

Speaking through the images of *The Economist*. When the visual language becomes a useful tool to activate and improve communicative competence

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide reasons why the use of multimodal tools may improve the productive skill of speaking in the process of learning a foreign language.

I will start by exploring how communication, as a process of interaction which involves participants (producer, receiver) giving, receiving and sharing information, discussing (agreeing, disagreeing) and negotiating over the message/s, cannot be efficiently organised and developed if the interactors lack competence.

I will summarize how, in the last sixty years, various scholars have elaborated the concept of competence as a multi-faceted system of knowledge and skills (linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, strategic, organisational) aimed at language and communication performance.

I will proceed by focussing on the communicative approach, among the various methods and approaches to language learning, as a valid instrument to develop knowledge about language and knowledge about how to use it, in terms of communicative competence. I will examine the reasons why this approach may be considered appropriate to shape a communicative syllabus.

I will explain how I organised a communicative syllabus for an English course at the Faculty of Education (University of Trieste) in the Communication Sciences degree course. I will give reasons for the choice I first made to work on how *The*

Economist uses the verbal mode, and why I secondly decided to extend my analysis to why the images in the British magazine may be useful tools to practise the productive skill of speaking.

Finally, I will provide an example, by analysing a cover of the magazine, of how Halliday's systemic functional approach to the verbal language, can be adapted and employed when working on multimodal discourse, where the verbal and the visual mode coexist, thus giving learners some practical and functional instruments to develop linguistic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic competence, thus building effective communication as intended by Dell Hymes (1972).

1. STEPS IN THE SHAPING OF COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

The American anthropologist Dell Hymes, who devoted most of his research to the role of speech in human behaviour, developed an approach to the understanding of language in use. By focussing on language as a set of ways of speaking, he investigated communication and framed it in terms of «who says what to whom, how, where, and why», (Dell Hymes, 1972: 56). According to his theory, any act of communication which is performed by an addressor (who) in order to provide an addressee (whom) with a message (what) must be produced according to formal rules (how): the producer chooses a specific contact, such as a written, a spoken, a written to be spoken medium, a channel which might be phonological or graphological, and a linguistic system (verbal and/or non verbal). Specific norms of interaction (how) are activated in line with the setting (where) they will be used, and are aimed at achieving an intended goal. Dell Hymes (1989), who argued that speech does not occur in a vacuum but in a specific socio-cultural context, underlined the close relation among all the elements mentioned above which contribute to shaping linguistic competence.

Dell Hymes's theory of contextualising the use/s of language was conceived as pivotal to outlining the steps towards a proficient process of learning language through communication. Learners' ability to produce speech acts which varies according to their level of competence, has been a subject of great interest among scholars in the last four decades.

1.1. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

The first scholar to introduce the term “communicative competence” in linguistic discourse was Chomsky, who defined the ideal speaker-listener endowed with competence, that is the knowledge of grammar intended as an internalised set of grammatically correct sentences with a finite set of rules.

Chomsky's model (1965) was widely criticised because it appeared to depict an image of the language user unrealistically idealised as someone who acquires the knowledge of the rules of grammar. Conversely Dell Hymes's concept of com-

petence (1972) concentrated both on the knowledge of grammar and on the ability to be linguistically competent and produce grammatically correct forms of language in a wide range of contextualised communicative situations.

Following Dell Hymes's socio-linguistic model, Widdowson (1983) developed a definition of competence as the knowledge of linguistic and socio-linguistic conventions. He believed in language learning as a process of acquiring the ability to use language to communicate. He introduced the term capacity and defined it in terms of the ability to use knowledge and provide meaning while performing language. Indeed, making a distinction between competence and capacity, Widdowson zoomed on the power the capacity of language performance has over competence.

According to Canale and Swain (1980), and Canale (1983), the competence we are asked to have mastery of, in order to communicate effectively, is a multifaceted system of knowledge and skills which the two scholars named as grammatical, socio-linguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence may be identified with the knowledge of linguistic code (verbal or non-verbal), and includes the knowledge of morphological, syntactic, semantic, phonetic, and orthographic rules. The competence described above allows the speaker to understand and perform meaningful speech. Socio-linguistic competence corresponds to the knowledge and use of the linguistic code of rules and conventions in different socio-linguistic and socio-cultural contexts. Discourse competence is described as the ability to combine language structures and meanings in order to achieve a structurally cohesive and a meaningfully coherent unit of spoken and written texts. Strategic competence reveals the mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies (paraphrasing, guessing, repetition, circumlocution, etc.) which may be called into play to compensate for failure in communication when grammatical competence is insufficient, thus allowing us to conduct efficient and effective communication.

