What Do Images Mean in Visual Semiotics?

Veysel Kılıç[1]
Zekiye Sarıkartal[2]

ABSTRACT

"There can be no words without images." (Aristotle)

We all live in a visually surrounded world. We are intensively surrounded by exciting and motivating images. This is visual communication, which doesn't include language codes in a sense. The production of meaning from visual objects can be evaluated and examined with the help of semiotics. Images mean everything. Commercials and visual objects mean lots of things without using language codes. This paper offers a kind of analytical perspective for understanding and producing meaning from visual objects with a special reference to semiotics.

Keywords: *Semiotics, Code, Icon, Index, Image, Visual Semiotics*

Görsel Göstergebilimde İmgelerin Anlamı Nedir?

ÖZET

"Hiçbir sözcük imgesiz olamaz." (Aristoteles)

Görsel bir dünyada yaşıyoruz. Yoğun olarak hoş ve ilham verici imgeler tarafından çevriliyiz. Bu, bir bakıma dil kodlarını içermeyen görsel iletişim. Görsel nesnelerden anlam üretimi göstergebilim yardımıyla değerlendirilebilir ve incelenebilir. İmgeler herşeyi ifade eder. Reklamlar ve görsel nesneler dilsel kodları kullanmadan pek çok mana barındırabilir. Bu makale, görsel nesneleri anlama ve anlam üretme üstüne, göstergebilimi referansalara analilitik bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Göstergebilim, Kod, Ikon, Index, Imge, Görsel Göstergebilim*

[1] **(Prof. Dr.),** Mardin Artuklu Üniversitesi, Güzel Sanatlar Fakültesi
[2] **(Prof. Dr.),** Mardin Artuklu Üniversitesi, Güzel Sanatlar Fakültesi, s.zekiye@gmail.com

*"One picture is worth a thousand words.
Yes, but only if you look at the picture and
say or think the thousand words."*
William Saroyan

Introduction

Communication is an act. It is the act of transferring meaningful signs from one party to another. Apparently, there are various forms, means and categories of communication. A message, speaker's intention

is sent through a proper channel to receiver's ear. Speaker first thinks of his message, his intention then he chooses appropriate grammatical rules and vocabulary–language codes and articulates them. The receiver receives this message; he first tries to detect the sounds and then language codes in order to comprehend the message. In other words; speaker encodes the message and receiver decodes it. Effective communication is the one, which minimizes potential misunderstanding. In the era of information, we have to send, receive and process lots of messages everyday via different channels. When we send messages, we don't only send language codes; we add our emotion to the messages as well. In an effective communication we are supposed to understand the emotion of the sender behind the message. According to Baudrillard successive phases of the image are; *"It is the reflection of basic reality. It makes any perverts as basic reality. It bears no relation to any reality. Whatever it is, its own pure simulacrum."* (Baudrillard, 1988: 170)

Among various communication tools human language-natural language is the most effective and sophisticated means of communication. Human language is different from other communication models or means because it is unique.

It has got unique properties of which the communication models lack. According to George Yule, a natural language has some unique properties. These properties distinguish human language from other communication systems. They are:

Displacement: Language is independent from time and place. Human language refers to the present, past and future. We can also communicate with people those who are thousands of miles far from us.

Productivity/Creativity: Human beings are continually creating new expressions and novel utterances by manipulating their linguistic resources to describe new objects and situations. This property is described as productivity or creativity.

If we internalize the rules and the basic vocabulary of our mother tongue, we can produce infinite number of sentences, which we have not heard before, and we can utter sentences which we have not uttered before, because language is open-ended. It also can create new words when the situation demands.

Cultural Transmission: We learn everything from our ancestors via language. Although we may have inherited physical features from our parents, we do not inherit their language. On the contrary, we acquire language in a cultural situation with other speakers. This process, whereby, a language handed down from on generation to next is described as cultural transformation.

Duality: Human language is organized at levels or layers simultaneously. This property is called duality. In speech production, we have a physical level at which we produce individual speech sounds like /n/, /b/, /i/. As individual sounds, none of these discrete has any intrinsic meaning. In a particular combination, we have meaningful units such as *bin* and *nib.*

Arbitrariness: There is no logical relation between signifier and signified. The connection is quite arbitrary; the aspect of relationship between linguistic signs and objects in the world is called arbitrariness. In other words, there is no logical connection between what comes out of our mouths and what they refer to in the world.

