

A Detextulaized Social Caricature as a Source of Plural Denotations

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Abstract:

The sense of contradiction between Gernsheim's statement (cited in Bisi, 2015: p. 228), image language is universal and that of Fairclough's (1992), image can be a source of ambiguity and creativity, has pushed the researchers to conduct the present study. Besides, surveying the literature review of caricature images, the researchers have found that still much work needs to be done as far as images are concerned in different disciplines in general and in linguistics in particular to bridge the many gaps there. Accordingly, the objective of the current research is to examine students' ability to identify the denotative key-signs that help access and share the intended denotative meaning and/or highlight other denotative meaning potentials from a detextualised image caricature. To achieve the objective of the study, the researchers adopted a cognitive semantic model, Domain Analysis by Ronald Langacker (1987) amalgamated with the semiotic concept of denotation by Ronald Barthes from his theory entitled Mythologies (1957). The study has revealed that only (19%) of the respondents were able to fully access the right denotative meaning. This very low percentage revealed the fact that the respondents could not invest the identified denotational key-signs in building the right denotational meaning.

Key Words: Denotation, Caricature Image, Denotative Domains, Plural Denotations.

Introduction

The head contains most of the senses. You feel over all, but you hear, see, smell and taste with the head. You also think with the head. It's the center of the universe; really ... I don't put any more emphasis than I think should be there (Neel; cited in Allara, 1998, p.33).

Images are signs as Arnheim states (1969, p.137) and the sign, regardless its types, consists of two layers of meaning as Barthes (1957) maintains in his semiotic theory of *Mythologies*: Denotation and Connotation.

Speaking of the layer of denotation, it has been shown that there is a consensus on the meaning of this concept. For instance, Kim (1996, p. 24) states that the term denotation indicates “a simple, unambiguous, direct relationship between a sign and its referent”. That is, the obviousness entails no quarrel at its meaning. Kim (ibid., pp. 27 & 25) goes on saying that the layer of denotation is concerned with what and represents the most fundamental basis of communication. Stratton (1999, p. 27) mentions that denotation reflects “the perceptual meaning”. Lane and Lynn (2000, p. 52) add that the denotative meaning “captures the physical and descriptive attributes of objects, attributes that may assist us in discriminating one object from another”. Mott (2009, p. 68) defines the denotative meaning as “a type of meaning that is also called cognitive, descriptive, conceptual, referential, propositional, extensional, factual or objective.” Barthes (cited in White, 2012, p.16) further says that the denotative meaning “refers to a neutral or what some would call ‘objective’ designation or indication of that which is represented... first-order message.” In this respect, Barthes (cited in White, 2012, pp.17 &22) states that denotation reflects the “common sense’ perception of the photograph- it captures what was actually there at some point in time.... it represents the analogous depiction of the photograph.”

Despite the consensus over the meaning of the term denotation, some scholars as Verderber et. al. (2008, p. 190) support the idea that

in some situations the denotative meaning of a word may not be clear [because the] dictionary definitions reflect current and past practices in the language community. [In addition,] dictionaries use words to define words. The end result is that words are defined differently in different dictionaries and may include multiple meanings that change over time.

This sense of contradiction is iterated in many scholars’ statements. Cases in point are the following: Gernsheim maintains that image language is universal while Fairclough (1992) states that an image can be a source of ambiguity and creativity. Moreover, William Saroyan’s (cited in Lester, 2014, p. 425) very famous quote reads, “One picture is worth a thousand words. Yes, but only if you look at the picture and say or think the thousand words”. In addition, the great documentary photographer, Lewis Hine (1874-1940), who often uses words to accompany his photographs says, "If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera" (Cited in Sampsell-Willmann, [1908]2009, p. 11). However, it is still beyond question that words and pictures possess different languages.

All the statements mentioned above confirm that images have language and that they help clarify the meaning created by words. Besides, images represent an economic way to say things. The feature of economy, in turn, can be invested in developing the senses of ambiguity and creativity as well. Thus, the question that lays itself here is that: How can the feature of universality, which reflects the clarity of meaning, be a source of ambiguity and creativity? It is this contradictory aspect in image reading that boosts the researchers towards conducting the present study.