In the 1990s Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996) developed a model which identified competence as communicative language ability. This ability includes language knowledge and strategic knowledge. Language knowledge is made up of two components, organisational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge.

Organisational knowledge enables the user to control formal language structures and comprises grammatical and textual knowledge. Grammatical knowledge consists of the mastery of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology, and graphology; it entitles the performer to recognise and produce grammatically correct sentences. Textual knowledge, which allows for the comprehension and production of spoken or written texts, requires the ability to organise discourse as a semantically and lexically cohesive and coherent unit. Pragmatic knowledge indicates the ability to create and interpret discourse. It enables us to perform language with respect to language conventions and varieties in terms of (dialects and registers) to provide meaningful utterances which are appropriate in a social and cultural context.

Strategic knowledge implies a metacognitive set of components which motivate the language user to engage in the process of setting goals and planning for proficient communicative production. The first step required in setting goals is identifying possible tasks and secondly choosing which ones to use. Planning means deciding how to use language knowledge to fulfil the chosen task/s successfully.

The last model I am going to refer to, is the model of language competence outlined by the Common European Framework (2001). As a tool intended for language learners and teachers, it is aimed at providing a common ground to elaborate language syllabus, curriculum guidelines, textbooks, and examinations across European countries.

The CEF defines communicative language competence as the knowledge which empowers «a person to act using significantly linguistic means» (CEF, 2001:9), and consists of linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence.

Linguistic competence indicates the knowledge and the ability to use language components (lexis, grammar, semantics, phonology, orthography, orthoepy) in order to produce meaningful and structured messages.

Sociolinguistic competence corresponds to the knowledge and skills necessary to use language appropriately according to the social context. The language user is here asked to recognise, respect, and perform according to the social, cultural (idioms, proverbs, etc.) and behavioural rules and the varieties of language (register and dialects) which the specific situation necessitates.

Pragmatic competence which is made up of two sub-components, discourse competence and functional competence, expresses the user's knowledge and skills to organise, arrange, and perform coherent and structured messages (discourse competence). It is also intended to produce discourse (written or spoken) for specific functional purposes (functional competence). Whatever communication is used for, being intended to describe, narrate, comment, ask or give information, explain, instruct, argue, persuade, it must be structured and performed in accordance with the social norms of interaction.

Following Dell Hymes's principle of communication by which interaction involves a producer and a receiver, the need to be able to decode and negotiate the subject of discussion in order to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and avoid or handle breakdowns in the communication process becomes fundamental. As a consequence, communication cannot be effectively activated and processed if the interlocutors lack linguistic competence, including its components and sub-components, studied and discussed by the scholars mentioned above. As Widowson strongly suggested (1983), communicative competence must be taught and learnt along with linguistic competence. As argued in the CEF, the communicative approach proposed to develop learners' language skills aims at developing communication competence in terms of a collaborative work of cooperation and interaction among learners and teachers.

2. DESIGNING A SYLLABUS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The question which arises spontaneously when dealing with how to develop learners' communicative competence must be undoubtedly found in the process of planning and shaping a learner-oriented communicative syllabus. First of all, in order to be conceived as communicative, a syllabus must be based on the communicative approach.

This approach to language teaching and language learning has developed in the last four decades and is meant to increase the knowledge about language and the knowledge about how to use it. Language is taught and learnt through language, by using all skills, including both the productive skills of speaking and writing, and the receptive skills of listening and reading.

Pivotal in a communicative syllabus is the need to provide and activate real and authentic language, which means language used in everyday life with specific attention to the role its functions and its varieties in terms of registers and dialects, have according to the purpose and the field it is going to be employed in. Learners must be taught and enabled to produce real language appropriately in real and different social and cultural situations.

Being tailored as functional to increase learners' communicative competence, the communicative approach focuses more on the fluency and on the production of meaningful messages than on their accuracy. This does not mean that grammar is of secondary importance; grammar is fundamental for communication to occur, and attention must be paid to how to adapt structures according to the context in which language is used, thus exercising and improving the knowledge of how to speak and write accurately and appropriately.

