



The Verbal and the Non-Verbal: Reading Graphic Tales

- Unnati Singh • Smriti Choudhary • Alka
- Devina Krishna

Received : November 2019

Accepted : March 2020

Corresponding Author : Devina Krishna

Abstract : *This study explores the non-verbal language paired with verbal language as a part of linguistic study, its impact on literature and its relevance in the contemporary world through a detailed analysis of three pioneering graphic novels, Art Spiegelman's 'Maus' (1980-1991), Marjane Satrapi's 'Persepolis' (2000-2004), and Amruta Patil's 'Kari' (2012). It aims to analyse the linguistic aspect of visual language in graphic novels and, understand its significance in our digital world. Our objective is to study the combination of visual and verbal language which created a new genre in the world of literature, called Graphic Novels, which is closer to*

common people due to its easy-to-understand language and attention-grasping format.

Keywords: *Visual language, Verbal language, Comic Strips, Graphic Novels, Linguistics, Illustrations.*

Introduction :

Pictures and written words have always been considered two separate forms of communication, that is, non-verbal communication and verbal communication, respectively. While the existence of verbal language is apparent in our daily lives and literature, we are always surrounded by non-verbal language and/or visual stimuli in the form of emojis, traffic signals, graphs, etc., which convey information much easily. The visual language acts as a means of effective communication and is relevant in the contemporary world of emojis, social network and television channels, that is, a digital world, where the attention span of the masses has decreased sharply.

A combination of the visual and the verbal language is found in Graphic Novels that addresses serious social, historical, political and individual issues in an attention-grasping format. Graphic novels emerged out of comic books– a genre which employed the combination of the verbal (dialogues) and the non-verbal (drawing, symbols, images, paintings, etc.) and which gained widespread popularity in the 20th century.

Unnati Singh

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2017-2020,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Smriti Choudhary

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2017-2020,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Alka

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2017-2020,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Devina Krishna

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Patna Women's College, Bailey Road,
Patna - 800001, Bihar, India
E mail - krishna.devina@gmail.com

Despite its widespread popularity, comic books were not taken seriously by critics and linguists due to the fantastic issues they addressed. The attractive, attention-grasping language of comic books was ignored on the ground of being trivial, child-like and, simply, because images and drawings were not considered a part of linguistic studies.

However, drawings and pictures convey meanings as effectively as spoken or written language. In fact, most of our digital communication happens through visual language by using emojis, pictures, illustrations, logos, etc.

The publication of graphic novels and visual linguists such as Will Eisner and Neil Cohn brought the language of the comics to the forefront. In works like *'Comics, Linguistics, and Visual Language'*, Cohn draws a parallel between the verbal and the visual language by applying tools of verbal linguistics to the language used in comics.

Visual Language :

The term visual language in relation to vision defines the perception, comprehension and production of visible signs. People can visualize their thinking as easily as they can verbalize it.

Humans primarily use three faculties to express: sound, body movement and creating graphic representations. Now, if any of these techniques takes on a grammar (a system governed by rules), that form becomes a type of language. The grammar-bound sounds and body movements become spoken language and sign language, respectively. The structured sequential images become visual language.

The human species has developed literacy (communication through writing and reading) and numeracy (communication through numbers) though the visual aspect of human communication, referred to as graphicacy, is still an obscure term. In today's digital world, the importance of competency to communicate through visuals and graphics is on a par with literacy and numeracy, which makes visual language an important field of study for linguists.

When visual language combines with written language, it gives birth to what we know as graphic novels. They are usually as long as a conventional novel, enabling the writer to tell a more complex story; and are

aimed at an adult audience, swerving away from juvenile genres such as funny animals, superheroes, or gag humour.

Fundamental questions associated with exploration in the field of linguistics and its sub-branches can also be applied to the study of visual language. Questions such as how is the system organised, how is the meaning conveyed, how do perceivers understand meaning, can be answered in verbal as well as graphic forms, and hence, analogies can be formed between the verbal and graphic modalities.

If we see visual language as just another cognitive capacity, we can analyse its structure, and the meaning this structure is trying to convey. For this purpose, we may draw analogies, and see how both spoken language and visual languages, use similar units for organisation and function.

Graphetics: Just as phonetics is concerned with the study of speech sounds, the basic architectural unit of language (phonemes), graphetics in visual languages studies the perception of meaning through the arrangement of its fundamental units (graphemes). Just as verbal languages use sound units to create words, the visual language also uses certain basic structures such as dots, lines, spirals, all of which combine to form images. Some speech combinations, such as 'tlk' in English language, are not accepted, likewise, ill-formed combinations of lines and dots pose restrictions in comprehension of meaning of the visual.

