Visual argumentation against racism in videos designed by university students: The role of images

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Abstract

The paper discusses university students’ multimodal digital compositions concerning racism in the specific sociopolitical context marked by the expansion of racist violence following the rise of far-right political parties and the financial crisis. Drawing on the fields of Multimodal Social Semiotics, Argumentation and Rhetoric, this paper attempts to provide a methodology for analyzing multimodal argumentation in videos. We focus on the way two students “orchestrated” circulated meanings and opinions into videos as answers to the short film Schwarzfahrer. Findings suggest that modality judgements related to specific types of photos and the interaction of rhetorical figures and visual meanings inform the identification and verbal reconstruction of the argument.

keywords: visual argumentation, modality, video, design, journalistic photos

Introduction

The process of digitization has simplified the manipulation, appropriation, transformation and re-circulation of existing media content (Jenkins, 2006) while economic and technological reasons made the video recording, editing and publishing tools accessible to an expanded population (Willett, 2009). The emergence of digital communication and multimodal texts (such as video) shaped a new landscape for the role of the citizen in modern times, while changes in the personal, professional and social life of citizens imposed the need for an expanded approach to the concept of literacy (The New London Group, 1996). Recognizing the role of photographs, videos, political cartoons and other visuals in real life arguing a growing number of argumentation scholars are interested in the study visual arguments (Groarke, 2017). This study’s interest departs from the observation that on several occasions, since 2008, in Greece, events have received wide media coverage generating opinions and arguments conveyed multimodally and disseminated in social networking sites. In this paper, we present the analysis of digital multimodal argumentative texts designed by university students by appropriating resources retrieved from the internet. By investigating the role of specific types of images and their properties we aim to understand multimodal argumentative practices which take place in digital communication landscapes in order to further investigate possibilities of application within the frame of formal education.

In the first part of this article, we present the theoretical framework for the analysis of videos drawing from Multimodal Social Semiotics (M.S.S), Argumentation and Rhetoric. M.S.S provides the tools for analyzing modality both as mode and as rhetorical positioning. Cope and Kalantzis’ (2000) model of the five dimensions of meanings and modality description according to the Grammar of Visual Design (2006) are presented in detail. Review of visual argumentation research on the issues of identification and reconstruction of arguments and the roles of visuals to convey claims and evidence suggest the relevance of
these issues to multimodality. In the second part, we present the research methodology and questions. In the third part, the detailed analysis of two videos is presented followed by findings and discussion on findings and analysis approach.

**Theoretical Frame**

**Multimodality**

Multimodality is an inter-disciplinary approach based on social semiotics. According to Jewitt (2013:251) the three theoretical assumptions underpinning multimodality could be stated as follows: (a) language is only part of a multimodal ensemble, (b) each mode has different meaning potentials or semiotic resources and realizes different communicative work, (c) interaction between modes is significant because people make meaning using a selection of modes, (d) signs’ meaning is socially shaped and influenced by the motivations and interests of the sign-maker in specific social contexts.

In Multimodal Social Semiotics, the present is recognized as a time of “instability and provisionality” which demands a rhetorical approach to communication based on the agency of the maker of signs (Kress, 2010: 26). Because the sign is motivated and “the social” is generative source of meaning, “design” is brought into the center of semiotic and social attention. Design “brings the interests of every member of a social group into the social-semiotic world”, through their own work as rhetor and designer (Kress 2014). In current communicational landscapes, designer and rhetor are often the same person. The rhetor has the political task to “provoke and produce the rearrangement of social relations by semiotic means” while the designer has the semiotic task, to “transform political intent into semiotic form” (Kress 2010: 121). For Kress (2014), “design rests on choice and it is the outcome of choices made[...]. Choice is always political; it is subject to power”.

Cope and Kalantzis (2000) describe five dimensions of meanings for each different mode (a) the representational, (b) the social, (c) the organisational, (d) the contextual, (e) the ideological.

However, speakers, writers, “rhetors” not only make a selection of modes but they also use modality-“a variety of linguistic and rhetorical cues that manage certainty and authority ascribed to statements” (Trimbur and Press 2015:23)- in order to position the audience to accept the truth or importance of what it is said.

