they may not share this interpretation.



Figure 6: Without coffee

Figure 7 is taken from a website run by a company that offers various coffee related products (Martin-Harper, 2021). In some ways, it is similar to figure 2 being dominated by the text (which adapts a meme common on social media) set against a bright yellow background with a cup of coffee in the right hand corner.



Figure 7 A bad day without coffee

Figure 8 is taken from a website the promotes healthy eating (Linder, 2019). Although the image contains both multiple objects and text, it is relatively uncluttered. The white background is naturally neutral making the text easy to read and the objects are a coffee cup and items related to coffee making. There is no particular connection between text and image except possibly indicating that the process of making coffee can be complex. Critically, it is hard to relate the objects to the text, but feasible to see how the designer believes the text fits the objects shown.



Figure 8 Life is very much like coffee

Figure 9 is taken from a facebook page run by a cafe (Magnolia cafe, 2024). The black-grey background serves to highlight the coffee cup and book, suggesting that these pleasures lighten the day (and that reading can involve a degree of dreaming). The text emphasises the enjoyment to be derived from both coffee and books. Of the three semiotic modes (color, text and image), it is possibly the image that is least important, but overall, this shows how the various modes can be used to support each other.



Figure 9 Happiness is a Sunday morning

Figure 10 is again from a commercial site and one where a visitor can 'buy a quote' (Coffee Mill, 2024). The design is simple with a neutral background, a stylised cup of coffee set in orange (to draw attention) and emphasising the text.



Figure 10 Coffee has given me

The last meme (figure eleven) is taken from a website hosted by a firm that produces coffee making equipment (Coffee Mill, 2024). The dominant color is dark blue, presumably reflecting feeling depressed, with a partial image of a red coffee cup. The text is centrally placed and dominates.

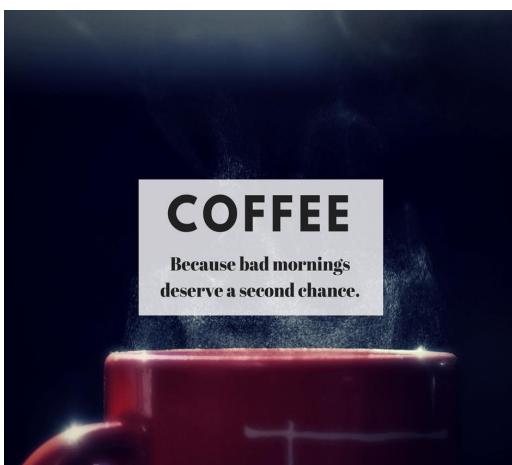


Figure 11 Coffee ... bad mornings

Adverts

Figure 12 is an advert produced by Nescafe and placed in the Times of India (Nescafe, 2017). The background is mostly grey which draws attention to the bright red coffee cup and the young woman staring out the window. The text is very much secondary, making reference to how a cup of coffee will keep one warm during the monsoon season.



Figure 12 Nescafe

Figure 13 is from the company MacCoffee, based in Kenya, and placed on Twitter (MacCoffee, 2024). The resulting image is dominated by the bright red background, reflecting the need to attract attention on a site where many users quickly scroll. The text makes an argument that if you are finding it hard to engage with Monday morning, then the solution is a cup of their coffee.



Figure 13 MacCoffee

Figure 14 is a classic advert from Macdonalds which is now part of a museum exhibit (MacDonalds, 2017). The background is black with a green lizard holding a cup of coffee. The text argues that their coffee is only made from the finest coffee beans. The result is a visually striking, incoherent, advert with the background simply serving to highlight the green lizard and the text adding little. The green lizard is typical of a type found in the region where those coffee beans are grown. In effect, the advert is designed to catch attention and for the reader to identify it as related to Macdonalds.



Figure 14 MacDonalds

The final figure is a mock up of an advert that emulates MacDonalds' style (MacDonalds, 2022) rather than an advert produced for use. The background is neutral and the main object shown is a typical cup of Macdonald's coffee. Here the text is dominant, not least as it seeks to carry the message that Macdonald's take relatively little care over their coffee and emphasise predictability over any individuality in preparation and serving.



