

**SEMIOTIC AND COMMUNICATIVE STATUS
OF PICTORIAL AND VERBAL TEXT
(transformation, translation, coexistence)**

The article highlights the problem of inter-code relations and transformations of two different types of messages: verbal and pictorial. We presume that: first, both a picture and a verbal message are texts; second, they can share a common message either functioning by itself each, or citing each other, or translating each other; and third, a complete message can be a visual translation of a verbal message while a pictorial message can be verbally translated and incorporated into a verbal text only as a part of it. Narrative painting is treated as cases of visual translations, mainly of Biblical and mythological verbal texts. The opposite process of transforming a pictorial text into its verbal description is regarded on the material of museum catalogue articles and belles-lettres text with pictures as sources of plot development (such as J.Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray"). Coexistence of each of the discussed types of messages and their mutual impact upon the communicative result of polycode messages are analyzed on the material of illustrated texts, guide books, academic writing. The issue of addressee's different activities in the abovementioned types of polycode messages is touched upon as well.

Key words: verbal message, pictorial message, polycode text.

Колегасєва І.М. Семіотичний та комунікативний статус піктографічного і вербального тексту (трансформація, переклад, співіснування). В статті висвітлюється проблема міжкодових взаємозв'язків і трансформацій двох різних типів повідомлень: вербальних і піктографічних. Стверджується, що як піктографічне, так і вербальне повідомлення є текстами, вони можуть співіснувати в межах спільного тексту, можуть цитувати один одного або перекладати один одного. Досліджуються особливості комунікативного впливу на адресата і загальний комунікативний ефект таких текстових повідомлень.

Ключові слова: вербальне повідомлення, піктографічне повідомлення, полікодовий текст.

Колєгаєва І.М. Семіотический и коммуникативный статус пиктографического и вербального текста (трансформация, перевод, сосуществование). В статье освещается проблема межкодовых взаимосвязей и трансформаций двух различных типов сообщений: вербальных и пиктографических. Утверждается, что как пиктографическое, так и вербальное сообщения являются текстами, они могут сосуществовать в пределах общего текста, могут цитировать друг друга либо переводить друг друга. Исследуются особенности коммуникативного влияния на адресата и общий коммуникативный эффект таких текстовых сообщений.

Ключевые слова: вербальное сообщение, пиктографическое сообщение, поликодовый текст.

To begin with let us answer the following question:

Can a piece of painting (namely a picture, or a fresco, or a watercolour) be treated as a text? Can we regard some flat surface, with colours and lines on it, as a *message* encoding certain information about the outside world? The world is *three-dimensional* and *dynamic*, while a picture is *two-dimensional* and *static*. Yet, the colours and lines on a flat surface create an *illusion* of a fragment of the three-dimensional dynamic world which

the on-looker is presumably viewing through the frame of the picture. “Western art had been, from the Renaissance up to the middle of the 19th century, underpinned by the logic of perspective and an attempt to reproduce an illusion of visible reality” [6]. The illusion mentioned is true at least when we deal with a piece of figurative painting. Whether it is true of a piece of abstract, surrealist, cubistic or any such type of painting is yet to be discussed, so much so as “abstract art, non-figurative art, non-objective art, and nonrepresentational art bear no trace of any reference to anything recognizable” [ibid.]. Marion Boddy-Evans emphasizes that “realism is the art style where the subject of the painting looks very much like it appears in real life, (while) pure abstract art does not try to look like anything from the real world» [5].

Meanwhile let us ruminate about the *figurative* painting only and regard its semiotic and communicative potential. One of the founders of semiotics *Charles Morris* believed that painting as much as speech should be regarded as a *sign* system. Thus, a picture should be regarded as a *semiotic* phenomenon, namely a text [4].

Yuri Lotman while meditating upon *semiotics of culture* was adamant about differentiating and even *opposing* to each other the two types of semiotic messages (texts in his terminology), namely, *discrete verbal* texts on the one hand and *non-discrete, continual* texts like pictures. He believed that translations from one type of text into the other (from a picture into a verbal text) or vice versa were impossible. But as far as they happen once and again, Yu. Lotman concluded that such attempts result not in *translations* but in *equivalent versions* of each other [3]. In my humble opinion, it is more the issue of terminology than the essential difference.

My view point is the following.

First: both a picture and a verbal message **are** texts.

Second: they can **share** a *common* message,

a) either functioning *by itself* each,

b) or *citing* each other,

d) or *translating* each other.

Third: a complete message can be a **visual translation** of a **verbal** message. A **pictorial message** can be **verbally translated** and incorporated into a verbal text as a part of it.

Let us begin *not* from the beginning but from the end of the list.

A complete message can be a visual translation of a verbal message.

The samples of such are numerous pictures which visualize a certain episode from The Bible or from ancient mythology.

For example, everybody remembers The Biblical episode “*Adoration of the Magi*” (sometimes “*Gifts of the Magi*”). It was re-created, visualized, or in our terms “*translated*” into dozens and dozens of pictorial versions of the message. Just to name the most outstanding painters (in alphabetical order – to make it neutral): Hieronymus Bosch, Sandro Botticelli, Peter Breugel the elder, Albrecht Dürer, Giorgione, Peter Paul Rubens, Diego Velázquez, Leonardo da Vinci, and many others.