**Modality**

The second meaning refers to rhetorical positioning. According to Halliday (1978: 223), modality is the speaker’s “assessment of the validity of what he is saying”. In Social Semiotics, which adapts Halliday’s systemic functional grammar to the analysis of other sign systems, modality refers to “the status, authority and reality of a message, or to its ontological status, or to its value as truth or fact” (Hodge and Kress 1988: 124). However, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 155-166) emphasize that modality judgments do not assess the truth of a “proposition” but refer to the degree to which “people, places and things are represented as though they are real”. Therefore, modality has a social meaning, dependent on the social group for which the representation is intended. They distinguish four coding orientations: a) the scientific/technological b) the abstract c) the sensory and d) the naturalistic. Modality is expressed visually by means of eight gradable modality markers: Colour saturation, Colour differentiation, Colour modulation, Contextualization, Representation, Depth, Illumination
Luhmann (2000:1) claims that “what we know about our society, or indeed about the world we live in, we know [it] through the mass media”. Images are central to journalism since the journalistic text constitutes a “visual construction, a more or less well integrated package of words and pictures” (Becker 1996:11). In this study, journalistic photos are important because students used them in their argumentation. The naturalistic coding orientation is based on the common sense understanding of the real, as it is evident in mid-twentieth century photojournalism, newsreels, and television reporting (Trimbur and Press 2015:26), related thus, to visual culture.

Therefore, modality judgements which inform on the positioning of the rhetor depend upon visual practices who relate specific types of texts to specific modality. Students choose images from a huge variety of resources existing in internet by assessing the modality judgments in these visuals. These choices may reflect to some extend their knowledge of the social world.

Visual Argumentation

Argumentation is a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field of study concerned with “the relationship between statements offered as conclusions and other statements that provide the grounds for those conclusions” (Zarefsky 2014: xv). According to Kjeldsen (2015:124), the field of visual argumentation concern the study of “the place and the function of the visual in argumentation” in line with definitions such as the one provided by Groarke (2009: 230): “Visual arguments forward premises and conclusions which are, wholly or partially expressed by (nonverbal) visual means”. In his comprehensive overview of the study of visual argumentation, he emphasizes that interpretative research deals also with the question of “propositionality” prominent in the debate on the possibility and actuality (Blair 1996). Besides the apparent general agreement that visuals can play an important role in argumentation there has been resistance to the idea that pictures can constitute arguments. The main objection is that images are not propositional by nature and therefore cannot be arguments. Fleming (1996:14) states that “picture lacks sequential syntax and is therefore unable to array ideas in the two-part conceptual structure of argumentation” and, because pictures cannot provide claims that can be contested per definition they cannot be arguments. Additionally, another sceptic, Johnson (2003:6) supports that visual argumentation is dependent on verbal argumentation “because the process of reconstructing visual images as arguments depends on our ability to translate them into words”. The “phenomenological and material difference between language and image” is reflected on research concerning the identification and reconstruction of premises. Nevertheless, there is an agreement to the fact that “we can never fully translate images into text or verbal propositions” (Kjeldsen 2015:119). Tseronis (2013:1) observes that both the advocates and the sceptics “tend to accept a formal understanding of argument and neglect the visual form of images” but when adopting a procedural view, “more functions of visuals can be recognised in between the two extremes of a merely ornamental or illustrative role, and the evidentiary one”.

Research Methodology

The study aimed at analyzing visual argumentation in multimodal texts (videos) in relation to the broader sociopolitical context in Greece. The research questions were stated as follows:

- (RQ1) How the phenomenon of racism is represented?
(RQ2) Which arguments are used?
(RQ3) Which are the functions of images in the argumentation process?

In order to answer the research questions the following tools were used: the Grammar of Visual Design (2006) and Cope and Kalantzis’ (2000:12-16) model of “dimensions of meanings” to investigate modality and the representational, organizational, contextual and ideological meanings of the visual mode; Toulmin’s argumentation model (1958); rhetorical tropes and figures.

**Context of the study**

Videos were designed in the context of a pilot research on Social and Political Messages on YouTube conducted in the University of the Aegean at the Department of Preschool Education and Educational Design during the spring semester of 2013. The 25 participants were all female students enrolled in a graduate’s level course about Learning & I.C.T. The didactic intervention created for the purposes of the study aimed at the micro level of the production of video. It included a) principles of semiotic theories, b) principles of film theory, c) principles of argumentation and (d) technical training on the online video editing platform WEVIDEO®. The final assignment consisted of the design of videos as answers to the short film “Schwarzfahrer” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wiuv5hzj5i4). The students did not produce original content but they designed their videos by appropriating audiovisual resources retrieved from the internet. 2 videos contained no still images at all.