Moreover, since this approach is learner-oriented, a careful selection of what, in terms of materials, activities, and tasks, should be chosen, taught and learnt, must be analysed attentively in order to make students become active communicative users. A core point in designing a communicative syllabus is to select communicative activities. Teachers who have become planners and facilitators of the language learning process should organise task-based activities to achieve this primary goal.

Ellis (1999) provided a list of six criteria according to which activities may be considered communicative. Firstly, students must be involved in using language for a purpose; secondly, they should be involved in the activity and feel the concrete desire to communicate; thirdly, the fluency of learners' productions and the content of their message/s prevail over the accuracy of their performance. Fourthly, learners should feel free to improvise and use a wide variety of resources they get personally or thanks to someone else's help. Another criterion Ellis took into consideration sees once more the learners as the key participants, since the activity must be monitored by the students themselves, only a final correction can be made by the teacher. Finally, the activity should not be intended as a language check, but as an opportunity to exercise and share new learning.

Students are individuals who approach learning subjectively according to their own learning style. As teachers, we must care a lot about this crucial point and provide varied and various materials and activities in order to allow all students to improve their communicative competence.

The communicative approach shapes a communicative syllabus and is functional to the development of language learning and competence for many reasons. It focuses on learning language within its social and cultural context and leads to the learners' acquisition of authentic language; it makes students more sensitive towards the cultural and social aspects which characterize the society speaking the language they are learning. It concentrates on the meaning rather than on language structure, thus motivating the weak students to perform, to participate in class activities, and learn by doing. It is learner-oriented, which means that language tools, activities, and tasks are planned to meet students' needs, in terms of what they need to learn in order to interact and to pass their exams, to become independent language users. This approach makes students work on all linguistic skills and aims at providing an objective equilibrium in developing learners' abilities, performances, and knowledge in each specific skills. Varied types of collaboration (pair-work, group work, class work) may be used to increase interaction, as a useful instrument to develop and build linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences.

2. 1. THE INTRODUCING IMAGES IN THE SYLLABUS

Since 2002 I have been teaching English as a Lecturer in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Trieste, in the Communication Sciences degree course (Faculty of Education). From 2002 to 2007 the course which I held on "The language of *The Economist*" focussed on a functional approach to the language of the British magazine. In the text analysis of some articles, that I provided my students with, principally taken from the *Leaders* section, I referred to Halliday's systemic functional approach (1978, 1985, 2004).

This approach develops the principle of metafunctions, it examines how semiotic resources are functional and interact to build meaningful messages. Halliday defines language as a semiotic resource; texts are used to represent the world through the words of a speaker/writer. This representation (ideational function) provides the reader/listener with a configuration of semantic functions in terms of who the participants are and what processes are performed under what circumstances, as an idealised meaning of reality. Language is also intended to activate interaction, orientation, and negotiation between the speaker/writer as the giver of subjective positions in the discourse, and the listener/reader as a supplier but also a replier of information (interpersonal function). Finally, in order to convey some meaningful input to the addressee, the addresser must construct a semantic unit, which is structured. The textual func-

tion aims at analysing how discourse is organized into semantically coherent and lexico-semantically cohesive units.

The reasons why I chose to investigate on the verbal language of *The Economist* are basically two. The first might seem quite obvious, and is linked to the degree course itself. The syllabus of the degree course in Communication Sciences includes courses on the history of journalism, the language of journalism, journalism and new media, and the sociology of communication, which are held in Italian, and deal mainly with journalism in Italy. I thought that exploring the verbal language of the British magazine would be of great help in order to develop the skills and techniques to create effective communication as possible future journalists. The second reason is didactic. When learning a foreign language, students are engaged in developing gradually but homogeneously all their linguistic skills, which means that, after practising on listening as a receptive skill, students should work on their spoken production and/or interaction as a productive skill, by discussing what they listened to, and also using some expressions, functions or structures they heard. The same may be always done by associating a receptive to a productive skill, such as listening to writing, and reading to both writing and speaking. Skills must be practised and applied in order to create communication.

