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## VERBAL AND VISUAL SEMANTIC STRATEGIES IN THE MULTIMODAL NARRATIVE OF A GRAPHIC NOVEL

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to study semantic strategies in the verbal-visual narrative of a graphic novel. An attempt is made to examine the way the multimodality of the graphic novel affects the functioning of semantic strategies in the narrative, particularly, how verbal and visual elements are applied in the text in order to create a semantic strategy. A semantic strategy in a literary text is understood here as a combination of devices and tactics used by the author to actualize an important theme which eventually will lead to the conceptual meaning of the text. In a graphic novel, the conceptual meaning is ultimately shaped by overlapping of the three structural levels of connectedness (verbal, visual, verbal-visual) and passes the three stages of creating a narrative: (a) building surface cohesion, (b) building coherence through literary elements, and (c) forming the conceptual meaning. Thus, the arsenal of a semantic strategy in a multimodal text includes lexical, grammatical, stylistic devices, as well as graphic and paralinguistic ones, and various verbal and visual tactics. The combination of structural and semantic analysis and conceptual approach to a multimodal text allowed identifying a number of verbal and/or visual means and tactics employed in major semantic strategies rendering the conceptual themes of a graphic novel on the example of *Everyday Matters* by Danny Gregory.

**Keywords:** multimodal text, graphic novel, verbal and visual, semantic strategies, cohesion, coherence

### INTRODUCTION

In this article we will attempt to outline a complex approach to the structural and semantic analysis of multimodal texts on the example of Danny Gregory's graphic novel *Everyday Matters* [1]. This novel is a first-person autobiographical narrative about a tragedy that led to disability of the author's wife; it tells the story of how the accident changed the life of the narrator's family (including their baby boy) and explores the process of coming to terms with their new changed life. It is about dealing with disappointment and learning to appreciate every moment of one's life. The novel combines autobiography and fiction, therefore we will further refer to the figure of the autobiographical narrator as 'narrator'.

When linguists use the name *graphic novel* to describe a certain type of text, they mean, in most general terms, a narrative that combines two modes of communication – verbal language (words) and iconic signs (images, especially drawings). Determining the difference between a graphic novel and other types of comic art has been a problematic task for the researchers, and there is still no agreement on the terminology and definitions. What are the generic features of such multimodal texts as a cartoon, comic

strip, comic book, and graphic novel? Why do we consider them as having more in common with each other than with other multimodal narratives, such as an illustrated text or a work of cinema? Romero-Jódar (2013) conducted a thorough research on the topic and suggested the term “narrative iconical subgenres” in order to differentiate the graphic narratives from other types of multimodal texts, e.g. advertisements. According to Romero-Jódar, the close connection between the verbal text and iconic signs is what unites comics and other types of multimodal texts using the same physical medium, while the narrative sequentiality is what creates a distinction between them. As for the characteristics of a graphic novel as a subgenre of the comic art, Romero-Jódar believes that although they are closely related and “share the same iconical language, comic books and graphic novels may be said to be essentially different in their use of narrative time. This fact allows graphic novels to explore and create more complex narrative structures” [2]. Indeed, it is no accident that the word *novel* has been used in this term.

From the compositional point of view, the graphic novel is a narrative made of the inseparable combination of language and images, i.e. it is “fully creolized”, using the term coined by Russian linguists Sorokin and Tarasov [3]. Drawings are woven into the narrative and together with words they become equal participants of the multimodal text, which can be defined as a linguistic and visual phenomenon combining language and images in order to create a structural and semantic whole. Two semiotic codes interact, enter semantic and grammatical relationship, affect each other, and build the spatial and temporal composition of a graphic novel [4].

What is of particular interest for the present research is that *Everyday Matters* is not a typical comic art graphic novel where a chain of panels contains consecutive images and phrases that create the sequential verbal-visual narrative. First of all, there are no comic panels in *Everyday Matters*, the verbal text and images are deliberately spread across the page in various structural combinations at the author’s discretion. Second, the drawings are not semantically sequential; each next drawing does not derive from the previous one. They are semantically connected with the verbal text rather than with each other. Nonetheless, it *is* a multimodal text and it *is* a graphic novel, because unlike an illustrated novel, *Everyday Matters* is essentially a verbal-visual narrative where one cannot separate the verbal text from the drawings without destroying the cohesion and coherence of the story.

## APPROACHING A GRAPHIC NOVEL

Whenever there is a text, there is a relationship between the author and the reader where the author’s primary pragmatic task is to organize the elements of the text (elements of different semiotic systems, in the case of a multimodal text) so that the communicative purpose would be achieved. The main communicative purpose of a literary text is to make the reader perceive the conceptual meaning of the text. A necessary pre-condition for such perception is the existence of interpretable structural ties and semantic connections between the textual elements. Connectedness of a multimodal text composed of verbal and visual elements occurs on three structural levels:

- 1) connection between verbal components;
- 2) connection between visual components;
- 3) connection between verbal and visual components.