Data consisted of (a) the 25 videos and (b) the 25 brief reflection papers submitted by the students. Quantitative analysis of these data (Fragkiadoulaki et al., submitted) pointed to the existence of two categories of videos. In the 1st category, seventeen (17) videos shared in common (a) representational meanings (cf. c.1.1.-c.1.7 in Figure 1), (b) low “naturalistic”modality, (c) rhetorical structure of images, (d) slow rhythm of alteration of visuals. In the 2nd category, the six (6) videos shared in common (a) “sequences of images” and rapid rhythm and (b) different representational meanings (cf. c.1.8 in Figure 1 or other).

We characterized these two distinct categories as 1st level and 2nd level redesign (Cope and Kalantzis 2000).

Analysis of the representational meaning of the images with more than one use pointed to eight categories (c1.1.-c1.8.). This categorization highlighted the relation of these meanings to arguments, types of images and modality. (cf. figure1) Students used graphic images or photos expressing low naturalistic modality to talk about racism. In particular, “biological characteristics of humans” constituted the basis of arguments against racism; “difference” was represented positively by means of photos of children and teenagers of different races coexisting happily; “exclusion” was represented through the symbols of eggs, sheeps, ducks, lamps. To a lesser degree they represented “violence” by means of naturalistic images or journalistic photos.
Figure 1: Categories of the representational meaning of images

Content Analysis of the videos
In this paper, two videos (https://goo.gl/l3MmU3) of the 2nd level design category are analyzed. Both videos belong to the 2nd category and they also have in common the use of journalistic photos.

In each video, the argumentation part containing the excerpt (sequence1) selected by the student and the sequence of images conveying the argumentation were identified and analyzed. In filmmaking, “sequence1” is a series of scenes that form a distinct narrative unit connected either by unity of location or unity of time. In this analysis, by “sequence2 of photos” we refer to a continuous series of photos which is not interrupted by text. Text may be included as subtitle to the images but not as a separate frame. In the case of these videos, each image represents a different frame. Multilevel multimodal transcripts were created for each argumentation section which permitted to visualize (a) images (with their subtitles) and titles as distinct frames, (b) the analysis of various dimensions of meanings for each frame, (c) the identification and verbal reconstruction of the argument, (d) the use of rhetorical figures and tropes, (e) information from the students’ reflection papers. Overall, these transcripts permitted the visualization of the relation between semiotic choices, rhetorical organization, arguments and reflective writing of the students. In this paper adapted transcripts were used (cf.figure 2,3) to facilitate the understanding of the analysis.
Video II.1. « UN-sleep »

The student A addresses the “motorcyclist – passengers […] citizens who encounter everyday racism” according to the student’s reflection paper. In the film, the motorcyclist and the other passengers witness the verbal assault without intervening. The student incorporated a sequence of dramatic photos and the short film’s excerpt within a scene of a video representing a man waking up from a nightmare.

The scene (1) (cf. Figure 2), the text-frame (2) and the title of the video “Un-sleep” constitute the elements that guide the understanding of what follows as “sleep” and “dream”. The argument is further enabled through the metaphor of sleep/non-intervention, the comparison of nightmare/reality, the opposition of dream/reality. Moreover, the oppositional relationship of the close-ups to the faces of the passengers and the victims invites the audience to compare and infer the non-appropriateness of this attitude in relation to the urgency of the situation.

The arguments are reconstructed, in Toulmin’s terms, as follows (specifying the frames’ number):

- 1st claim React to racism’ (20)/Stop hatred act (21-22)/give your hand (21)
  - Ground (1a) not reacting is similar to sleeping (1+20)
  - Ground (1b) people do not react when some people suffer (4-17)
  - Ground (1c) not reacting means acceptance (20)
  - Ground (1d) reality is a nightmare for some people (8-17)

- 2nd claim (ground 1d) Reality is a Nightmare for some people
  - Ground (2a) The incidents are real and happen to real people (8-17)
  - Ground (2b) The incidents are numerous (8-17)
  - Ground (2c) The incidents are getting more serious (11-17)

“React to racism” by “stopping hatred act” and “giving your hand” is the main claim of the video. The student describes her argument as follows: "If racist phenomena continue and we stay apathetic, as if we accept this situation, these phenomena will persist and more and more people, with our consent, will become victims of racism." “Reality is a nightmare”,

Figure 2: Argumentation section in “UN-sleep”
(G1d) constitutes the main reason to support this claim and results from the representational meaning of the photos but also from the place they occupy as the nightmare of the man. On the basis of the high naturalistic modality of the journalistic photos, these photos can be interpreted as evidence for “real” crimes recorded in police files, as “real” events reported by journalists (2a). The size of the phenomenon (2b) results from the repetition of the representational meanings: three incidents of physical assault and six victims. The seriousness and urgency of the situation (2c) results from the organization of the representational meanings as a progression (climax): from faces to the whole body of a victim and from a young man to a child. Ground 1b results from a juxtaposition which points to the opposition between the facial expression of the passengers and the victims.