A primary and significant difficulty teachers might face while selecting authentic materials could be to find tools whose level matches students' linguistic level. This is actually a problem and the articles in *The Economist*, whose language varies from a B2 to a C2 level (CEFR, 2001), are an example. Textbooks, on the contrary, are organised into modules and units and provide graded activities of listening, reading, writing, and speaking, in order to enable learners to use the language, functions, structures, and vocabulary given in the module/unit; all this will allow them to improve their level in all the skills step by step but uniformly in all the skills. Authentic materials which are not part of a textbook are first of all intended to be used by native speakers, that is why they are not meant to be didactic tools but they can be chosen as realia. Since one of the key points of a communicative syllabus is to make learners use real language in a context, reading and speaking about newspapers articles is unquestionably a motivating and triggering instrument to prompt communication.

In 2008 I introduced in the above mentioned course a module on the multimodal¹ approach to the language of *The Economist* which I have been working on with success since that year. If the first two reasons why I started to do my

¹ Monomodality pertains to messages which are rendered in a single mode, either visual or verbal. If, for example, we take into consideration some written forms of communication, such as newspaper articles, books, essays, medical prescriptions, letters, e-mails, text messages, which contain only the mode of written text, we must conceive of them as monomodal texts. Conversely, if visual tools are added to the above-mentioned texts, such as pictures, graphics, diagrams, smiles (i.e. with text messages and emails), or even some sound, as for example, with birthday postcards that write and sing happy birthday, monomodal messages turn into multimodal communicative expressions.

research on the language of *The Economist* as a practical and worthwhile instrument to attract the attention of students attending a degree course in Communication Sciences may be given for a module on the visual language of the magazine, other reasons, which I am now going to deal with, can be valid for a multimodal approach.

Images may be looked at the viewer's pace; s/he can start from what s/he is attracted by most because there is no linear reading with them. The skimming and scanning of the meaning, in terms of the content and the message they are intended to communicate, will be subjectively interpreted according to the viewer's sensitivity, spirit of observation, and knowledge of the subject the image depicts. If then the viewer is asked to share her/his understanding, and/or argues about the visual representation, her/his speaking skills will contribute to monitor and influence the viewers. When images are used for a didactic purpose, they can be a useful tool to exercise and improve language learning, in terms of spoken production, spoken interaction, and vocabulary. Images allow learners to interpret and talk about them at different levels, according to the learner's linguistic competence. Moreover, visual representations may be used by teachers, especially with classes of lower levels; by showing pictures they avoid the use of the dictionary and/or translation which learners tend to use a lot when building up their own vocabulary. Finally, visual depictions, which are linked to a text, as in the case of the multimodal discourse of the press, advertising, web pages, films, cartoons, etc., may be conceived of as valuable to decode what the students find difficult to understand by scanning the verbal language.

Since learners are individuals with different learning styles, some may prefer visual activities, others auditory ones, some are attracted by kinaesthetic, others by tactile activities. As teachers, we must focus on our students' needs and provide activities which may help them all. Willing (1987) identified four different types of language learners which made me reflect on the great help images would give my students in improving their communicative competence. Concrete learners are creative and enthusiastic, they dislike being provided with routine activities, they like practising the language they are learning, they prefer using pictures, watching videos, films, etc. Creative students will welcome the introduction of images in the syllabus. Analytical learners like studying alone, working on grammar and on activities organized by their teachers. They like reading newspapers, so they will hopefully enjoy reading *The Economist* articles and might appreciate "reading" its images. Communicative learners are flexible and adaptable, they like the communicative approach because it implies social learning, taking decisions, sharing opinions, using authentic materials, among which newspapers and images as well. Authority-oriented learners depend on their teachers and need their support, they learn by reading and learn new vocabulary by visual tools. They will appreciate the reading of *The Economist*; by viewing and analysing the paper's images they will be guided to appreciate how meaningful the visual mode can be.

2.1.1. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS

Images are visual instruments of communication which are created by a source of emission and addressed by a channel of transmission to a point of reception (Barthes, 1977). Analysing pictures used by the press, and in the specific, by *The Economist*, the source of emission, which corresponds to the author/producer, may be a photographer or a designer; both provide representations aimed at commenting on the topic under discussion; photographs and pictures are subjective depictions of the world. The channel of emission is associated with *The Economist* itself, while the reading/viewing public symbolizes the point of reception.