Figure 15 MacDonalds (fake)

Summary

The focus in the analysis is on how the three semiotic modes of text, included objects and color interact rather than the grammar adopted by each individually. While it is sometimes suggested that text now takes a role secondary to color that is not borne out by these examples. To summarise the findings:

Table 1: Summary of Semiotic Modes

Fig.	Type	Dominant Color	Dominant Mode(s)
1	Meme	Light Brown	Text, Image
2	Meme	Light Grey	Text
3	Meme	Grey. Brown	Image, Text
4	Meme	Dark Blue	Color, Text
5	Meme	Red	Color, Text
6	Meme	Grey	Text, Image
7	Meme	Yellow	Text
8	Meme	White	Text
9	Meme	Black-Grey	Color, Text, Image
10	Meme	Off-white	Text
11	Meme	Dark Blue	Text
12	Advert	Grey	Image

13	Advert	Red	Color
14	Advert	Black - Green	Color
15	Advert	Light Grey	Text

The dominant mode across all 15 images is text, sometimes shared with other modes, but in six cases clearly dominant over the others. Where color is dominant (on its own or balanced) it tends to rely on strong color combinations such as black-green, black-grey, red or dark blue. However, this is not consistent as figure 11 relies on a dark blue color scheme, but text is the dominant semiotic mode. Only one figure (12) combines a lighter background with the object as the dominant semiotic mode. There, the red of the coffee cup catches attention even though the main color is a light grey.

Mostly where the dominant color is light (often shades of grey), this serves to emphasise the text, and to make that text easier to read. This breaks down for figures 2 and 4 where while the text is important, it is also hard to read (mainly the chosen font) and, in both cases, a very cluttered visual design.

Some colors re-occur and have similar intent, but this still requires a degree of judgement and interpretation by the viewer. Two images that talk about being in a bad mood (before drinking coffee) use a deep or dark blue background. However, this also points to the complication, they could be using a dark background simply as that approach makes any text or key image clear to the viewer (the contrast to figure 2 where the background color and font color merge), rather than drawing on any social connotation between 'being blue', unhappy and needing a coffee to cheer up.

This suggests that while color is important, the role is situational even simply within the image. In many cases, color plays the role of forming the background while the images and/or text dominate. The exception to this is figure 9 where color, image and text all have equal semiotic weight. The colors draw attention to both the images (book and coffee) and frame the text. The text relies heavily on the image for meaning making. In effect, it is a rare instance of a complementary approach to design across the three semiotic modes.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, color is central to visual design, even if, at the simplest, to provide the means to discriminate between background, text and any included images. Figures 2 and 4 above are examples of the problem that can follow from not allowing sufficient discrimination between overall background color and the color used for the font in that the text then becomes hard to read. However, color has a role well beyond ensuring that any included text is easy to read. It can be used to attract attention (either to the whole poster as in figure 13 or an element as in figure 12) and it is notable that red is used in both these instances. It can be used to imply mood (so dark blue is used to indicate someone feeling mildly depressed without their coffee). In other instances, differential color such as in figure 9 is used to draw the user's attention to the core images of books

and coffee. A contrast here is to figure 2 where there is no obvious focal point and the color plays no role in framing the picture.

The enduring problem is that while important, analysis of color is problematic. There are issues of aesthetics that may vary between viewers, perhaps some find figure 2 better composed than figure 9, this is, after all a choice. Equally, while there are rules around composition, sometimes an overall impact can be achieved by ignoring these conventions. The second problem is interpretation of color schemes. Two of the images rely on a deep blue background and an assumption is this is meant to invoke the relationship between 'being blue' and being depressed. However, an alternative is that the designer chose that background simply as it made the text and foregrounded image so much clearer.

The relative importance of color compared to text or image does show some variance between the memes and the real adverts. In the memes, text is often the dominant mode which relates to the intent of the overall composition. While the whole image is important, the intent is to create a framework for the chosen words. The adverts tend to be dominated either by the image or the chosen color scheme, reflecting a desire to attract the viewer's attention.

This supports Kress and Leeuwen's arguments that color is essentially contextual and interacts with any text or image present. It may, in some cases, be the dominant mode, but even here (such as figure 13) meaning making is heavily influenced by the other modes. At the moment, it is not really feasible to identify a clear grammar for interpreting color given its shifting role in respect to other semiotic modes.

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