Literature Review

Many studies have been conducted on images from different perspectives. Price-Rankin (2001), for instance, conducts a study to examine the role of gender in online newspapers. Danjoux (2005) researches political cartoon in an attempt to explore the ability of political cartoons to provide the interests and norms that reflect the ideological decisions in conflict. Wurtz (2005) assumes, in her study entitled “A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Websites from High-Context Cultures and Low-Context Cultures”, that there are stylistic differences in communication across cultures. Such differences are expected to create challenges among the websites when communicating their messages. Keegan (2007) studies the effectiveness of using images in teaching materials to improve students’ learning experiences in mass lectures. Abdul Jabbar (2009) researches semiotically political cartoons and concludes that political cartoons express their meanings through analogy, irony, exaggerations, labels and captions. Abd. Rahim and Mun (2010) study the role of gender in advertisements, and its effect on the advertised brand image as viewed by the Malaysian consumer. Adejuwon and Alimis (2011) conduct a study on the political cartoons in Nigeria to analyze some socio-political and economic issues that are essential to the political process in Nigeria. Kem (2011) conducts a study under the title “Representation on College and University Websites: An Approach Using Critical Discourse Analysis”. The purpose of this study is to understand the way colleges and universities use language to represent themselves on their institutional websites (ie., the Official Websites of Higher Education Institutions). In (2012), Utaberta, Jalali, Johar, Surat, and Che-Anis conduct their research entitled “Building Facade Study in Lahijan City, Iran: The Impact of Facade's Visual Elements on Historical Image”. The researchers try to identify the architectural and urban elements that affect the image of historical building facades. Totry and Medzinis (2013)

demonstrate the ability of cartoons to reflect geographic, social, economic and political information on a given culture.

In what has been surveyed so far, one can see that still much more work needs to be done as far as images are concerned in different disciplines in general and in linguistics in particular to bridge the many gaps there.

Methodology of the Study

As far as the present study is concerned, it is a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative approach. It is qualitative as it implies a subjective description and interpretation to the selected image by the respondents. In this respect, Duff (2008, p. 47) maintains that "qualitative approach is associated with an interpretive, humanistic orientation, and nonobjective methodology." It is also quantitative as the analysis of the respondents' answers will be statistically dealt with. In this regard, MacDonald and Headlam (1986, p. 35) maintain that "qualitative methods can tell you how people feel and what they think, but cannot tell you how many of the target population feel or think that way as quantitative methods can."

The selected image was submitted to the jury members in a cover letter. The latter consists of the following items: a cover letter, the selected caricature, a set of two open-ended questions, and a scoring rubric that was also designed by the researchers themselves. After taking into account all jury members' comments and valuable remarks, the researchers have moved to the second step, which is conducting the pilot study.

The pilot study was conducted two weeks before submitting the questioned-based caricature in its final form. It was conducted on (30) randomly selected respondents from the Third Stage/Morning Classes of English Department/ College of Education for Women/ Baghdad University.

In the main study, the number of the respondents was (100) third stage college students. The place was one of the classes in Baghdad University/ College of Education for Woman/ Department of English. The starting time was from 8:30 till 9:00. The image was taken from the Iraqi monthly published Magazine, Narjes. It has been established at the end of 2004. The magazine is concerned with social issues of Iraqi society. Further, it gains the first position among Iraqi magazines after doing a survey/ questionnaire in 2013 and 2014 (Hassan, 2014, p. 3).

The image is about Mother's Day. The mother appears sad with a photo of her son giving her a red flower. The main objects are: an old woman, a young man, a red flower, a photo hanged on the wall with a black ribbon, and the tears of the mother. The black ribbon on the photo connotes the son is dead and the tears of the mother represent the idea that the mother is sad and is longing for her son. The caption the caricaturist puts at the bottom of the image was translated by the researchers to read as such:

-To the Iraqi mother.. In her Mother's Day!!