The episode from ancient mythology narrating about Hercules who had to

chose between Vice and Virtue “*Hercules at the Crossroads*” is translated into quite a number of pictures (in historical perspective): the XVc. – Girolamo di Benvenuto; the XVIc. – Johann Liss, Annibale Caracci; the XVIIc. – Peter Paul Rubens, Jan van den Hoecke; the XVIIIc. – Paolo de Matteis, Benjamin West.

The pictures mentioned of course differ from one another in everything but the narrative plot, the system of personages, the collision visualized. There are no verbal links between the “initial” verbal text (the Bible, mythology) and its visual translation upon the canvas except the *title* of the picture. Thus we observe the case of multiple inter-code translations of a single complete verbal message.

Part of a verbal message turns to be a translation of a pictorial message.

Belles-lettres texts readily include a picture not only as a detail of interior description, but as sort of a “character” or at least some “source of plot development”. To mention but some of them: O. Wilde’s famous “*The Picture of Dorian Gray*” and his less famous “*The Portrait of W H*”, D. du Murray’s “*Rebecca*”, S. Maughm’s “*The Moon and Sixpence*”, the shortlist Booker Prize nominee of 1999 M. Fray’s “*Headlong*” and many others. The pictures in those books are treated as *messages* with vitally important content, *iconically encoded* by fictitious *artists*, and “translated” into *verbal* messages by the *authors* of the novels.

Obviously, no picture is presented to the reader, yet he/she is “looking” at the picture, “examining” its minute details. But unlike the *real on-looker* who grasps the visual message *holistically* and *simultaneously*, the *reader-on-looker* perceives the picture, in a *linear succession* of one by one details *chosen* for him by the writer. Such are the inevitable limitations of translating a pictorial, iconic message into a verbal message. The reader-on-looker can “see” what is *shown* to him. And it is not *his* selection: which of the picture’s aspects should be inspected more scrupulously than the others (for more details see [2]).

A visual and a verbal phenomenon share “the territory” of a common message. This is the so called *polycode text*. This can happen in two variants.

Variant A. ***Each heterogeneous component of a polycode text functions on its own.***

Usually it is a verbal text with incorporated pictures, schemes, maps etc. We meet such in academic writing, in travel and adventure stories, and guide books. Pictorial messages here may function as citations: narration tells about some letter or map, and the letter or the map is presented to the reader in their authentic or imaginary authentic form.

Each heterogeneous component of a polycode text might as well function completely on its own. The overwhelming prevalence of a pictorial component over a verbal component brings out a comic strip (sometimes even a comic book). The point to be emphasized here is that each of the messages functions “on their own”, transferring their own pack of information and eventually creating the common communicative whole.

Variant B. ***The heterogeneous components of a polycode text function as translations of each other.***

The example is a book with illustrations, each illustration *repeating* what was already told in words, this time “re-telling” the episode from the book in *pictorial*

form. To name the brightest examples: John Tenniel's illustrations to L.Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-glass" or Ernest Shepard's illustrations to A.Milne's "Winnie-the-Pooh".

It should be emphasized that pictorial translations of the book's episodes are communicatively "*one way road*": the text has no explicit references to the illustrations. The only connectors are captions (sometimes a phrase from the text, sometimes just a general nomination of the situation) which might follow the illustrations. The *presence* of illustration enhances the communication (especially in children's reading community). But definitely, the *absence* of illustrations does not deteriorate the communication, to say nothing of communicative failure.

The situation differs dramatically in a specific type of polycode text, i.e. the text of a ***museum catalogue***.

The analysis of a picture gallery catalogue [7] showed that an article in a catalogue is a very interesting semiotic and communicative phenomenon. The readers of such text can be qualified as "pampered" addressees. They find themselves constantly switching their function from that of a reader to that of an on-looker, in either case being *assisted* through all sorts of *clues* and *hints*, which improve their communicative activity (for more details see [1]).

A *catalogue article* is a twofold message, comprising an iconic and a verbal component. The former being a *reproduction* of some famous picture, the latter being approximately 150–200 word long *annotation* commenting upon the painting, the artist, sometimes the history of the picture, its artistic and literary background.

The two components are unequal as to the degree of self-sufficiency in the process of their perception. The iconic component *might* function independently, though with certain loss of its informative potential. The verbal component is *nearly useless* in case it is devoid of the corresponding iconic support. In other words, an addressee may more or less successfully leaf through the catalogue without reading the textual messages, but an addressee cannot just read the annotations and skip the illustrations. The result will be a communicative failure.

The point is *to show how each of the components enhances the informative impact of the polycode text upon its addressee*. I have already mentioned about clues and hints that the addressee gets, if he/she thoroughly perceives the catalogue article. To begin with, the reproduction that catches the eye first and foremost does not contain exact information of the picture size, which is by far different from what the addressee sees in the catalogue.

Our research proved that the size of a picture is decreased drastically: a reproduction sometimes equals as little as 0.2% of the space which the original canvas occupies. For sure, the impact upon the on-looker is manifold weaker. The reader of the catalogue is usually quite unaware of this difference.