Semiotics: Semiotics or semiology is concerned with meaning. In other words; how meaning is represented in its broadest sense, it generates meanings or processes meaning by which readers or viewers comprehend or attribute meaning. Representation of meaning is realized by language, images and objects. Semiotics can also offer a useful perspective about formalist analysis. Semiotic analysis can be applied to literary texts as well as visual objects. Semiotic analysis, in effect, acknowledges some variable relationships. It is the study of signs and signifying practices. *"Semiotics studies how this referring results from previously established social convention."* (Eco, 1976: 16) A sign can be defined basically as an entity such as words, images and objects. A sign refers to something else other than itself. Signifying practices simply refers to how rather than what meaning is produced and finally the social convention with meaning is called a code.

The founders of semiotics are Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sander Peirce. Saussure is the founder of linguistics and semiotics both as sciences, which study the role of signs as a part of social life. Actually the origin of semiotics can be linked to structuralism, which is a method of analysis that looks for deeper structure and meaning behind the surface structure. According to structuralisms' all phenomena are ruled by some unseen rules.

American linguist Chomsky says that every sentence has got two structures; surface structure and deep structure. In order to get the meaning of a sentence, we have to reveal the meaning from deep structure, so structuralism tries to reveal the hidden rules, which organize anything from how people interact in particular social context. The structural semiotics is more concerned with the relation of elements to each other. *"Semiotics studies how this referring results from previously established social convention."* (Eco, 1976: 16)

Semiotics is often employed in the analysis of the text. Text doesn't necessarily mean written language. In the broadest sense, anything has got a message can be defined as text. Furthermore; written language, movies, films, pictures etc. are texts, shortly a text can exist in any medium verbal and non-verbal.

Some other approaches to textual analysis other than semiotic approach are rhetorical analysis, discourse analysis and content analysis. Semiotics is also very closely affiliated with cultural studies; content analysis is rather well established within the mainstream tradition of social science research.

Although content analysis concerns a quantitative approach to the analysis of manifest contents of media texts, semiotics is rarely quantitative and often involves a rejection of such approaches.

A social semiotic would also emphasize the importance of the significance, which readers attach to signs within a text. Saussure saw linguistics as a branch of semiotics because semiotics is concerned to stress the social aspect of signification, its practical, aesthetic or ideological use in interpersonal communication; there meaning is constructed as semantic value produced through actually shared codes.
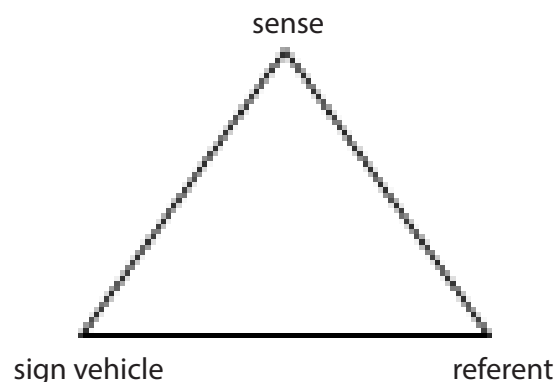
Signs

The study of signs is the study of construction and maintenance of reality. *"We only think in signs."* (Peirce, 1931: 58) Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. No sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs, because the value of signs is determined by the relationships between the sign and other signs within a system as a whole. The signs are organized into codes paradigmatically and syntagmatically. The meaning of a sign is determined mainly by its relationship to other signs. The study of codes emphasizes the social dimension of communication. Shortly, the word code means a signifying system.

Saussure defined this sign to the relationship between signifier, which carries or produces meaning and the signified, which is the meaning itself. The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. Arbitrariness is one of the unique properties of language. The arbitrariness of the sign is a radical concept because it proposes the autonomy of language in relation to reality.

There is no one-to-one link between signifier and signified; signs have multiple meanings rather than single meanings. Signifiers change from culture to culture. Convention is the social dimension of signs; it is the agreement among the users about the appropriate uses of and responses to sign. The relationship between one's concept of fishers and the physical reality of fish is signification; it is one's way of giving meaning to the world of understanding it.