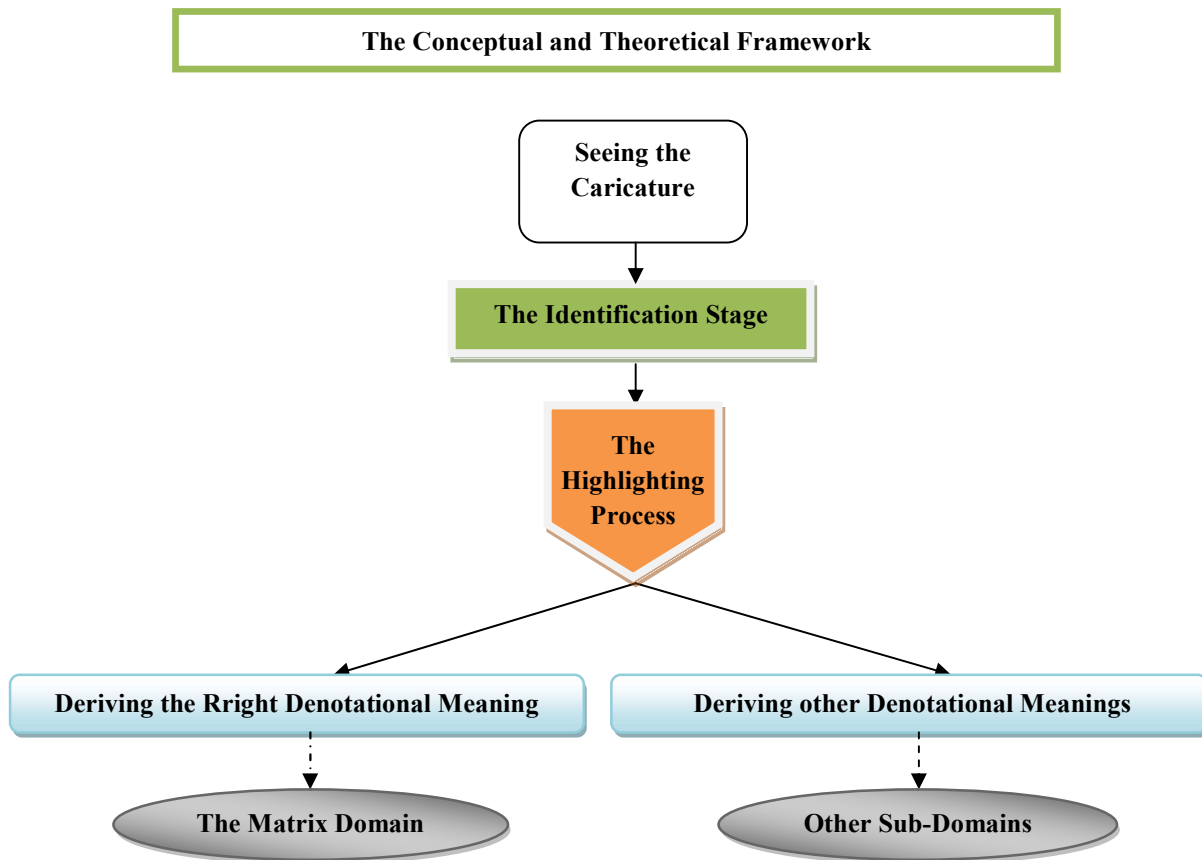
For the caricaturist, the red flower is a symbolism for the gift to be presented in such an occasion. Consider the following Figure:

Figure: (1)
Mother's Day (cited in Narjes, Iraqi Monthly Women' Magazine, 2004)



Before displaying the image in question, the researchers asked the respondents to prepare a sheet of paper for the answer. At the end, the researchers had to collect the respondents' identifications and denotational interpretations to the displayed caricature to be ready for the analysis using the following theoretical and conceptual framework:

Diagram: (1)



Findings

Rubric: (1)

The Respondents' Ability to Identify the Denotative Key-Signs and Access the Intended Denotative Meaning, or Highlight Other Denotative Meaning Potentials

Respondents	Q1			Q2			
	0	1	2	0	1	2	3
	NI	SI	FI	IUD	CUD	IRD	CRD
Respondent 1		1					3
Respondent 2		1					3
Respondent 3			2			2	
Respondent 4		1				2	
Respondent 5	0					2	
Respondent 6		1					3
Respondent 7		1			1		
Respondent 8		1			1		
Respondent 9			2			2	
Respondent 10	0					2	
Respondent 11		1				2	
Respondent 12			2				3
Respondent 13		1		0			
Respondent 14			2			2	
Respondent 15		1				2	
Respondent 16			2			2	
Respondent 17		1			1		
Respondent 18		1				2	
Respondent 19		1				2	
Respondent 20		1					3
Respondent 21		1				2	
Respondent 22		1				2	
Respondent 23		1		0			
Respondent 24	0					2	
Respondent 25		1				2	
Respondent 26		1			1		
Respondent 27		1				2	
Respondent 28		1				2	
Respondent 29		1				2	
Respondent 30		1				2	
Respondent 31		1				2	
Respondent 32		1				2	
Respondent 33		1					3
Respondent 34		1					3
Respondent 35		1			1		
Respondent 36		1				2	
Respondent 37		1				2	
Respondent 38			2			2	
Respondent 39			2			2	

