

Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Caricatures about Electricity Shortages in Iraqi Facebook Pages

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Abstract

This paper evaluates some electricity-related caricatures selected from a number of Iraqi Facebook pages. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar framework, the study elucidates how deliberate visual pictures are produced to convey and spread ideas, beliefs, and identities in one of the most prominent forms of social media. Iraq's current state of affairs can be deduced from examining the caricatures concerning electricity. The study demonstrates this through several textual modes that enabled Iraqi caricature artists to convey their ideological stances to their audience.

Keywords: multimodal discourse analysis, caricatures, Facebook pages, visual grammar, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

Caricatures, a form of visual communication, aim to provide sociocultural meanings that can be construed within a wider critical context. The shift from verbal to visual communication has been the subject of debate regarding clarifying discursive implications. Caricatures are visual images that are naturalistic and coded in common sense (Kress et al., 1997; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). A caricature's primary function is to convey meaning and stimulate social and cultural ideas and behaviors. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p.165-6), recipients can comprehend these visual representations regardless of how much knowledge or scientific-technological training they have had. Studying Iraqi sociocultural caricatures in light of Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2006) Visual Grammar framework, this research aims to examine how well the framework describes the composition of Iraqi sociocultural caricatures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA) is a multi-dimensional method of analysis that focuses on "denotational" and "connotational" readings of discourse (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; O'Halloran et al., 2011). This method of analysis was developed by Kress and van Leeuwen. According to O'Halloran et al. (2011), connotational processes refer to the sociocultural, ideological beliefs and values, whereas the denotative processes recognize the literal meaning of what is being portrayed by the sociocultural, ideological values. The literal meaning of what is being presented is realized via denotative

processes. The phrase “second layer of semiotic meaning construction” accurately describes connotation (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001, p.96).

The study of visual and semiotic representations of caricatures is the focus of this article. The two methodologies, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodality are employed in this study. These two methods have been selected to investigate the visual discourse maintained in journalism. The works of Fairclough (1989, 1992) and the dominant critical examination of the notions of power and ideology by van Dijk are the primary sources of inspiration for this review of CDA-related literature (1997, 1998).

CDA is defined by Fairclough and Wodak (1997) as the analysis of real social interactions inside the context of their respective linguistic structures. To put it another way, CDA takes into account the complex relationship between language and culture. In a nutshell, it is a way to become involved in social life and social interactions (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258). According to van Dijk (1997a), this draws attention to the study's interdisciplinary nature, as it combines various points of view in its analysis to project many social problems. As a result, Multimodal Discourse Analysis uses both critical linguistics and visual grammar, maintaining its significance in integrating the two methodologies.

The method of multiple-mode discourse analysis is a critical practice emphasizing the significance of mixing visual images and concepts within verbal discourse. According to various academic sources (van Dijk, 1997b; Wodak, 2002; O'Halloran, 2008), multiple-mode discourse analysis can accommodate both the construction and portrayal of meaning. Their argument is based on the observation that linguistic constructions in a given context are not the only ones that can lead to the total meaning of texts and that visual structures also can express ideological meanings.

The necessity of using CDA in visual semiotics study is also emphasized by van Leeuwen (2009). By merging the two, van Leeuwen (2009) claims that proper discursive tactics may be used to perpetuate and explain social inequalities, injustice, and oppression. This is accomplished through the utilization of appropriate discursive methods.

Visual Grammar

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) conducted research based on Halliday's functional grammar to investigate the interpretations of images in visual communication in terms of the purpose in which they are encoded. Therefore, one can deduce that the functions of representation, interaction, and composition in functional grammar are analogous to those in visual grammar's ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. In terms of visual grammar, the representational structure portrays events, participants, and contexts; interactive relations assess power relations between the recipients; and compositional structure refers to the image's positioning and its semiotic variables structure.

In this regard, visual grammar is analogous to Halliday's metafunctions and representational attitude to the real world. According to Kress et al. (1997, p. 278), three requirements should be present in any discursive practice irrespective of its mode:

- to communicate and represent pertinent elements of the social relations of those engaged in communication.
- to communicate what the communicator intends to communicate about the events, the issue at hand, and their perceptions by representing them and communicating them.
- to make it possible to produce messages that are internally consistent as a text and externally consistent with relevant aspects of the semiotic environment (the so-called “context”).

In the same way that functional grammar is interpreted and is itself interpreted through culturally bound and social interactions, so too is visual grammar. Thus, according to van Leeuwen, social semiotic elements seem to be resources imposed upon our societies and are the means by which meaning is decoded. A complex condensing of cultural and social histories and a knowledge of contemporary conditions is used to interpret this meaning. (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 12).

Caricatures

According to Calder et al. (2000), caricatures’ importance lies in their representation of identities, attitudes, values, and stereotypes. Producers of caricatures can reflect psychological implications by recognizing semiotic elements produced (Calder et al., 2000; Slavney, 2004).

