SUMMARY

Two texts published in Formats 1 (“The initial guidelines and borders of visual play”) and Formats 2 (“Informative noncompliance and audiovisual communication”) analyze in detail the conceptual relations that occur in visual discourse between observation, with its iconicity of structures in the real world, and comprehension, which refers to symbolic objects. They also attempt to pursue the notion of knowledge from competence with which the user, when faced with intentional change of predictable characteristics of a visual utterance, initiates an inferential process to give sense to the utterance.

ARTICLE

The constant changing of both verbal and visual languages entails a structural complexity that rarely allows reduction to simple logical structures as required by semantic analysis. Any ordinary language, and visual languages are no exception, are modeled according to a process of rules, motivations, and interpretations that do not lend themselves to a simple logical order.

A consequence of this is that the thorough comprehension of a visual expression requires one to evaluate not only the image itself but also the institutional contexts that give it meaning. All emphasis is focused on the meaning resulting from the relationships of an image to its users.

In other words, we must clearly place ourselves in the framework of cognitive pragmatics and link communicative operations to the central system of thought and to in the field of behavior in which they appear. This operation forces us to consider the use of images as a means to carry out a unique integral communicative act, as a function of the communicative purpose of the sender and the proper inferential interpretation by the receiver.
Visual discourse: unfamiliar yet comprehensible at the same time.

Within the specific field of visual discourse, we may say that visual discourse is based upon iconic images that refer to real world structures the knowledge of which is given. Nevertheless, these images at the same time refer back to content the comprehension and interpretation of which requires prior knowledge of the rules or agreements governing their use.

Therefore, the basic norms for accepting or producing an unfamiliar visual utterance (1) that is at the same time comprehensible are conditioned both by our own observational and sensorial experiences as well as by our experience in communicating or understanding.

a) Sensorial observational experience:

In the first place, images that can be used in communication are conditioned by their analogy with an external world that imposes its own iconic structure and that of its use. In this case, the identity of images, as re-presentation of a real world, acts as both the first norm of acceptability and as a barrier to the production of visual discourse.

In this initial stage, reception of a visual utterance requires an observational sensorial experience directed towards things or perceptible states. It is the personal experience of a single individual, subject to specific perceptual rules that shape a pattern external to the expression itself. They are the same perceptual rules that allow us to evaluate the quality of the result and constitute observation.

Experimental, effective observation is part of perceptual reality and always signifies knowledge of something in particular. It is personal, everyday knowledge that we have of a part of reality. It is based on pretheoretical knowledge, i.e., acknowledged intuitive knowledge that is aimed at iconic images and as such is not brought about by convention or social code but rather by the simple analogy that exists between images and real objects.

On this level, iconic images do not act as signs but rather as things themselves. Things are re-presented by images and therefore are perceived immediately; perception does not require specialized training. Their referential structure is determined by perceivable reality or direct observation of reality and re-presented by iconic signs. A world of sensory objects, controlled by general perceivable criteria. (2)

b) Communicative experience or comprehension.
Images also refer to social objects or semantic fields determined by the history of their social use. It is **comprehension** that shapes part of communicative consciousness and refers to the generation of symbolic products that are used to say something about reality.

Access to this symbolic reality is mediated by the understanding of a manifestation over reality. A world of interpretive intentionalities in a framework of a shared competence.

This level is defined by **categorial knowledge**, in which the communicative experience of the receiver is directed towards the meaning of the visual utterance, by attempting to understand the meaning of the images. Within these visual referents, images acquire an added value or meaning that makes them intelligible and believable.

**Implicit utterances**

Both types of knowledge, pre-theoretical and categorial, constitute the initial points of reference for visual communication: the former, from its analogy with represented reality, and the latter, based on the conventional knowledge of its use and the causal effects produced or likely to be produced. They are intimately related to one another by knowledge and deductively lead to the comprehension of **implicit utterances**.

We may represent this deductive process with the diagram below, in which the relationships between the two types of knowledge, perceptual and symbolic, are shown in parallel and in synthesis:

*Diagram nº 1: Relationships and synthesis of implicit utterances or meaning*

- A parallel relationship between the exhibitions of two aspects of reality. In visual utterances a **fragment of perceptual reality (fpr)** is represented, in the same way as in interpretive utterances certain contents or a **semantic fragment of symbolic reality (sfsr)** are shown.

- An epistemic and parallel relationship between experience and its objects. Just like the cognitive referent of the **act of observation** is the **perceptual reality represented**, in the **act of comprehension** this referent is found in the **reality** that shapes the **symbolic object uttered**.
As the final objective, in this process there is a relationship of synthesis between the act of observation and that of comprehension that gives rise to the **implicit utterance**, in that its meaning can be deduced from the perceptual and symbolic elements shown.