**Video II.3. What is that you don’t understand?**

The student C addresses “the elderly lady”. The title of the video indicates the explanatory approach adopted and her position towards the lady. The colloquial phrase “What is that you don’t understand?” is used when something is considered as extremely obvious for somebody but paradoxically not for his/her interlocutor. The video is organized in two parts. In the second one, identified as the argumentation section, the student discusses the question “then, what’s the crime?” and organizes the answer around the word “crime” heard in the excerpt selected (c.f. 1 in figure 3). The sequence of images which follows, representing youth, immigrants, a white woman and black baby, explosions, children’s dead bodies, hand full of blood, politicians, Obama and the stock market conveys the meaning of “crime” (or illegal act/behavior). These images are divided by the subtitles into 3 groups: (a) “our color?” (b) “our need to survive?” (c) “the political games that they play behind our backs?” Images depict possible reasons of immigration as the student notes: “I used examples of possible reasons people immigrating to other countries especially the people the lady refers to (Turkish, African ...)”. In this sequence, the use of graphic images (low naturalistic modality) next to photojournalistic (high modality) look incoherent. However, considering these choices as part of the argument uncovered their argumentative use.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 3: Argumentation section in “What is that you don’t understand?”**
The arguments are reconstructed as follows:

- **1\(^{st}\) claim we all fit on earth (15)**
  - Ground (1a) we are all humans (19)
  - Ground (1b) color is not a problem (2\(^{nd}\) claim)
  - Ground (1c) Their need to survive is not a crime (3\(^{rd}\) claim)
  - Ground (1c) politicians play games behind our back

- **2\(^{nd}\) claim Our color is not a crime (3-5)**
  - Ground (2a) we can be happy with people of different color (4)
  - Ground (2b) People of different color need us (5)

- **3\(^{rd}\) claim Their need to survive is not a crime (6-9)**
  - Ground (3a) people help kids in need from Africa (6)
  - Ground (3b) Wars really kill children (7-9)
  - Warrant “we all look for a better life” (stated by the student)

- **4\(^{th}\) claim Politicians, USA super power, The Markets are criminals (7-10)**
  - Ground (4a) they play political games behind our backs
  - Warrant politicians are impersonal (11)
  - USA super power (12)
  - The Markets are numbers (13)

The student takes into consideration what is considered as “crime” by racists, therefore, she places these two arguments in the beginning of the argumentation. The subtitles are the claims of the opponents (in form of rhetorical question), while the visuals provide the reasons. In particular, the first image depicts a positive ideal example (happy young people and white woman with a black child) while the following images refer to real situations of people in need (immigrants, victims). Realistic journalistic photos are used to represent the real situation next to the ideal conveyed by stylized photos in order to control the negative answer to the question before presenting her main thesis. The third rhetorical question is accompanied by a symbol of a murderer (10) and graphic images of politicians and the stock Market. Those graphic images, of low naturalistic modality are in contrast with the naturalistic journalistic photos. While victims are represented as real people, the real responsible for the crime are not represented as human people but as juxtaposed profiles of politicians, as superman and as numbers. This implies that the actual responsibility for wars, deaths and immigration differ from real “human people”, giving, thus, additional force to the ground 1a “because we are all humans”.

**Findings and discussion on research questions**

**RQ1: The representation of the phenomenon of racism**

Both designers, argued against racism by representing concrete causes and consequences of racism. The first student represented adverse consequences of racism by means of photos of victims criticizing the passive attitude of the society. Student C treated racism not as an issue between racists and their victims but as a consequence of “political games played behind our backs”. Both videos had high contextual meaning through images to the socio-political circumstances in 2013: Lagarde, Obama, war in Irak, the Stock Market, the Egyptian fisherman victim of racist assault, immigrants on a boat. In the 1st level of redesign, students by means of images of low naturalistic modality or high sensory modality kept their distance from the phenomenon of racism and restrained from referring to the sociopolitical context.