There are two types of connectedness on all the three structural levels: cohesion and coherence. The elements of a text are related to each other semantically – that is why a text is perceived by a reader as a *meaningful* whole, – and these semantic relations are expressed through lexical and grammatical means, which is true for both cohesion and coherence.

Such being the case, what is the fundamental difference between cohesion and coherence? Most researchers define cohesion after Halliday and Hasan (1976) as the semantic relations between the elements of a text that are realized through grammar and vocabulary [5]. Cohesion lies on the surface of the text and creates its texture, i.e. “threads of meaning <...> interwoven in such ways that readers can (normally) construct coherent interpretations” [6]. Coherence, on the other hand, is generally understood as a more subjective category that is directly related to the reader’s perception. Coherence is the result of the reader’s interpretation of the text and depends on the degree of the interaction between the text and the reader. Other important aspects of coherence are the current situational, social and historical context at the time of reading, and the background information that the reader possesses and is able to use for the interpretation of a literary work [7].

Textual means of creating cohesion and coherence can be analyzed from several perspectives. First, a researcher could place the emphasis on the lexicogrammatical connections between the elements of the text and try to see how they interact in the process of creating cohesion and coherence. Second, attention could be turned to the role that cohesion and coherence play in creating the semantic relations between the elements of the text. And finally, it is possible to combine the two approaches in order to see the whole process of bringing into being a meaningful, unified, complete literary work. This process starts from (a) the surface level of the text where words join together into sentences, and sentences sometimes join into supra-sentential units [8] by means of lexical and grammatical relations between the elements; the process continues into (b) the deeper level of semantic and thematic relations between the elements of the text, including key-words, symbols, literary devices, that take part in building the plot, system of characters, semantic strategies, etc.; finally the process culminates at (c) the highest point of any literary work – formation of the conceptual meaning of the narrative. Apparently, these stages correspond more to the process of interpretation of a text than to the process of its creation, which presumably goes the other way around – starts with an idea and ends up with a physical realization via words (and images). These stages were described with a verbal text in mind, but they are also true for any visual text: at stage (a), the iconic signs join together to create an image; at stage (b), images join together to create a visual message; at stage (c), visual messages join together to express an idea. When we analyze a multimodal text, it all becomes yet more complicated, because we need to deal with the overlapping of the three structural levels (verbal, visual, verbal-visual) and the three stages of creating a narrative: (a) building surface cohesion, (b) building coherence through literary elements, and (c) forming the conceptual meaning.

Before we proceed to the analysis of the novel, it is necessary to describe its plot, even if in brief. *Everyday Matters* tells the story of the new life circumstances that the narrator and his family found themselves in after his wife fell off a subway platform and was run over by a train. The narrator found it extremely hard to adapt to the post-

accident reality, so he started drawing in order to keep his mind away from depressing thoughts about his present and future. All these themes are actualized in the novel through the combination of the verbal text and drawings. Below, an attempt is made to examine the process of how the verbal and visual components participate in creating the narrative. We believe that the center point of any narrative is the *conceptual meaning*: it is the expression of the author's point of view, the ideology of the whole narrative in one phrase, that is why one could say that the ultimate purpose of a literary work is to convey its conceptual meaning to the reader. The central message of *Everyday Matters* can be phrased in the shortest manner as "life is beautiful in all its manifestations". Due to the limits of a research article format, we will narrow the analysis down to one aspect of the conceptual meaning: semantic strategies.

### SEMANTIC STRATEGIES IN *EVERYDAY MATTERS*

A semantic strategy in a literary text is understood here as a combination of devices and tactics used by the author to actualize an important theme which eventually leads to the conceptual meaning of the text [9]. The arsenal of a semantic strategy in a multimodal text includes lexical, grammatical, stylistic devices, as well as graphic and paralinguistic ones, and various verbal and visual tactics. Each semantic strategy in a graphic novel is realized through both visual and verbal means.

Three major semantic strategies in *Everyday Matters* are examined in this article:

- 1) Seeing through drawing
- 2) Getting out
- 3) Searching for the meaning.

Let us observe how each strategy is implemented using verbal text, drawings, and the combination of the two.

#### 1. Semantic strategy "Seeing through drawing"

This strategy is used to express the idea of the narrator's attitude to life changing for the better with the help of drawing. We will start the analysis of this strategy with the novel's title.