Rubric: (1) Continued							
Respondents	Q1			Q2			
	0	1	2	0	1	2	3
	NI	SI	FI	IUD	CUD	IRD	CRD
Respondent 40		1				2	
Respondent 41		1				2	
Respondent 42		1				2	
Respondent 43		1				2	
Respondent 44			2			2	
Respondent 45		1				2	
Respondent 46			2		1		
Respondent 47		1				2	
Respondent 48			2			2	
Respondent 49		1			1		
Respondent 50			2			2	
Respondent 51			2			2	
Respondent 52		1				2	
Respondent 53		1					3
Respondent 54		1					3
Respondent 55		1				2	
Respondent 56			2			2	
Respondent 57		1				2	
Respondent 58		1				2	
Respondent 59	0					2	
Respondent 60		1				2	
Respondent 61		1					3
Respondent 62			2				3
Respondent 63		1					3
Respondent 64		1					3
Respondent 65		1					3
Respondent 66		1					3
Respondent 67		1				2	
Respondent 68		1				2	
Respondent 69		1					3
Respondent 70		1			1		
Respondent 71			2			2	
Respondent 72			2				3
Respondent 73			2				3
Respondent 74		1				2	
Respondent 75		1			1		
Respondent 76		1			1		
Respondent 77		1				2	
Respondent 78		1		0			
Respondent 79			2		1		
Respondent 80		1			1		
Respondent 81		1				2	
Respondent 82		1				2	
Respondent 83	0					2	
Respondent 84		1				2	
Respondent 85		1			1		

Rubric: (1) Continued							
Respondents	Q1			Q2			
	0	1	2	0	1	2	3
	NI	SI	FI	IUD	CUD	IRD	CRD
Respondent 86		1				2	
Respondent 87		1				2	
Respondent 88	0				1		
Respondent 89		1				2	
Respondent 90	0				1		
Respondent 91		1			1		
Respondent 92			2			2	
Respondent 93		1			1		
Respondent 94	0					2	
Respondent 95		1				2	
Respondent 96			2			2	
Respondent 97		1				2	
Respondent 98			2			2	
Respondent 99		1					3
Respondents 100		1				2	
Total Numbers	8	71	21	3	17	61	19
Percentages	8%	71%	21%	3%	17%	61%	19%

Where:

NI means No Identification;

SI means Some Identifications;

FI means Full Identification;

IUD means Incomplete, Unrelated Denotation;

CUD means Complete, Unrelated Denotation;

IRD means Incomplete, Related Denotation; and

CRD means Complete, Related Denotation.

Speaking of the respondents' ability to identify the denotative key-signs, results have shown that (8%) of the respondents left the question empty with no identification, 71% of the respondents were able to provide some of the denotative key-signs, and only 21% managed to provide the full identification.

Concerning the respondents' ability to access the intended denotative meaning, results have shown that only (19%) of the respondents were able to fully grasp the denotative meaning as intended by the caricaturist whereas (61%) of them managed to partially grasp the intended meaning.

The low percentage was for the respondents who failed to access the intended denotative meaning. Despite their failure in approaching the intended denotative meaning, they proved themselves to be creative. They were able to generate other denotative meanings (denotative meaning potentials or plural denotations) that can also be applicable to the image in question. The percentages of those who generated IUD and CUD were (17%) and (3%), respectively.

Examining the impact of identifying the denotative key-signs on fully grasping the intended meaning, results have shown that only (4) respondents (ie., 4%) out of the (21), who managed to provide full identification for the denotative key-signs, managed to access the intended denotative meaning. Besides, out of the (71) respondents who provided SI, only (15) of them were able to grasp the intended denotative meaning. Moreover, none of the (8) respondents, who provided NI managed to fully grasp the intended denotative meaning.

On the other hand, examining the impact of identifying the denotative key-signs on the partial derivation of the intended denotative meaning, results demonstrated that (15) out of (21) of the respondents were able to provide IRD; (41) out of (71) provided IRD, and only (5) out of (8) were able to partially access the intended denotative meaning. For more illustration, consider Table (1.1) below:

Table: (1)
The Impact of FI, SI, & NI on the Generation of CRD & IRD

Number	Types of Identification	Types of Description	Types of Description	The impact of FI on CRD	The impact of FI on IRD
	Q1 (FI)	Q2 (CRD)	Q2 (IRD)	4	15
	21	19	61		
	21%			4%	15%
	Q1 (SI)			15	41
	71				
	71%			15%	41%
	Q1 (NI)			0	5
	8				
Percentage	8%	19%	61%	0%	5%

Examining the denotational readings highlighted by the respondents regarding the image in question, the researchers have found that the plural interpretations given lie within the domains illustrated in the following Table:

Table: (2)

The Highlighted Denotational Domains

Caricature (1)	No.	Highlighted Domains
		Family Domain
	1.	A Dead Son Giving his Mother a Present
	2.	Husband and Wife
	3.	Parents and their Children
	4.	Father with his Son