Due to the symmetry among conceptual relationships, a visual utterance is not merely a simple experience of a fragment of reality but rather, from this *lived experience* we adopt an interpretive attitude and attempt to understand its implicit meaning. Within a framework of elements that shape visual utterances, the observer, transformed into an interpreter, applies his or her pre-theoretical and categorial knowledge to deduce their meaning.

Understanding the **implicit meaning** of an image, therefore, means capturing the perceptual structures of re-presentational elements and then approaching the structures that generate expressions to transform them into products that *say something*.

**Altered information and sense of inferred utterances**

In communication, the person producing the utterance does not only provide pre-theoretical, intuitive information about reality, in which images are mere substitutes for experienced reality. Rather, they also aim to say something beyond conventional content about that reality by referring to the level of social objects.

To supply this information, the sender alters the conventionally predictable information so that the receiver may recognize, despite the change, his or her willingness to cooperate communicatively and *infer things* that do not directly correspond to the visual stimuli received.

If we previously discussed **meaning** as a product of the indications comprising the images shown, when we refer to inferred utterances we will employ the term **sense**, in other words its meaning plus the contextual and situational indications its suggests. The modification or purposeful alteration of a visual utterance does not pose difficulties for the effectiveness of a communicative act but rather achieves precisely the opposite result: it increases effectiveness, since its acceptability does not depend on whether it is correct or incorrect but rather on making it suitable, based on our knowledge from competence, to the system of mutual understanding.

Unlike meaning, the sense of images is not a property that is logically deducible from *what is shown* and therefore sense is not at all related to the *logical* values of the utterance. Sense is not defined by images but rather by the interpretive situation generated by those images. (3)
We will analyze the basic procedure for information that is not pronounced, in other words, information that is shaped by indications that the sender wants to transmit, albeit not explicitly, but which the receiver is assumed to want to retrieve.

In this situation, both the sender and the receiver initiate an exchange in order to attribute coherent sense to uttered elements. This may lead to a third type of knowledge, knowledge from competence, which makes knowledge of an unexperienced social reality possible and comprehensible at the same time (cf. diagram nº 2).

*Diagram nº 2 Process reconstructing inferred utterance or sense*

From a natural assumption of being believable, the receiver is led to interpret the utterance as a true description of reality, except in those cases in which he or she believes that the irregularity and insufficiency of the available meaning requires a different interpretation. In these cases, the receiver, in the face of an incomplete, changed or otherwise unexpected utterance, interprets that the changed or irregular utterance must be located beyond the initial, conventional understanding that may be inferred. An alternative sense thus becomes coherent with the communicative purpose of the sender. As a result of his or her knowledge from competence, the receiver tries to delve into the set of intentions behind the visual message.

This inferential process, which is brought on by the ambiguity in or intentional change of the message, will occur if:

- The visual message is accompanied by a perceivable modification of the predictable norms or rules in an informative act;

- It is clear that this change has been effected intentionally and, despite this irregularity, the receiver believes that the sender still wants to cooperate.

The receiver, in order to maintain this belief, assumes that the sender implicitly wants to say something different from what he or she is making explicit. In spite of this irregularity in communication, the receiver, having recognized the sender’s intention to cooperate, interprets that the sender has enough reasons to not provide all the information required and thus trusts that the receiver will make an effort to search for these reasons to interpret this error or anomaly correctly.
This explains why the receiver’s initial reaction, as soon as a violation occurs, is not to accuse the sender of noncompliance but rather to assume that transmitted sense will be respected, even though a formal violation has occurred. In these cases there may arise a sense that is the result of the balance between the set of norms and maxims which, in that specific situation, govern the act of communication. (4)

From this point of view, communication may be considered a contractual activity based on participants’ efforts to cooperate. Sender and receiver must make an effort to communicate, and this effort must always be that required by the purpose and situation in which the message occurs. This effort to cooperate means that each participant, according to the principle of reciprocity, recognizes the other as an effective interlocutor and assumes that any communicative exchange has certain possibilities.

The inferential process

When faced with the evidence of a purposeful change of the message, the receiver enters into what Wittgenstein calls a state of ambiguous precision (5) which gives the message an atmosphere of indefiniteness that in this case favors the connection between the perceptual and symbolic components and facilitates exploration and establishment of a hypothesis to achieve a stable value on which to base possible senses.

First, the receiver deduces what the sender has said (what the sender wanted to express with the conventional sense of the images shown) and then, bearing the context in mind, engages a second, inferential act, that occurs indirectly. In this process of interpretation, the receiver not only applies pretheoretical and categorial knowledge, but also, when he or she believes that the utterance is insufficient, irregular or ambiguous and thus cannot assure unique and objective comprehension of the message, reconstructs intuitive knowledge to go beyond the utterance’s surface.