Of all the verbal means that are used in this graphic novel, the title is probably the most outstanding one. It is well known that a title is one of the key elements of any text and its adequate interpretation is crucial for understanding the idea of a literary work. Lev Vygotsky argues in his fundamental work *Psychology of Art* that the title holds the key to the most important theme in a text, it outlines the dominant idea that determines the whole structure of the story. He states that every short story, painting, or poem is, without a doubt, a complex whole composed of completely different elements which are arranged into varying hierarchies of subordination and correlation, and within this complex whole there is always a dominant element which determines the composition of the rest of the story, the meaning and the title of its every part [10]. The title unites various elements of a literary work, acting as a thematic dome, under which the story unfolds.

The title *Everyday Matters* resonates with three dominant themes in this graphic novel: adapting to the life after tragedy, searching for the meaning, and drawing. It refers to the everyday reality that the narrator records day after day in his drawings. He starts

drawing because he feels the lack of something in his life and he wants to change it. At the very beginning of the novel, he actually reveals the purpose of his novel, when he talks about drawing:

*... I've found it has a power to change my life and the world around me so profoundly and I'd like to share it with you (3).*

The narrator begins with drawing the ordinary objects that surround him in his apartment, and through these sketches comes the apprehension of the beauty of everyday routine; drawing gives him a different perspective on life. The title corresponds to the words "ordinary", "routine", "every thing", "everything", that are used in the passages describing the narrator's drawing experience and attitude to life. These words are among the key words in this novel, i.e. the words that help unlock its interpretation:

*What I began to see by drawing is that everything is actually special and unique and interesting and beautiful. Everything. Just by sitting and studying it, I quickly began to penetrate beyond the categorical imperative that made me feel so afraid.*

*I saw that if everything around me looks different than I think it does, maybe the gloomy life I had been defining for us was also just an illusion (17).*

The verbal tactics that are employed to express the semantic strategy "Seeing through drawing" include using the words "drawing", "to draw" in the same context with the words "see", "look", "view": whenever the narrator *draws* the life around him, he starts *seeing* it from a different angle. The contextual meaning of the verb "see" here also calls to mind the meaning "to understand":

*Looking at a photo is looking at how someone else saw something. So my drawings become imitations rather than revelations... (37).*

This is the description of the narrator's perception of drawing:

*You allow yourself to lose all preconceptions, to shed judgment, and embrace possibility. Time's tyranny is suspended. Everything is beautiful in its complexity and singularity. You don't need to draw to see. But I do (41).*

In the fragment below, the narrator talks about drawing being a road that gives opportunities and promises change of the view:

*...I like this, it makes me better to myself, makes me reconsider a lot of things in my life, makes me take some risks and open some doors. This new path is too short for the view to be different from where I was except in my fantasies, so rather than dash them, I shall continue down it, and the landscape will change (75).*

Another tactic that the author adopts to express this semantic strategy is the use of color. This primarily visual tactic is not expressed verbally in the novel. The absolute majority of the images in the novel are black and white, that is why every instance of color calls attention to the drawing and foregrounds its meaning.

The author employs the color in the third part of the novel, in the images of Nevada, Canada, Wales, Italy, much more often than in the previous parts. Generous use of color symbolizes a change in the narrator's views on his life. The first part of the novel is full of black and white drawings of the ordinary items of daily use from his apartment. On

the contrary, the last part is abundant with colorful drawings depicting the narrator's travels. The color adds to creating binary oppositions: daily routine v. new experiences, apathy v. excitement, and shows changes in the narrator's attitude to life and the world around him.

## 2. Semantic strategy "Searching for the meaning"

This strategy is used to express the theme of trying to find the meaning of existence after the tragic accident had destroyed the old life of the narrator's family. The strategy, again, starts with the title – "everyday matters", the routine that the author had had before completely changed as the result of the tragedy:

*We began to develop new routines, reinventing even the most basic functions of life: getting dressed, cooking dinner, playing, making love (7).*

The narrator experiences depression and desperation; he feels that nothing is ever going to be fine again and life will never be the same; he feels that life has lost its meaning:

*Everything suddenly seemed up for questioning, and I was a mess (7).*

Then, through drawing, he comes to a realization that there are still meaning, value and beauty in life, that every day is important and in the end it is all a matter of perspective:

*Every day matters. I think so. I do. But I really have to work to force myself to see its value sometimes. And drawing has really helped me to do that (25).*

*We can't control what life deals us, just how we respond to it. And if we are monomaniacally focused on the bad stuff, we are missing the beauty of a half eaten apple, the sunshine on the bedspread, the smell of warm cookies (116).*

The title is intentionally ambiguous which reflects the road that the narrator has walked from the first till the last page of the novel: from a huge pile of daily problems that made his life miserable (everyday matters) to the realization of the beauty of every day and *every thing* (every day matters). This ambiguity is actualized by the drawing on the cover of the novel: it is a still life of kitchen utensils, a bowl of cereal, a carton of milk, a notebook with a pen, and a framed photograph of his wife and son. This photograph of the most precious people in the narrator's life is placed among the most routine things imaginable – household items; it is purposely lost among things that hold no sentimental value for the narrator.