Peirce classified signs in terms of **symbol, icon** and **index.** Signs can be classified in terms of these three modes without reference to the purpose of their users within particular context. A sign may consequently be treated as symbolic by one person, as iconic by another and as indexical by the third.

sense

sign vehicle   referent

Sense: The sense he made of sign
Sign vehicle: The form of the sign
Referent: What the sign stands for

Saussure's model of signification:

Sign is a concept of

Signifier (physical existence of sign)   Signified (mental concept)
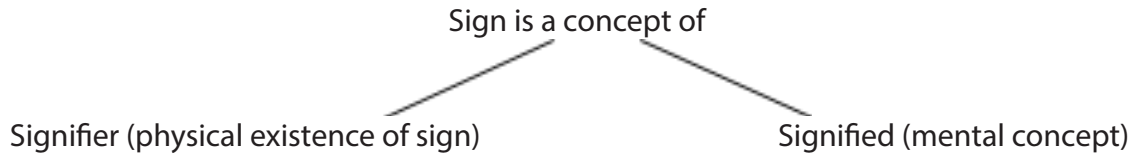
Signification: is the external reality of meaning

Symbol

A mode in which the signifier doesn't resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional, so that the relationship must be learned; for instance, language in general (plus specific languages, alphabetical letters, punctuation marks, words, phrases and sentences) numbers, Mors codes, traffic lights, national flags. Symbol is the situation in which signifier doesn't resemble the signified. Signifier is the arbitrary convention of signified.

Icon

A mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified (recognizable looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling) being similar in possessing some of its qualities: For instance; a portrait, a cartoon, a scale model, onomatopoeia, metaphor, realistic sounds in programed music, sound effects in radio drama, dubbed film sound track, imitative gestures and sound and music. *"Thus iconic signs are particularly ruled by convention but are at the same time motivated; some of them refer to an established stylistic rule, while others appear to propose a new rule."* (Eco, 1979: 16)

Index

A mode in which signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way physically or casually to be signified-this link can be observed or inferred: e.g. pastoral signs

(smoke, thunder, footprints, echoes, non-synthetic odors, flavor and medical symptoms, signals, pointers and recordings, all words, sentences, books and other conventional signs or symbols… It is the effect of what is filmed. As Peirce says we think only with signs. Nevertheless, anything cannot be labeled as a sign as long as it is not interpreted as a sign. Signifier can be interpreted as a physical aspect of sign. Both signifier and signified are the forms rather than content. Signifier is interpreted as the content of sign.

According to Hjelmslev signifier is expression, signified is content. Barthes referred specifically to non-linguistic signs *"as being so open to interpretation that they constitute a floating chain of signifieds."* (Barthes, 1999: 39) A sign is also something physically perceived by our senses; it refers to something other than itself; and it depends on recognition by its users than it is a sign. (Fiske, 41).

Language is experienced as nomenclature; its existence precedes our understanding of the world. Words seem to be symbols for things because things are inconceivable outside the system of differences, which constitutes the language. Yet even an image is not what it represents, the presence of an image marks the absence of its referent.

The difference between signifier and signi-fied is fundamental. Nevertheless; when the signifiers are experienced as highly realistic as in the case of photography and film and it is particularly easy to slip into regarding them as identical with their signifieds.

Similarly, these very things seem to be rep-resented in mind in an autonomous realm of thought because thought in the essence symbolic, dependent on the differences brought about by the symbolic order. And so language is overlooked or suppressed in favor of a quest for meaning in experience or in the mind. The world of things and sub-jectivity then becomes the twin guarantors of truth.

Signification:

In semiotics, sign functions syntagmati-cally (horizontally) and paradigmatically (vertically). The essence of pragmatics is the understanding of how sign works in the linguistic system. The system is related to the reader or viewer and his/her social status and his culture and background in-formation. From this token, it is possible to say that the same sentence likely conveys different contexts.

The interaction between text and reader, interaction between reader and writer is determined by conventions. Interactive ideas or messages can be analyzed by the system formed by conventions.

All signs have got two types of meaning de-notative and connotative meanings. There are two orders of signification. Barthes called the immediate visual impact deno-tative meaning and the cultural meaning connotative meaning.

"The difference between denotative and con-notative meaning is not (as many authors maintain) the difference between them "uni-vocal" and "vague signification." (Eco, 1979: 55)

Meanings are produced in the interaction between text and message. Meaning pro-duction is a dynamic act in which both ele-ments contribute equally.

Denotative Meaning: Denotative mean-ing is the first, inherent, literary meaning. This is first order signification. What we dis-cern in our mind when we heard a word is denotative meaning. Shortly; denotative meaning describes the relationship be-tween signifier and

signified and the external reality. In terms of visual image a photograph is a sign, in other words it is a text. As for the example of photograph, denotative meaning is what is photographed and connotative meaning is how it is photographed.

Connotative Meaning: Connotative meaning is secondary, associative, reflected meaning. Every word has got one denota-tive meaning but it has more than one con-notative meaning. Connotative meaning is the second order of signification which uses denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it and addition-al signified. Related to what connotation is, Roland Barthes refers to myth; *"Barthes argues that the orders of signification called denotation and connotation combine to pro-duce ideology, which has been described as a third order signification."* (Fiske and Hartley 1994: 287) According to Barthes, another second order of signification is called myth.