The *verbal component* of the article informs the reader about the original dimensions of the reproduced picture, giving the exact figures. Such piece of information is a must in the "passport" of the picture, containing the name of the artist, the years of his life, the title of the picture, its dimensions and qualification of the technique (oil, tempera etc.) and material of the support on which it is painted (canvas, paper, wood etc.) Sometimes the dry figures are "revived" in

the annotation through a descriptive commentary.

For instance, “*The Still-life*” by France Snyder is nearly 2 meters high and more than 3 meters long, its reproduction is more than 200 times smaller. The annotation revives the largeness of the canvas, saying: “*The huge size of the still-life indicates a certain type of client with large rooms available, like nobility with castles and large dining-rooms*” [7, 48]. The descriptive details like “*huge size*” “*large dining-rooms*”, “*castles*” help the reader visualize the hugeness of the original painting, enhancing the precise data of the passport: “1,97m X 3,25m”.

In some cases the cues that help the addressee imagine the real dimensions of a picture are given in the annotation *indirectly*, through a *detail*. Titian’s famous picture “*The Tribute Money*” is commented upon as following: “*Titian painted this magnificent painting of Christ... on a wardrobe door in the castle of Ferrara*” [7, 15], thus highlighting the passport information: “75cm X 56cm, Oil on poplar wood”. It is much easier for the addressee to visualize the size of the picture knowing that it used to be a part of a wooden wardrobe.

Another way of “pampering” the addressee of a museum catalogue is explaining to him/her *what* the reproduced picture *is about*, especially if the picture belongs to the so called “*narrative painting*”. The addressee, functioning as an on-looker, has to guess who is who in the picture and what’s happening in the imaginary world of the painted message. Much depends on the addressee’s cultural thesaurus. In case of certain deficiency of cultural knowledge, the informative impact of the picture upon the on-looker is considerably weakened. A helping hand is thrust forward by the annotation author, who provides the addressee with all the information required for adequately perceiving the visual message.

For instance, Nicolas Poussin’s picture “*The Kingdom of Flora*” is a visual “translation” of literary texts by the antique Roman poet Ovid. The annotation explains, that “*the flower goddess is dancing in the centre, surrounded by figures which were transformed after death into flowers*” [7, 41], then each of the 7 characters is named (they are *Klytia, Narcissus, Smilax and Crocus, Adonis, Hyacinth and Ajaks*), their position in the picture is defined, as well as the position of the flowers, into which they will be transformed after death, and the names of the flowers are also given (correspondingly, they are *heliotrope, daffodil, bindweed and crocus, anemone, hyacinth and pink*). The amount of additional information encoded verbally and offered to the addressee of the museum catalogue is very big. It is unlikely that many visitors of Dresden Old Masters gallery, while looking at Poussin’s picture, can enjoy as large scope of information as the addressee of the catalogue “Old Masters”.

In fact, part of the annotation is a *verbal translation* of the *visual message* (reproduction of the picture). Besides re-telling “what is going on” in the picture, annotation also comments upon certain features of the painting: its symbolic details, its colour range, its composition and the like. Each commentary of such type makes the reader turn his gaze upon the picture reproduction.

For instance, the commentary of Pieter Glaesz’s “*Still-Life*” explains to the addressee that “*The pocket watch with opened lid was meant as a hint to the inexorable passing of time*” [7, 52]. The passage induces the reader to look again

at the reproduction and find the symbolic detail which he might have missed before.

Comments like the following: “*his colours are elegant and very delicate*”, “*the tendency to monochromatic painting... with uniform hues*”; “*delightful blooming colour*” make the reader turn his eyes to the picture and see for himself whether *the colours are blooming, elegant and delicate* and what are *the hues of monochromatic painting*. What is important – the colour nominations *per se* are not used: *green, red, yellow* are superfluous, as the picture is at hand and the colours are exposed to the on-looker. Meanwhile, the annotation offers qualifications of the colours (***fresh colours, subtle hues, surprisingly colourful***), thus suggesting certain interpretation of the picture.

The effect of perspective is one of the means of creating the optic illusion of three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional flat surface of a picture. Annotation helps the reader comprehend this peculiarity of painting, drawing his attention to the correspondence of *foreground* and *background*, as is in Jan Wildens’s “*Winter Landscape with Huntsman*”: “*the figure of the hunter is **the main focus**; the landscape stands **in the background**...a great suspense exists between things of the **foreground** level and the expanse of the wintry **space** which is lost in **the depth***” [7, 46]. This is another reason for the addressee to look back at the reproduction and see for himself whether the effect of depth is created by the painter.

Summing up the performed investigation we come to the following conclusion. Both a pictorial and a verbal message possess the semiotic status of a text, each of them having certain potential of coexisting side by side in a common polycode text, or transforming into each other, which might result either in visualization, i.e. “translation” of a verbal text into a picture or, vice versa, verbalization of a pictorial message, i.e. verbal explanation and description of the form and/or content of the picture. Communicative impact of either of those combinations is certainly beneficial.

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