## 3. Semantic strategy "Getting out"

This strategy is used to express the theme of trying to find the way out of the hopelessness that has filled the days of the narrator's life. The strategy is realized through verbal means (key words), visual means (drawings) and their combination (mutual disposition of the verbal text and drawing on the page).

One tactic that the author uses to implement the semantic strategy "Getting out" is the structural arrangement of visual and verbal elements. The surface structural organization of the verbal text plays a significant part in a graphic narrative. It can be explained by (a) the non-linear nature of multimodal texts, and (b) the non-linear aspect of the verbal component in graphic novels. Such features of the structural organization of a multimodal narrative as the graphic arrangement of the sentences, the font size, the mutual disposition of verbal and visual components have a direct impact on the meaning



of the text. *Everyday Matters* gives plenty of instances of such graphic organization. For example, the drawing of a large hospital drip bag that is filled to the brim with... the words:

*In the hospital, Patti asked me "why?" Why had this happened to her and to us? I said, "I don't care". If this was God's idea of a lesson or a punishment for a former life's transgressions, well, I wasn't interested. There couldn't be an explanation I could be bothered to accept. I was dazed and mad. What I needed to know was "What next?" How do we remake our lives and be happy again? How do we get OUTTA HERE?!! (c. 4).*

"Outta here" in this fragment refers, in the first place, to the situation that the narrator and his family ended up in after the tragedy: he wants to have their life back, he wants this nightmare to end. However, there is an additional structural and semantic relation between the verbal text and the drawing: the verbal text is placed inside the drip bag, therefore the phrase "How do we get OUTTA HERE?!!" also refers to the closed space inside the drip bag which symbolizes being confined to a hospital bed; it illustrates the seriousness of the situation – the whole world has shrunk down to this drip bag and the narrator is struggling to get out. This is an example of visual metonymy (a drip bag as a representation of hospitals and illness) and visual metaphor (the narrator feels that he is trapped and cannot get out of it – his situation is compared to the drip bag).

The other tactic used by the author to express the semantic strategy "Getting out" is the gradual change in the objects the narrator depicts. The sequence of drawings in this graphic novel can be divided into three parts: in the first third of the novel, the drawings are images of objects that surround the narrator in his apartment (pages 6-37); in the second third of the novel (which, by the way, begins with the passage: *Time to get out. I've drawn every damned thing in our apartment, from the she trees to the ice trace. Tim to feel a little less safe and see how I deal* (38)), the drawings are the images of the streets of New York, the city where the narrator's family lives (pages 38-85); in the last third of the novel, the sketches are the objects from and sceneries of other cities and countries that the narrator's family travels across (pages 86-107). This tactic serves to implicitly and indirectly demonstrate the process of regaining his freedom: first, getting outside, into the streets; then – getting out of the city and the country; and, finally, getting out of the depression.

## CONCLUSION

The graphic novel is a multimodal text that belongs to the genre of comic art, but possesses certain distinctive features, both structural and conceptual, that allow researchers to talk about the *discourse* of graphic novels.

Coherence in a graphic novel is essential for the conceptual integrity that makes the deeper basis of a narrative. The concept, or idea, that permeates the narrative from the beginning till the end, is what is generally called the conceptual meaning. It is the central idea of a text that expresses the author's attitude to the fragment of reality depicted in the text, one could describe it as the author's point of view. The conceptual meaning is realized in a text through the use of semantic strategies – the sets of verbal and visual devices and tactics employed by the author to express a certain theme or idea. A graphic novel is characterized by the active participation of the visual component in

rendering important themes and ideas through (a) its content, (b) its semantic interaction with the verbal component, and (c) its structural interaction with the verbal component.

The dominant semantic strategies in *Everyday Matters*, "Seeing through drawing", "Searching for the meaning" and "Getting out" are employed in order to lead the reader to the interpretation of the conceptual meaning of the text, which can be summed up as "one can find the beauty in the smallest, most trivial things in life". The techniques that are used to implement the semantic strategies include verbal (e.g., title, keywords, syntax), visual (e.g., images, color) and verbal-visual (e.g., graphic interaction of text and image) means. Verbal and visual means constantly interact, creating grammatical and semantic bonds which form the multimodal narrative of a graphic novel.

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