The caricature is a visual communicative discourse pursuing the transmission of meanings and implications. Caricature serves four functions entertainment; aggression reduction; agenda-setting and framing; and specific policy and history (De Sousa & Medhurst, 1981, p.124). Accordingly, caricature producers directly or indirectly seek to convey their ideologies via common semiotic components pursuing implication delivery and perception (De Sousa & Medhurst, 1981; Machin, 2007).

The representation of societal caricatures integrates a set of other linguistic theories to render the intended meaning its appropriate elucidation. Visualization in caricature is regarded as multi-tasking permitting linguistic utilization such as pragmatic incongruity, intertextuality, schema, and sexism, which render itself to a wide range of meanings.

Drawing its implication from Kress and van Leeuwen’s approach to visual grammar, this study looks for a practical expansion of this western-specific approach to studying Iraqi visual representations of caricatures in social media discourse. To perform a visual analysis of Iraqi caricatures, visual grammar is utilized as a tool for interpreting how such discourse is exploited in Iraqi social media.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Visual grammar and CDA, two social semiotic theories, are incorporated into the study’s theoretical framework. Halliday’s functional grammar (1978) and Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (1996, 2006) visual grammar thoroughly grasp the three meta-functions that visual pictures fulfill simultaneously.

CDA's empirical base (van Dijk, 1997) explains how texts produce power relations, ideologies, and other social practices.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study is conducted to address the following research question:

- How successful have Iraqi caricaturists on Facebook been in portraying the different aspects of the electricity problem in Iraq?

METHOD

The current study's data consist of six caricatures posted on several Iraqi Facebook pages that were retrieved on 16 June 2021. All caricatures are presented in their original colors. According to (Wang, 2014, p. 279), colors and visual features may be used to enhance ideological encoding in the visual semiosis.

The caricatures were chosen based on the following criteria:

- The data ought to provide direct semiotic allusions to the issues with electricity.
- The selection process ought to be devoid of any overt forms of prejudice.
- The perception of the caricatures is then classified according to the topic that the caricatures are connotatively representing.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

When it comes to caricatures, the viewer can choose what to focus on first. As a result, the pieces of the photographs may be interpreted in any sequence by the viewer, irrespective of what was predetermined. In addition, students choose which parts of the text to keep reading and which parts to put down for a second time. Thematically, these drawings show how caricaturists use the representational tools at their disposal to express their thoughts and the world they experience.

Efforts in the electrical industry have been ongoing for a long time. Looting and civil war in the years after the 2003 US-led invasion significantly harmed the country's infrastructure, which had already been destroyed during the 1990-91 Gulf War and the subsequent decade of international sanctions. Corrupt practices and poor leadership have slowed the industry's ability to restore and increase its capacity, even as demand has risen with population expansion and the widespread use of consumer electronics, such as air conditioners. The continued high levels of related gas flaring in the fuel supply of power plants have been another issue. Despite its best efforts, Iraq has made little progress in meeting the energy demands of its citizens. The Middle East's lowest per-capita electricity production, which is needed to power air conditioning, is still the case.

Caricature 1:



In Caricature 1, the participant is symbolically depicted. In the image, the official represents all elected Iraqi officials, government officials, members of parliament, etc., who came to power after 2003. The air conditioning unit addresses the official by looking at him (vector). Conversational interaction is conveyed by the verbal representation in the speech balloon, and the official is directly linked to the A.C. unit by his haughty head positioning and lack of eye contact (vector). Such representation mirrors superiority and the absence of mutual intimate interpersonal relations between the Iraqi people and their post-2003 officials.

The narrative depiction of a dynamic and dramatic caricature corresponds to the transactional relationship between the Iraqi official and the Iraqi people in this caricature. The representation of the official as talking to themselves represents their separation from the people they are supposed to serve. The look of surprise and disbelief on the face of the A.C. unit in the caricature reflects the absence of trust in what officials say, resulting from the repeatedly broken promises of all the governments that took power since 2003.

Before the U.S. invasion, the relationship between the ruler and the Iraqi people was often considered a dictatorial superior-inferior relationship. Caricature 1, with the official's posture and having him talk to himself, succeeds in connoting that not much has changed since then. Caricature 1, hence, exposes the current catastrophic situation in Iraq.

The speech contained in the conversation balloon, which is expressed in words and which, incidentally, is an exact quotation, communicates the hypocrisy of all Iraqi politicians who talk in the media and in their electoral programs about how they "feel severe pain" because of "my people's suffering" of extreme heat due to lack of electricity, faking all the affected face expressions of suffering and pain while they are living a life of luxury, represented in the caricature in the form of air conditioning system.

The caricature's meaning is conveyed through the information value provided by both the visual and verbal content. This meaning can only be perceived through the sociocultural norms presented by the visual semiotic modes.

Caricature 2:



In Caricature 2, the two participants are again symbolically depicted. In the image, the official represents all newly elected Iraqi officials. The other participant represents either the official's corrupt inferior employees who run the electricity-related government departments or the corrupt private sector electricity generator owners who provide electric power for excessive amounts of money while receiving subsidized fuel from the government. Conversational interaction is conveyed by the verbal representation in the speech balloon, and the official is linked to his inferior employee/private sector partners by their arm positioning and the tender look by the official, which both betray the level of collusion and partnership in corruption with regards to the electricity sector.