Photology: The study of photology accounts for not only combination of graphemes to form basic shapes, but also of combination of these graphic shapes all the way up to form complete scenes. Equivalently, sounds in verbal language feature phonological combinations within words, sentences, and are even linked with intonation, metrical structure, and prosody.

Morphology: In spoken languages, some morphemes don't have a meaning unless they are combined with other words. For instance, the morpheme "-ness" makes no sense when it stands on its own. To create a meaning, it must be added to words like "happy" or "sad" to create "happiness" or "sadness". Similarly, in the visual language, some elements like word bubbles are irrelevant unless they are affixed to a root object. Hence, we can note that these graphical elements and

root-affixes share similar relationships in their bound and free form.

Semantics: The study of meanings of words, and relations between them is perhaps the subfield of linguistics which can be most accurately applied to visual languages. Some semantic phenomenon such as metonymy and synecdoche commonly appear in comics.

Syntax: The crux of the visual language's linguistic examination is its syntax – the feature of a language that confirms which elements can or cannot combine together to form logical and systematic sequence. In linguistics, syntax analyses the grouping of words and phrases into coherent sentences. In the visual language too, syntax refers to the structural organisation of meaningful units into a combinatorial sequence of images.

Scott McCloud is credited as the first to examine the sequential nature of visual language. He categorised the panel transitions into six types:

1. Action to action: It shows a single subject passing through a sequence of actions.
2. Moment to moment: It shows a short interval of time, with basic movements.
3. Subject to subject: The transition stays within a specific scene, and they require more involvement of readers.
4. Scene to scene: It shows a spanned time or space.
5. Aspect to aspect: It takes on an idea or a mood. In this instance, the aspect focussed on is time.
6. Non sequitur: The panels have no logical relationships with each other.

Structuralism: For the structuralists, the culture we are a part of can be 'read' like a language.

'Language' is also seen as a set of cultural codes, and comics are a place where these cultural codes can be found, and reduced to minimal units.

History of Graphic novels:

A chronological series of adjacent drawn images, usually compiled horizontally for the purpose of storytelling, is known as comic strips. Emerged as illustrated stories, its history can be traced to the 18th century, as in '*The Adventure of Peregrine Pickle*' (1751) by Tobias

Smollett. The non-verbal language made its debut in the world of literature and language through these illustrated stories and comic books.

Comics have their origin in 'the sequential art' – a term used by Will Eisner in 1985, defined as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response."

Comic strips became the area of interest for the Swiss author and caricature artist, Rodolphe Topffer, who is usually considered as the father of the modern comic. One of his first works, '*Histoire de M. Vieux Bois*' (1827), eventually inspired subsequent generations of comic artists.



Fig. A page from *Historie de M. Vieux Bois*

Appearance of comic strips on the newspaper marked a new achievement. The first newspaper comic strip, '*The Yellow Kid*', was produced by Richard Felton Outcault in 1895, a pioneer of the modern comic strip.

The revolution of printing press ignited the development of comic strips. Comic strips gradually came to the forefront. Newspaper became a large arena for the exhibition of comic strips; divided into daily strips and Sunday strips.

Comic strips gave birth to comic books defined as a magazine that consists of comics art in the form of sequential juxtaposed panels that represent individual scenes. The first comic book appeared in 1935 and was a reprinting of earlier comic strips.

With the arrival of comic books, comic strips achieved their own genre. Comic books caught an uproar and gained popularity in a short time but the genre remained confined to a certain category of people and was not taken seriously by literary critics. Its language was not addressed as a subject of linguistic interest.

The scenario began to change in the late 20th century, when artists began to use the language of the comic book (the combination of the visual and the verbal) to present serious issues. The fantasy was switched with real life incidents. This metamorphosis of comic books gave birth to Graphic Novels.

Amalgamation of writer and artist delivered the combination of images and words for the graphic narrative. The sense of seriousness and ambition stretched the line of difference between the usual comic strips and graphic novels.

The graphic narrative parallels the verbal and the non-verbal modalities of linguistics. The intrusion of visual language enhances the meaning of textual linguistic information. With the combination of words and images, two of the primal building blocks for communication, the graphic novel gave a new definition to the term multi-modality and a different ground for linguists to experiment.

