Dilemmatic visual situations in press photographs:
A photo elicitation-based semiotic perspective of the Greek crisis

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ABSTRACT

In a small-scale study, we applied the photo elicitation technique as a research method to get a visual semiotic perspective of post-graduate students' views regarding press articles on the contemporary Greek crisis. We aimed to identify a relationship between the verbal aspect of news articles and the visual message of the accompanying photograph. Photo elicitation, based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview, was combined with the commutation test to isolate important signifying qualities. A questionnaire tested whether visual or verbal elements of press articles carry important meaning, and by replacing these elements with other ones, or removing them completely, we examined if this affects the overall meaning significantly. The research strategy allowed for the open expression of students' dilemmas while providing concrete talking points. Thus, it was the photos and their content that became the focus of discussion, rather than the subjects themselves. This seems to have triggered confidence, leading subjects to reveal their attitudes and values. By using Greimas' concept of isotopies, we identified repetition of basic meanings, which establishes some level of familiarity within the press stories, thus allowing for uniform readings and interpretations. However, further research, such as face-to-face interviews, is required to verify the results.

1. THE AIMS AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The main driving force behind this research has been the intention to help university students increase their awareness of the visual aspect in foreign language acquisition. As a research and educational tool, we used a technique called photo elicitation (Harper, 2002). This research is part of a recent series of theoretical and research studies we have conducted to examine the visual-verbal relation (e.g. Christodoulou and Damaskinidis, 2012). Through our research, we aim to contribute to the curriculum of a post-graduate course offered by the Italian Language and Literature Department of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece. We also that this research will help us inform theoretical approaches of the non-verbal semiotic elements in foreign language acquisition in general. In this article, we begin by outlining the visual semiotic perspective that underpins this research. Secondly, we present the theoretical framework of the photo elicitation technique that the methodological tool of this research was based on. Thirdly, we describe the methodological tool we used to collect visual and verbal data from certain data-texts. Fourthly, we present a sample from the data collected and a preliminary analysis of the results yielded. We conclude with an overall evaluation of the research and our future steps.

2. A VISUAL SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

Our visual semiotic perspective is governed by the fact that the visual is a social research process. Jewitt and Oyama's (2001) theoretical investigation of the concept of 'semiotic mode' is based on social semiotics. This theoretical approach investigates human signifying practices in specific social and cultural circumstances (Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou, 1992). The method allows viewers to create their own interpretations and interconnections about visual material. At the same, it creates windows on the world and offers subjective points of view, which are socially determined.

This perspective is possible if we move away from pure language and adopt the concept of 'semiotic mode'. This would require a broadening of traditional views about language. Linguists, for example, have started to realize that verbal language may not be adequate by itself to discuss the various intersemiotic relations between certain verbal and non-verbal aspects of multimodal texts, such as the translation of humour in film and comics. Hortin (1994) supports the validation of visual language within a visual literacy framework and argues for the establishment of an analogy between verbal and visual language. However, despite the foregrounding of semiotic elements other than language in the production of modern texts, the fact that 'most Western societies remain print dominated' (Hull and Nelson, 2005, p. 2) makes any effort to discuss non-verbal modes of communication a difficult task.

Such a discussion could be facilitated if we adopt Greimas' (1966) theory of structural semantic isotopy. By describing the coherence and homogeneity of different multimodal texts, we could find the isotopies in these texts and thus detect when there is a repetition of a basic meaning trait (seme). In press articles, this would involve the examination (at least) of the caption and any accompanying visual material, such as a photograph. Such a repetition, which establishes some level of familiarity within the texts, would allow readers to find if there is a uniform reading/interpretation of them. In this case, the focus would be to bring to light potential ways that the polysemous photographs are disambiguated or complicated by the co-occurrence of the captions.

3. THE PHOTO ELICITATION TECHNIQUE

Photo elicitation is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph in a research interview (Harper, 2002). Photo elicitation sharpens the informant's memory and reduces areas of misunderstanding. It prods latent memory, and stimulates and releases emotion statements. This method, which is useful in empirical studies, was incorporated in a questionnaire and combined with Barthes' commutation test (1964) to isolate important signifying qualities. In brief, the commutation test is one way to test whether something (here, a visual element) carries important meaning, to change it (by replacing it with another visual element), or remove it completely from an object of art (here a newspaper article), and then see if this affects the overall meaning significantly.

By employing the method of photo elicitation, we aimed to trigger lexical knowledge through visualisation. With this aim in mind, Abousnnouga and Machin (2010: 139) urge Van Leeuwen to use photo-elicitation in his work to 'think about the meaning potential of typefaces that are tall versus stocky or slim versus fat'. In our research, the respondents had to compare and contrast photos which share some visual elements and are relevant to the verbal element of the text(s) given. This technique was expected to allow for open expression while providing concrete talking points. Harper (2002) argues that one type of image often used in photo elicitation is that depicting events that are part of collective or institutional pasts. In the context of our research, the photos selected depict events that occurred in the respondents' recent past. Therefore, these photos connect the individual to recent occurrences or the current crisis, even if they do not reflect the research subjects' actual lives.

4. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

A questionnaire was sent by e-mail, in February 2012, to fifty randomly selected post-graduate students studying a range of humanities and social science courses at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the Hellenic Open University. There were no specific criteria for choosing these students; they simply had to be studying at a university. We set a response deadline of less than one month for the questionnaire. The seven data-texts were drawn from the Greek high-circulation daily newspaper *Kathimerini*. We had set a range of criteria for choosing these data-texts: They had to be published in 2011, written in Greek (thus requiring no translation), and related to the Greek crisis in some way. Although this relation is definitely 'arbitrary', every effort was made to ensure that these data-texts would not mislead the respondents.

In particular, we chose only the title and the caption to make it easier for the respondents to complete the questionnaire. In addition, we wanted to contribute to what Caple (2008) calls the

'image-nuclear news story'. According to Caple (ibid: 126), 'the heading and the image work together to form a nucleus, from which the evaluative stance of the newspaper towards that particular story can be read. The caption then goes on to locate the image participants and their actions within a particular context'. In our data-texts, it was expected that the word-image interplay would initially engage the students in literal play between lexical items in the heading and the image. This interplay, including the caption, would then take other forms, like alliteration and allusions that test their cultural knowledge. The questionnaire consisted of twenty four open-ended questions divided into five sections. For the purposes of this paper, these questions are presented in list form in Table 1.
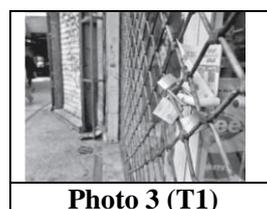
Table 1. *Questionnaire*

Questions in list form
• Which photograph accompanies the title/caption?   • Which text/caption accompanies the photograph?   • Which dilemmas did you have in choosing the photograph or text/caption?   • Which elements of the photograph affected your choice?   • Which key words of the title/caption affected your choice?   • Which was the greatest difficulty in making your choices?   • Which criteria guided your choices most?   • Explain briefly your answers as a whole.   • Choose a photograph from any internet source to accompany the title and the caption. Describe briefly the criteria for your choice, the selection procedure and the dilemmas that came up.   • Write a caption for the photograph (max 50 words).   • Choose one of the five choices below to explain briefly how the wider political and socio-economic context of this period affected your answers.   DECISIVELY – VERY MUCH – WELL ENOUGH – VERY LITTLE – NOT AT ALL

These questions were asked for each data-text (here in translation) and were meant to create various dilemmas that would play the role of rhetorical elicitation devices. Two visual-verbal alternatives were offered for each verbal-visual problem, as illustrated in Figures 1 to 3. The parenthetical information next to the photos indicates the correct choice for each caption. In Figures 4 and 5, the students were asked to find a photograph and write a caption, respectively.
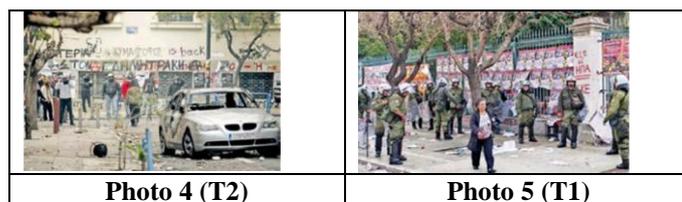
	(Under Liquidation) – (Closing Down) – (Everything Below Cost)	
	Photo 1 (T)	**Photo 2**
TITLE	Lack of political unity in EU	
CAPTION	During the 1930 recession, profitability and investment activity were restored by stimulating demand, while in the 1970-1980 recession profitability was restored by holding down wages, reducing rates and integrating Eastern countries into the world market.	

Figure 1. *Data-text A*

Photo 3 (T1)

T1	TITLE	53,000 small and medium businesses to be padlocked for good.
	CAPTION	Almost 15% to 20% of all properties in Ermou and Kolonaki are empty, while authorities say that more than 25% of the shops in the wider area of the historical centre remain vacant.
T2	TITLE	Pressure on owners of business properties
	CAPTION	In the summer of 2010, 15% of registered companies closed down — a percentage that increased to 21% in the winter of 2011 and is now up to 25%. Of the 342,000 commercial companies started in August 2011, 255,000 survived and 69,000 closed down.

Figure 2. *Data-text B*

		Photo 4 (T2)	Photo 5 (T1)

T1	TITLE	Anti-authoritarians take action
	CAPTION	Officials of the Ministry of Citizen Protection fear anti-authoritarian 'intervention' amidst this period of social fluidity, on the anniversary of the Polytechnic uprising.
T2	TITLE	No sanctuary this year for the National Technical University of Athens on the anniversary of the 1973 uprising
	CAPTION	Fear of unrest after the customary protest march to the US embassy has led to talk about a crash test for the implementation of the new bill protecting higher education institutes.