**RQ2: Arguments used**

“Stop hatred act” and “We all fit on earth” are the positions of the students. The reasons conveyed visually are identified and explained in detail in the previous section.
**RQ3: The functions of images**

By our analysis of “Un-sleep” we suggest that describing images as “dramatic” functioning as an appeal to “pathos” does not account for the variety of their meanings and their functions in the argumentation. The visuals depicting victims of racism argue on the severity and urgency of the situation through the interaction of both organizational and representational meanings. In addition, the rhetorical figure of opposition (close-ups of victims and passengers) and the metaphor of sleep incite the audience to infer on the non-appropriateness of the passive attitude given the size of the phenomenon. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971:169) consider a figure to be argumentative, if it brings a change of perspective by suggesting a “choice”. In advertising, the rhetorical figures are used to “channel inferences” intended by the advertisers (Phillips & McQuarrie 2004:114).

The second designer notes on the choice of images “I wanted each image to highlight specific characteristics- such as war, poverty, the difficulties the immigrants face, well known politicians- in order to sensitize the audience […] they concern what is happening around us, the wars, the political circumstances of the time”. Therefore, the images constitute the visual equivalents of those “characteristics”. Although this is true, modality judgements were critical in highlighting distinctions between ideal (people who are happy, who help) and real (immigrants, war victims) but also between real and abstract (politics) determining thus, the inferences intended. In addition, the analysis indicates that it is “dialectical” in the sense that opposite claims are represented as well. She states “I started from the opposite position intentionally, in order to end up with how- I believe-humans should treat other humans”. This statement challenges and confirms Blair’s (2004:60) claim that visual argument has relatively simple structure and content “in logical terms” and it tends to be “one-sided, presenting the case for or the case against, but not both together.”

**Discussion on content analysis approach**

In relation to findings of a previous analysis who focused on the materiality of the videos, we proceeded to the analysis of the arguments used. Following a MSS perspective, modality is analyzed in association to various dimensions of meanings to inform the identification and verbal reconstruction of arguments. The extensive use of rhetorical figures could not be overlooked, as it reflects the experience of persuasive texts students have, therefore it was incorporated in the analysis. These theoretical frameworks are shown to account for the semiotic and rhetorical work of “designers” as manifestations of their “interests” when associated to information drawn from the students’ reflection papers.

It is to be noticed that the above findings concern two videos and cannot be generalized. They constitute the interpretation of the researchers after multiple viewings and after transcribing the videos which do not correspond to the usual conditions of video viewing. It is a contextualized interpretation of the text dependent on the short-film and the sociopolitical context. This is in line with Birdsell and Groarke (1996) who claim that three types of context are relevant in a theory of visual argument: the immediate visual and verbal context and the visual culture. Reflection papers were used to delimit possible interpretations and keep them closer to students’ intentions. Their proximity implies that MSS provides useful concepts for the identification and verbal reconstruction of argument in the case of adopting a formal view of it consisting of premises and conclusion. The task of verbal reconstruction of the argument has been helpful for the understanding of students’ semiotic choices, however, the argumentation is neither linear, nor monomodal; while the interaction of modes and meanings is strongly complex and interwoven. This agrees with Gronbeck’s (2007) claim that because images are “inherently unstable sets of signs it is impossible to capture them in full in a single Toulmin-like or syllogistic model. Rather, pictures become woven into complex argumentative discourses, and their places vary across different
This study views videos as the outcome of “choices”. When considering semiotic, rhetorical and argumentative choices of two students in comparison to others’ then these choices reflect not only the way designers choose to best address their audience but also the way the specific “interests” of citizens are brought into the social-semiotic world, through their own work as rhetors and designers (Kress 2014). Speaking about racism by means of journalistic photos constitutes a political choice. Depictions of violence is done by photos; depictions of idealized world is done by stylized images. Modality is thus associated with content. Modality has a social but also ideological meaning. The choice in “Unsleep” to represent only the black race, or the Egyptian fisherman (which is the only photo related to the Golden Dawn) could be described as having an ideological meaning. However, the first use is related to organizational meaning assuring the thematic coherence while the latter is only speculated. Although it may be intentional there are chances that this image appeared in the Google search engine because of its popularity by the time of the research. More ethnographic methods are required in order to describe which choices are fully controlled and thus “political” or on the contrary “haphazard or improvised” (Bazalgette and Buckingham 2012:6).

Concluding, there is an interest in approaching discourse as multimodal argumentation and using the relative concepts and tools. This permits understanding the process of argumentation, its relation to the social world and to interpret the semiotic choices of the designers as political choices. The expansion of the social media and the role of visuals in argumentation practices implies that “the semiotic work of all is not without interest” and that it should be attended “with equal seriousness” (Kress 2014). Practically, this calls for more empirical research on the productions of “ordinary people” who argue on social and political issues and not only on texts produced by professionals such as advertisements, public service announcements and so on.

REFERENCES