Maus :

Published between 1980-1991, in two volumes, 'Maus' by Art Spiegelman is considered by many to be the first true graphic novel. A graphic memoir of Spiegelman's parents—Vladek and Anja—who were persecuted by the Nazis, brought about a revolution that led the American readers as well as literary critics towards considering comics as a serious art form. By claiming the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, 'Maus' set a milestone for other comic artists to chase.

'Maus' is an exceptionally sensible book that deals with several sensitive issues besides the central theme of holocaust, such as stereotypes of nationalism, human bonding, father-son relationship, and life after war.

Written in a conventional comic book style with a traditional use of panels, gutters and speech bubbles, it is the theme, the content and the narrative style of 'Maus' which differentiates it from an ordinary comic book. There is a constant flux in the narrative as it keeps oscillating between the present and the past. The plot is woven finely with proper description of events that employs a dexterous use of both images and words.

Spiegelman's characterisation technique is one of the best elements of 'Maus'.

He draws the Jews as mice and the Nazis as cats to portray the Jews as victim and the Nazis as offender.



Similarly, the Poles are drawn as pigs, the Americans as dogs, the French as frogs, the Swedes as dears with horns and the Gypsy as butterfly.

The animals not only act as metaphors which makes it easier for the readers to identify the general traits of the people of a particular race with those of particular animals, but also provide a safe emotional distance for the reader to be able to follow the moving story of the holocaust without getting overwhelmed.

Also, instead of having drawn just random human faces which would question the authenticity of the book, Spiegelman took refuge in abstract characters.

'Maus' makes significant use of visuals like maps and diagrams to replace the verbal and precisely describe ghettos, prisoner-of-war camps, concentration camps and hiding places.

Concentration camp (left) and Hiding Place (right):



Visuals are also employed to convey serious circumstances in the novel. Where a conventional novel would have taken multiple pages to convey Art's depression and alienation after the success of 'Maus I', here it is done equally impactfully by show Art seated over a pile of dead Jews. We also see his size decreasing in consecutive panels describing the state of his conscience.



The entire novel is drawn in black and white hatched panels, intentionally using a simple style that heightens the blunt impact of the content, with colours appearing only on the covers of the book. The title of the book ‘*Maus*’ is written in red colour in a font that is suggestive of blood marks. On the cover of the second volume the typical blue and white striped costume of Jews in concentration camp is drawn.

The novel ‘*Maus*’ is a fine example of graphic novel which shows the efficacy of the visual and the verbal paired together to narrate an incident or story.

Persepolis :

Published in two volumes, ‘*Persepolis*’ is a graphic autobiography by Marjane Satrapi.

Reminder of “precarity of survival” in political and social situation, the novel depicts the childhood of the author.

Woven in verbal narration and visual experience, a meeting of word and pictures, ‘*Persepolis*’ draws the minute details of the author and her family history against a dramatic backdrop of a despotic regime. ‘*Persepolis*’ heavily deals with the idea of identity– a search for identity of the author, her family or that of Iran or the West.

Marjane Satrapi’s portrayal of characters is simple in nature with the lack of colour that negates a sense of individuality. The female characters including the protagonist are shown wearing veils which later on becomes a symbol of oppression in the name of religion.



The despotic ruler is drawn as a serpent to show the evil power and chaos.

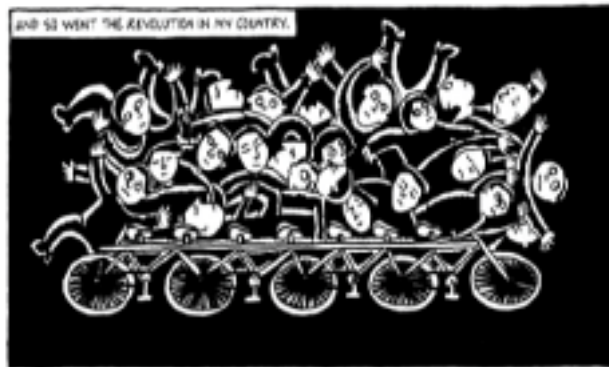


The novel follows traditional comic book style with sequential use of panels and speech bubbles in the novel.

Portrayed in achromatic palette, the illustrations in the novel are filled with deep meaning and emotions. With no shading or colour, the black and white colour creates a contrast–black stands for authority, power and oppressive regime whereas white symbolizes neutrality, purity, and call for freedom.



The visual element overpowers the verbal space in the novel. During conversations related to the past, the events being discussed are drawn in the background for a better understanding, a technique unique to the visual language. The revolution is illustrated as people riding a bicycle with multiple wheels and pedals depicting each person’s contribution towards it.