Figure 3. *Data-text C*

Photo 6	
TITLE	By 2013, 13,000 jobs will have been lost in banking
CAPTION	In addition to personnel cutbacks, banks are also planning to sell their assets in 2012.

Figure 4. *Data-text D*

Photo 7	
TITLE	There is Personal Dignity
CAPTION	

Figure 5. *Data-text E*

The word 'dilemma' has a negative connotation, since choosing one of two alternatives results in losing the advantages of the alternative not selected. We manipulated this negative connotation by having the respondents find a solution and adapt the strategies they adopted to honour the opposing values. We tried to achieve this research goal by providing the verbal-visual problems shown in the examples above with two visual-verbal alternatives.

5. THE RESEARCH RESULTS

Out of the fifty people to whom we submitted the questionnaire, twenty-four responded in less than three weeks. The respondents were twenty-two females and two males with an average age of thirty-one years. In general, the answers were detailed and all the respondents justified their answers to various degrees. In other words, it is safe to assume that a fair amount of time was devoted to answering the questions. Due to the limited space available here, we will present only the isotopies identified and the association of the texts to the photographs.

Figure 6 shows the isotopies we have identified from analysing the students' selection of visuals in response to the question asking them to find a photograph that could accompany Figure 4.

Isotopy of space (5 photos)	Isotopy of currency (5 photos)	Isotopy of technology (3 photos)
Selling on credit · Selling for cash	BANKS	Banks. The death of the middle class...
Isotopy of stakeholders (3 photos)	Isotopy of branding (3 photos)	Isotopy of social impact (5 photos)

Figure 6. *Photo isotopies based on students' selection of visuals (Photo 6)*

The isotopy of space is about the bank as a place where public transactions occur. The photos show people queuing at bank counters. The common thread here is that they are typical journalistic photos, taken inside a bank. The isotopy of currency is about the material manifestation of money. Three photos show bank notes (euros) and one some gold coins. These photos differ from the rest in that they are 'staged'. We can see pliers holding euros, bank notes and coins with a calculator and a pen, a bank clerk's hand taking money out of a till, and gold coins next to a safe-deposit box. The isotopy of technology consists of the collage shown in Figure 6 (the photograph of a desperate man on an ATM display) and the front page of a newspaper whose main article is accompanied by a photograph of the EU's prime ministers after a summit meeting. The ATM collage was chosen by two different respondents. The isotopy of stakeholders consists of three cartoons which are a lampoon of the banking system's role in modern society. The isotopy of branding covers the main banking theme. The graphic shown in Figure 6 was chosen by two respondents. The isotopy of social impact consists of a number of photos and graphics that illustrate the effect of banking on people's lives, such as debt-ridden people committing suicide, street riots and the cruel bureaucratic face of the banking system.

Table 2 shows how the respondents related the photographs to the data-texts. The square brackets indicate the correct answers.

Table 2. *Association of texts to photographs*

Photographs chosen by the respondents for each data text
Data-text A   Photo 1 = [19] Photo 2 = 5
Data-text B   Text 1 = [21] Text 2 = 3
Data-text C   Photo 4 / Text 2 = **[-]** Photo 5 / Text 1 = 24

According to Table 2, the majority of the respondents associated the correct photographs with data-texts A and B. Lexical items had a major impact on their answers. For example, in Data-text A, the signs 'Under Liquidation' and 'Closing Down' led them to Photo 1. In Data-text B, the word 'padlocked' in the title left the respondents with almost no alternative but to choose Text 1. In Data-text C, they made it quite clear that the word 'anti-authoritarians' compelled them to (incorrectly) choose Photo 4, despite any reservations that they may have had.

6. CONCLUSION

The questionnaire provided a stimulus for students to bring in the visual as a key aspect in verbal discussion. Verbal-visual dilemmas broadened students' perspective of their choices in making visual-verbal associations. There has been a uniformly negative perspective of the situations depicted by the data-texts. In Figure 1, for example, no one associated the empty office as a positive sign; e.g. a recently established or renovated company. Photo elicitation has the potential to become a research and educational tool in language teaching and learning. Despite the lack of formal standards for assessing visual literacy levels, evidence suggests that familiarity with the visual – the visual literacy level – varies among the respondents. For a more complete evaluation of the answers, face-to-face interviews with students are needed so as to elicit more information about their choices. At the moment, we are planning a post-graduate course in foreign language acquisition by employing photo-elicitation techniques. The literature review and our past experience in teaching a visual literacy course suggest that visual literacy is an essential language skill for social reasons, no matter the teaching subject. In analysing and interpreting the results, we have demonstrated a high degree of reflexivity, but it should be taken into account that our Greek identity might have affected our interpretation. Finally, we aim to build on this experience and design an introductory course in image analysis for undergraduate students in Aristotle University's Italian Language and Literature Department.

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