The sender, using his or her knowledge from competence, makes an effort to infer the set of intentionalities that have motivated the utterance in order to understand the true sense of the inferred utterance. It is no longer the implicit meaning that we usually relate to a symbolic expression, but rather the intuitive awareness of a type of comprehension that goes beyond what the utterance implies.

To achieve these inferences, we transfer the acceptance and validity of facts based on the laws of the world from our own perceptual and symbolic experience to a world of possibilities in which what the receiver expects or predicts may occur, by means of the inferential act.

Inferring the correct intention that justifies the utterance and assigning meaning to the message in the terms in which the sender intended to transmit forces the receiver to attempt to overcome an initial phase of disorientation when he or she believes the utterance is altered or insufficient. The sender, with the aid
of knowledge from competence, begins to disambiguate the message. The first goal of this operation is to detect the relevant elements in the utterance and to use them to construct a proper context in which to apply a set of believable assumptions.

In this phase of the process, the relevance of the elements depends on how these same elements modify the receiver’s expectations. A fact will be relevant to the extent that it is understood in an unconventional manner and thus assumed to be a special structure.

Visual stimuli only make reality ostensive so that the receiver can construct the inference necessary to allow him or her to elaborate and recover the true communicative purpose. As Sperber and Wilson said (6), what is given is not the context but rather the assumption that what has been said (or shown, we may add) is relevant.

In other words, although inferred thoughts have their origins in visual stimuli shown, the stimuli are not the direct cause. The relevant elements of an utterance only enable one of the thoughts or assumptions to exist in the mind of the receiver. They shape the context from which the inferential process will begin.

As a result, comprehension of an utterance judged to be intentionally insufficient, in that it attempts to say something that it does not say, forces the receiver to analyze the relevant facts that the utterance manifests in relation to the context it creates. This inference manifests itself from two different yet complementary perspectives:

a) In the case of observation, it manifests itself as a perceptual reality that is insufficiently represented. The sender does not express a segment of the utterance and leaves it to the competent receiver to reestablish this intentional absence (Diagram nº 1).

b) In the act of comprehension, it manifests itself as an insufficient reality that shapes the uttered symbolic object. The sender leaves out an element of thought and allows the competent receiver to reestablish this intentional absence (Diagram nº 2).

In the former case, we refer to the implicit meaning proper to pretheoretical knowledge. The activation that leads one to assume that the sense of the alteration is motivated by a network of conceptual relationships that is constrained by everything that may be assumed or is possible. It allows completion of the true content that the sender wanted to communicate by means of the irregular or insufficient utterance, thereby reestablishing the harmony of the expressed utterance.

In case b) when receivers attempt to interpret an utterance that manifests deletion of elements of thought, they activate their categorial knowledge and knowledge from competence in order to make sense of the utterance.
The inferred utterance goes beyond the images shown, since the receiver must resort to the sense that can be inferred from the duly contextualized utterance.

The correct interpretation of the fact suggested will depend on the full competence of the receiver and on the interpretive fact produced in him or her. Inferences, the sense of a visual utterance, must be sought in the act of utterance and the opportunity for use, always within a context of assumptions and intuitive conclusions that the receiver draws upon from his or her overall communicative competence.

We may conclude with the following summary:

1. The process of inference, from which new senses beyond the meaning of the image will emerge, is not only conditioned by what is shown but also by the comprehension of its use in a specific context.

2. The context is shaped by the set of thoughts that the competent receiver has or imagines as true at a specific moment in time. These thoughts come from the set of experiences that an individual has as a representation of the real world: personal opinions, assumptions, beliefs, desires, etc.

3. Based upon this context, the receiver establishes a set of hypotheses or assumptions that, within the limits of his or her memory, his or her degree of attention or interest and the rules of deduction that he or she possesses, automatically lead (7) to inference of a relevant sense, in relation to the assumptions and information that he or she has stored in memory and that are judged to be reasonable and not trivial.

4. Each assumption suggests new assumptions, and their combination produces new synthetic inferences. The new inferred situation, in turn, combines with preexisting assumptions to change and improve the context.

5. Contextual effects reinforcing previous assumptions are deduced from this confrontation, which allows one to continually supply knowledge from what has been shown to that which has been said.

6. The act of competence, with its inferences, enriches the act of communication to the extent that it complements information that is not precise enough, thereby broadening its meaning.

7. Inferential interpretation allows the receiver to personalize sense. Receivers become coauthors of the discourse, and therefore identify themselves with it more closely.
(1) We believe that utterances, and not images, are exchanged in visual communication. A visual utterance corresponds to images completed by information extracted from the situation in which the images are produced. A visual utterance, therefore, is the product of the utterance of images.

(2) Clearly, certain continued practices over time are conventionally assigned to images as if they had their own meaning. We thus consider certain images to be more appropriate than others for a specific communicative act.