The verbalization of the utterance enclosed in the dialogue balloon, where the official tells his inferior electricity-sector employee that now that the elections are over, you can do "your business," implies that politicians are using the electricity problem as an electoral blackmailing card that they utilize during the election period, and that as soon as they secure their election, they allow corrupt officials and blood-sucking generator owners to do as they like. The written caption "Unprogrammed Power Cuts" further exposes the perceived corruption in electricity-related government departments, which claim that the power cuts that people are suffering from are organized on an equal and fair basis as per a government-approved program, while the caption shows that no such programming is done, betraying foul play on the part of the government departments.

Again, the combination of the visual and verbal content collaboratively achieves the purpose of conveying the meaning of the caricature.

Caricature 3:



Unlike caricatures (1) and (2), Caricature 3 tackles a different aspect of the electric power problem in Iraq. The setting here is a classroom representing all classrooms in Iraqi schools. The caricature shows some of the different types of suffering those Iraqi students and teachers have due to the absence of electric power. The candle on the teacher's desk shows one such aspect: classrooms, houses, markets, etc., suffering total darkness for hours daily unless they pay excessive fees to private sector generator owners. The freezing teacher, covered in a blanket, shows yet another type of suffering, i.e., students and people in general, unable to get desperately needed air conditioning in the severe Iraqi weather. The unhappy, unmotivating look on the teacher's and the student's faces is another evidence of how this problem affects the educational process in Iraq.

The verbalization of the utterance enclosed in the dialogue balloon, where the student is apparently describing the Iraqi climate as "hot and dark in summer; cold and dark in winter," is further proof that this problem is not a temporary, season-specific one; rather it is a recurrent an issue that has persisted for decades with no signs of improvement in the future. So, recurrent that it has become part of Iraq's climate description. Choosing a small kid may also refer to the fact that there is a new generation in Iraq now that has grown up with these problems and has no idea how the rest of the world lives where continued electricity supply is considered a fact of life, not a luxury. The caption at the top of the caricature reaffirms the message of the caricature about the continued recurrence of the electric power cuts.

Caricature 4:



Caricature 4 uses two visual symbols with no verbalized utterances in dialogue balloons. First, there is the light bulb which symbolizes not only the long-awaited continued supply of electric power but more probably represents the corrupt officials in charge of the electricity sector in Iraq. On the other side, there are the handcuffs which most probably symbolize the law enforcement and judicial authorities who need to play their part in fighting corruption in this important sector. The caption, "Article 4 electricity," is a pun made with reference to Article 4 of the Iraqi Anti-Terrorism Law of 2005, which is often used for prosecuting people accused of committing terrorist acts. The message is that the damage caused by corrupt officials responsible for the electricity problem in Iraq is no less catastrophic than that caused by terrorists and that these corrupt officials need to be prosecuted under the terms of this article. The choice of the red color for number 4 is another visual cue that the caricaturist is using to assert the urgency of the situation and probably as a strong warning to those officials of the gravity of what they are doing to the Iraqi people.

Caricature 5:



Caricature 5 uses one visual symbol with a caption but no verbalized dialogue balloons. The visual symbol is a light bulb with a turtle's body. The light bulb/turtle has the caption "Ministry of Electricity" on its back. The symbolism is very explicit, and the message regarding the slowness and delay of the ministry of electricity in finding solutions for the electricity problem can easily be understood by the reader, especially since turtles are universally associated with the notion of being slow. The caption at the top of the picture reads, "The Ministry of Electricity attempts to provide justifications for its delay," which enhances the tardiness message provided by the visual cues. The curved lines around the body of the light bulb/turtle, giving it an inflated look, may symbolize the large number of employees working at the ministry and the large sums of money annually allocated for the ministry's projects with no real concrete results.

Caricature 6:

Finally, in caricature 6, we see two electricity poles, and a man is sitting on the electricity cables and using them as a swing. The caption at the top reads, “Between generator owners and the national electricity grid.” One of the two electricity poles is shabby-looking, most probably representing the public sector national electricity grid, whereas the other pole looks relatively in a better condition, symbolizing privately owned generators. The swinging action very eloquently symbolizes what the Iraqi citizen has been going through daily for years now, with power cuts on an hourly basis, constantly switching between the national grid and generator electricity, and being required to pay for both parties for their low-quality service every month. The miserable, even electrified look on the man’s face depicts how people feel about their current situation

CONCLUSION

Electricity-related caricatures in Iraqi Facebook pages show and reflect profound awareness of the gravity of the problems caused by the absence of continuous power supply in Iraq and the great level of suffering it is causing people. The various verbal and visual cues used in these caricatures have successfully managed to convey this level of awareness of these problems, as well as the awareness of who is behind these problems and what people must do to put an end to this tragic situation.

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