"Barthes thinks of a myth as a chain of related concepts. Thus the traditional myth of British policemen includes concepts of friendliness, reassurance, solidarity, non-aggressiveness, lack of firearms." (Fiske, 1990: 88)

A signifier might have different referents in different languages and it might have different signifieds because signified is a mental concept. In other words, many words in particular language refer to the same thing, however; they reflect different evaluations. Furthermore, a signified shown by one word is subject to historical change. Understanding consists in the reduction of one type of reality to another.

Codes: Codes are very important in semiotic analysis. In that respect the analyses of traffic lights for example is a code. That is why codes can be called the system in which signs are organized. Like all other systems- from the point of view of structuralism- are governed by rules which are admitted by the members of the community using that particular code. Apparently, the study of codes stresses the social aspect of communication. *"Almost any aspect of our social life which is conventional or governed by rules consented to by members of society, can therefore be called coded."* (Fiske, 1990: 64)

Therefore, understanding a sign fullflegedly involves the application of an appropriate code, which is familiar to the interpreter or reader. As far as a text is concerned it is possible to say that every text is a system of signs organized according to codes and sub codes, which reflect certain values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and practices as well.

Signs in Analyzing Plastic Arts and Drawings:

Color: Color can either be examined individually or collectively. Colors sometimes can be considered as an institutional model on their own. Each color is the unit of expression and it is determined by the measure of sovereignty. Each color is connected with other colors in visual communication. *"Viewer should comprehend physical and cultural message at the same time."* (Barthes, 1964: 42)

Structure: Structures should be classified. Images generally considered in two dimensions. It gives impression of touching.

Form: In order to comprehend the differences between limit and line, the counter should be determined. Each image has got physical limits/borders. These limits become concrete in accordance with the forms.

SAMPLE	
SIGN	MAGAZINE ADVERTISEMENT
SIGNIFIERS	AN IMAGE OF A MAN
SIGNIFIED	A PERFECTLY HARMONIOUS

Paradigmatic analysis of the sample:
The paradigmatic approach emerges from the structuralist work of Claude Levi-Strauss 1966 and considers the patterns of oppositions that exist within the narrative and how they contribute to the development of the text. Possibilities of tension and struggle between images and their meanings have been denoted and negated by some artists of the 20th century. The process of labeling

Image 1. Rene Magritte, "Cecin'est pas unepipe", 1929

the work itself has become the main question consequently.

Among the most well known paintings, which can be underlined as examples to understand the visual semiotics, is the "*Cecin'est pas une pipe*" (French for "This is not a pipe") by Rene Magritte, finished in 1929, from his serial "*Treason of Images*". Magritte was also a friend of Michel Foucault and it is known that they had been corresponding.

In his painting, Magritte reintroduces discourse (This is not a Pipe) beside the classical elements of a painting; a realistic image of a pipe, painted carefully, considering the plastic elements and the equivalence in resemblance. Yet, Magritte used linguistic signs and affirmation besides them. There is the image of a pipe but the text affirms that

it is not a pipe. The signifier (image of the pipe), which is supposed to refer the object, a real pipe in life, is indicating that it is not the pipe that it refers to but the concept of a pipe, as it is confirmed by the text. Since this painting makes reference to semiotics, it has inspired some arguments in structuralism and post structuralism. The text, the letters, are in an uncertain relation with the painting itself. The confusion within the communication on the common ground of the canvas verifies that the mimetic representation of *"the pipe"* loses its identity and refers to almost nothing.

Relationship between signs and objects is not a mysterious phenomenon; human beings have the capacity to implement actions with the help of memory, imagination, and language. Creativity of mind nourishes by the representational images betraying

reality. Metaphors, displacements, dislocations, transpositions are some of the ways of articulating the creative process.