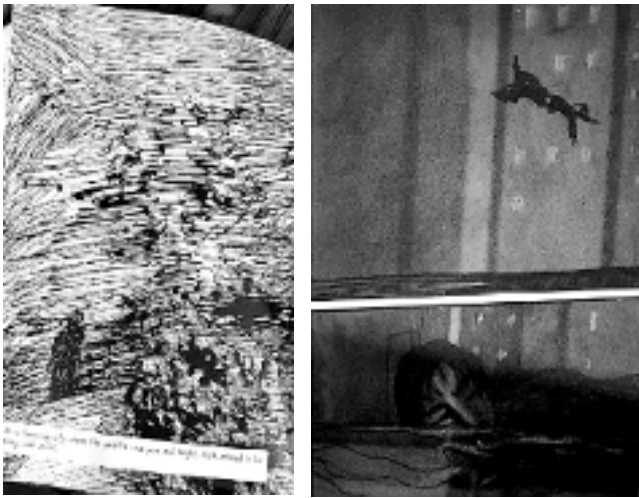


‘*Persepolis*’ is a project in multimodal processing. Marjane Satrapi’s novel shows that words and images live in a symbiotic relationship with each other.

Kari :

Written in 2008 by Amruta Patil, '*Kari*' is a novel about life of a homosexual woman in a heteronormative metropolitan urban set-up. It can be called experimental as the techniques it uses are not conventionally found in graphic novels. The plot is loosely arranged, and time and space are often distorted. This hints at a possibility of multiple readings of the text.

Patil uses colour sparingly, with the major part of the book illustrated in black and white sketches. The colour scheme effectively represents Kari's state of mind throughout the novel. She uses a scrapbook style illustration at certain places where there is a shift in mood. Kari's claustrophobic life has been captured in ink, marker, charcoal, oil bar, crayon, and found images.



Patil has presented a part of Kari's personality in her sketches. She has been drawn with arched eyebrows which give her a fearless look, but also hints that she is susceptible to being hurt but can rise above it.



Patil uses her own handwriting instead of a pre-set font which gives it a diary like presentation. This writing style also aides in stream of consciousness technique which gives us insights in Kari's mind. At various places in the book, Patil has replaced verbal language to use only visuals to bring forward certain messages. For example, in the scene where Kari first meets Ruth, she draws only their eyes looking at each other. It perfectly sets the atmosphere for a romantic encounter without the use of words at all.



Amruta Patil uses graphic novel as a medium of her minimalist social commentary. The multimodality of this genre provides a stage for Patil to express her literary genius through her poetic language along with her dark and gothic style of art.

Findings :

A survey was conducted to understand the perception of readers towards the visual language as a medium of communication and their acquaintance with graphic novels among 32 students of varying educational qualifications. Among the participants, 71.9% had read graphic novels. According to them, graphic novels gained popularity due to their precise form, attractiveness and quality content. They also recognised various tools used in graphic novels as literary tools, such as, speech bubbles, colours, shading, visual symbols, font style and size, etc.

When talking about the visual language, all respondents, except one felt that it can be considered a branch of language. They recognised paintings, drawings, comic strips, emojis, graffiti as visual language. They felt that the visual language is easier to

visualise, and hence can be used as a learning tool in classrooms. The participants noted that it is easier to understand and the use of symbolism is also more apparent in the visual language.

The survey showed an increasing awareness among readers regarding graphic novels and efficacy of the visual language in our daily lives. The precise and attractive format of graphic novels encourages readership. It shows a newfound consciousness among readers regarding the utility of graphic novels in propagating ideas to the masses effectively.

Conclusion :

Graphic novels fuse the two essential elements of linguistics, that is, the verbal language and the visual language to create a long-lasting impact on the reader. They have made literature appealing to common people. Novelists like Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi and Amruta Patil, all belonging to different countries and different social backgrounds have taken this genre to new heights through their revolutionary works- like *'Maus'*, *'Persepolis'* and *'Kari'*, respectively. *'Maus'*, considered by many to be the first true graphic novel, deals with the sensitive issue of holocaust with a rare artistic exuberance. *'Persepolis'*, an autobiographical novel, portrays Iran during revolution. *'Kari'* is a tale of a homosexual millennial living in a heteronormative society, her failed suicide attempt and how it served to help her develop into a better version of herself. All these novels highlight the importance of visual or non-verbal language as a means of communication, and how the visual language is an integral part of linguistics and is relevant in our contemporary world.

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