Conclusions

Generally speaking, the study reveals the following:

1. The percentage of the respondents who managed to access the intended denotative meaning was (4%). The very low percentage reveals the fact that the respondents could not invest the identified denotational key-signs in building the right denotational meaning. On the other hand, the respondents who provided some identification were better in providing a close interpretation to the intended denotative meaning. This again proves that the whole process is cognitive by nature;
2. There were respondents who gave full identification and failed to access the intended denotative meaning, yet they managed to create other stories that are also applicable on the images in question. That is to say, the denotational key-signs played as access points to denotational meanings other than the intended ones. Such a conclusion is in line with (Brandt, 2004, p. 5) who maintains that “in cognitive linguistics, meaning is the product of human thinking and mentally looking at things”;
3. The different highlighted denotative meanings prove the fact that every respondent reads the signs, and links them in a different way reflecting by that her mentality or background. Such a conclusion agrees with that of Tynianov (1965, p. 125; cited in Tarasti, 1995, p. 147), who maintains that the meaning of every word is calculated with respect to the neighboring word. The situation here is not different; the image used is a matrix sign, which contains other sub-

signs. And these signs have been cognitively (subjectively) linked to describe the objects in question;

4. Being a textless image has given the freedom to the respondents to construe it in different ways proving as a result White's idea (2012, p. 29) in that an "image is "polysemous"-containing multiple semes, or signifying elements. For any image, there is a "floating chain of signifieds" from which viewers may choose. In the same way, textless images can be a source of a denotative plurality;
5. The universality in image meaning as called by Gernsheim is not absolute; instead, it is cognitively-based and thus represents, to some extent, a source of creativity and ambiguity;
6. The intended denotational meaning represents the matrix domain whereas the other denotational meanings represent the other sub-domains;
7. Textless images and words out of context have something in common. They can sometimes be polysemous and other times be homonymous; and
8. The denotative meaning of detextualized images might be ambiguous or somehow vague as they are susceptible to the reader's cognitive understanding.

Suggestions for Future Studies

Based on the conclusions and the results stated above, the researchers suggest conducting studies on the following topics:

1. Creativity and Ambiguity in captioned vs. non-captioned Images; &
2. The Plurality of Connotative Meanings in Textless Images.

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Appendix (1)
The Cover Letter

University of Baghdad
College of Education for Women
Department of English
Postgraduate Studies

Name :.....
Specialty:.....
School :.....
Date :.....

A Letter to the Jury Members

Dear Dr./ Assoc. Prof./ or Prof.

The researchers intend to conduct a study on an Iraqi social caricature, under the title “**A Detextualised Social Caricature as Source of Plural Dennotations** ”. The study aims to:

- ☛ examine students’ ability to identify the denotative key-signs that help access and share the intended denotative meaning and/or highlight other denotative meaning potentials from the detextualised image caricature

Accordingly, we would be grateful if you could highlight some points that help develop the items of the **Scoring Rubric**. The newly designed rubric is a tool that is intended to be used in the analysis of the respondents’ answers in accordance with the previously set objective. The respondents will include all third stage students/ Morning classes in the School of Women’s Education/ Baghdad University. Accordingly, your comments will be highly appreciated.

With all our due respect and gratitude,

Yours,
Dr. Rana H. Al-Bahrani
Professor Shatha Al-Saadi
Tiba Akram Yousif



Dear Respondent,

Answer each of the following questions with respect to the image displayed above:

Q1: Identify the objects in the image.

Q2: Describe what the image is about.

Scoring Rubric

	Table (1) The Denotative Meaning of the First Caricature							
	Respondents	Q1			Q2			
		0	1	2	0	1	2	3
		No Identification	Some Identification	Full Identification	Incomplete Unrelated Description	Complete Unrelated Description	Incomplete Related Description	Complete Related Description
Caricature	Respondent 1							
	Respondent 2							
	Respondent 3							
	Respondent 4							
	Respondent 5							
	Respondent 6							
	Respondent 7							
	Respondent 8							
	Respondent 9							
	Respondent 10							
	Respondent 11							
	Respondent 12							
	Respondent 13							
	Respondent 14							
	Respondent 15							
	Respondent 16							
	Respondent 17							
	Respondent 18							
	Respondent 19							
	Respondent 20							
	Respondent 21							
	Respondent 22							
	Respondent 23							
	Respondent 24							
	Respondent 25							
	Respondent 26							
	Respondent 27							
	Respondent 28							
	Respondent 29							
	Respondent 30							
	Number							
	Percentage							