In 1917, when Marcel Duchamp bought a standard urinal, under the title *Fountain,* signed and dated it as *"R. Mutt 1917"* and submitted it to the contemporary art exhibition held by the Society of Independent Artists in New York, the committee board decided to exclude the *Fountain* off, announcing that an indecent sanitary ware could not be considered as a work of art. This must be a test for the commitment of freedom of expression of the new American Society who invited Duchamp to New York to establish a version of Paris Salon with a new conception of art. Duchamp did not reveal his identity since he was also among the board members. The prominent photographer Alfred Stieglitz photographed the work and it is the only

recording of *"the original".* The work of art was lost afterwards and later Duchamp produced a few replicas. *Fountain,* since then is addressed as the key work of the contemporary art which inspired many other artists and art critics as well. Although that object is a piece of mass production, Duchamp claims that, since it is signed and submitted to art circles, it transforms into a work of art. Although it was not sculpted, it has all the values such as form, volume, texture, etc., to be evaluated as a sculpture. Since he also rotated the form 180 degrees and mounted it on a pedestal, the ordinary object has then gained a new formal concept in that new context. For example, it looks more like a womb of a woman, rather than a sanitary piece for man. That readymade object should be evaluated with a semiotic approach. Duchamp proved that the presentation and perception of a work of art occur in a semiotic chain of exhibition

Image 2. Marcel Duchamp, "Fountain", 1917

Image 3. Joseph Kossuth, "One and Three Chairs", 1966

and reception. He chose a mass produced item at a particular moment and time; signed it to conceal that it is the idea of the artist; it is not an original, not a unique piece of art with an aura. He produced replicas; thus the ideas representing it, would survive forever.

Another important aspect is the signature *"R. Mutt."* Although it is derived from the name of the shop owner, the word was a pun in German, meaning poverty, besides referring a daily funny cartoon strip. Consequently, all the useful significances disappeared visually and verbally, and literally a new perspective became possible to make new associations. In an interview, Duchamp said *"I was drawing people's attention to the fact that art is a mirage. A mirage, exactly like an oasis appears in the desert. It is very beautiful until, of course, you are dying of thirst. But you don't die in the field of art. The mirage is solid."* (Hahn, 1964: 22)

Another powerful example of the relationship between semiotics and visual art is the "*One and Three Chairs"* by Joseph Kossuth, realized in 1966. He presented the object (chair) together with its photograph and a text of its dictionary description. Presenting an image like Magritte and presenting a ready made object as Duchamp, besides presenting a text, he proved that the communication among human beings is dependent on linguistics. Relatively pure information of the text is considered most important because language is essentially self-referential. The

Image 4. Diego Velazquez, "LasMeninas", 1956

work seems to be literally what it says. The artist presents three different forms of signifiers referring to the same signified; yet the levels of abstraction are not the same. Following a Duchampian path,

Kossuth opens up a possibility to imagine that recognition in the art world becomes possible only under the hegemony of the established system of language. Reigning the images and concepts is not enough

anymore; discourse is also imposed. The discovery of the significant role of discourse in contemporary semiotics leads way to post structuralism through the texts by Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, and Lyotard who have interpreted the relation with the hegemonic power of the discourse and being actually in power.

"Las Meninas" (1656) by Diego Velazquez is one of the rare early examples in which the depicted figures evoke suspicious relations with the viewer. The daughter of King Philip IV, together with her dog, surrounded by her maids, and two dwarfs are portrayed in a large room where the upper bodies of the king and the queen are reflected in the big mirror. The painter also depicted himself as working at a large canvas. This composition creates considerable ambiguity on the depicted identities. The title, *"Las Meninas"* declares that it is the painting portraits of the maids. However, the princess is also there, besides the king and the queen. The space in the painting is not clear; it can be the studio of the artist as well as a chamber where the royal family posed. The viewer gets suspicious that there can be two paintings since s/he sees the one that is depicted and also another one, which has been studied by the painter in the painting. The viewer is also somehow included in the painting, because the mirror reflecting the images of the king and the queen, is supposed to reflect the viewer as well.

This painting is a particular example in which the signifier is the signified at the same time and Foucault addresses it as the first signs of epistemology in European art. In his *"The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences,"* he discusses the

complexity of knowledge and its discourse. The sight appearing in *"Las Meninas"* develops a central hiddenness possessing acceptable assumptions. Thus, the painting is a representation of the Classical but the space defines a Modern representation.

The semiotic approach focusing upon intertextuality and iconography in relation to the location of meaning concludes that a sign is not a thing but a socially constructed code. In the mentioned works of art, context, senders and receivers reached a new level negating the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The signifiers and what they signify are uncertain within the semiotic patterns of language. The number of representational forms is infinitive and none of the representations is more real than another.

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Image 2. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountai*n, 1917. http://www.wikiart.org/en/marcel-duchamp/fountain-1917

Image 3. JosephKosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. http://www.wikiart.org/en/joseph-kosuth/one-and-three-chairs

Image 4. Diego Velazquez, *LasMeninas*, 1656. http://www.wikiart.org/en/diego-velazquez/las-meninas-detail-of-the-lower-half-depicting-the-family-of-philip-iv-of-spain-1656