From a didactic point of view, conceiving images as representations of reality may be seen as a weakness. Since reality is seen through the eyes of the producer, the image is subjectively illustrated, thus undergoing a connotative transformation. The level of comprehension and its subsequent deciphering will depend on the reading/viewing public's knowledge and culture of the world. In case the image is highly coded, as for example happens with caricatures or visual metaphors (Leonzini, 2011), understanding what is depicted becomes greatly challenging because more than one interpretation may be possible.

On the contrary, the impulsive need to verbalising what is portrayed, may be considered as a strength; from a communicative point of view, images represent a triggering input aimed at performing communication. As a way to exercise language functions and structures, verbalising images will improve learners' linguistic competence, as well as their pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence.

When images are accompanied by a text, that is when visual and verbal language coexist, language is often perceived as and functions as "anchorage" (Barthes, 1977) of all possible meanings the image may convey. As Barthes argued "it is not the image which comes to elucidate or realize the text, but the latter which comes to sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image" (1977: 25). From a linguistic point of view, this can be considered a weakness because it is the language, in the form of a text and, when dealing with the press, in the form of a newspaper article and/or headline, which helps the viewer/reader to identify, understand, and interpret what message/s the illustration wished to transmit. From a didactic point of view, the polysemy of images can be seen as a strength because it can be chosen as a discussion activity during which learners are asked to interact, exchange information and opinions, express agreement, disagreement, negotiate, etc., thus developing their linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences.

The use of images for didactic purposes can be primarily conceived as powerful in order to prompt and develop learners' communication and linguistic competence; images may become symbolic tools of interpretation, as well as indicators of learners' responsibility in shaping their sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences.

3. SPEAKING THROUGH THE IMAGES OF THE ECONOMIST

It is a consolidated habit of *The Economist* to use images as anchorage (Barthes, 1977). Visual representations are chosen and created by professional designers, members of the paper's staff, according to aesthetic and ideological patterns which characterise the house style of the magazine. It rarely occurs that images are chosen as denotative representations of the news. Conversely, the visual expressions are usually designed as connotative messages under the form of visual caricatures, personifications, metaphors, metonymies, and ironies², which, as mediators of the articles, are intended to complete, and at times simplify, the concepts argued in the verbal mode.

The visual depictions I am referring to, and which I have been focussing my research analysis over in the last five years, are mainly images introducing the *Leaders* articles³, the articles in the *Charlemagne* opinion column section⁴, and the covers⁵. The symbolic re-representations of the economical, financial, social, environmental, technological etc. topics, *The Economist* discusses about, can undergo a process of guided interpretation and following a process of decoding thanks to the verbal support of the articles they illustrate and to the systemic functional approach to multimodal discourse analysis (O'Halloran, 2008).

3.1. A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Halliday's systemic functional approach (see section 2.1), as a social semiotic theory to analyse language and its functions in a context, was taken as an ex-

2 Caricatures are visual descriptions of someone whose appearance and/or behaviour is depicted in a humorous or critical way, meant to exaggerate some specific trait of her/his personality. When inanimate objects, animate non-human, or abstract qualities are given human attributes they are personified. Visual metaphors are processes whereby something is potentially thought about and depicted in terms of something else. A metonymy is a figure by which the representation of a referent is replaced by the depiction of an attribute or of an entity related to in some semantic way. There is a directly or logically contiguous relationship between the substituted element and its referent. Visual irony is found when what is represented appears to mean quite the opposite of the sense actually required in the context and presumably intended by the author.

3 The *Leaders* section is the introductory section of *The Economist*. It consists of five articles, whose topics are usually chosen by a productive and dynamic collaboration between journalists and editor, who evaluate the most relevant news of the week to tackle. These articles, which arise from group negotiation, are comments on the subjects dealt with, through which the journalists express their opinion, thus providing highly connotative messages.

4 The *Charlemagne* opinion column is integrated at the end of the *Europe* section. It takes its name from the founder of the Holy Roman Empire and writes about economics, politics, and finance in Europe. The weekly article in this section is meant to observe, remark, and reveal the journalist's position on the topic discussed.

5 The house style of the magazine has fixed a model according to which the covers correspond to the visual representation, in the whole page format, of the first *Leaders* article which usually comes after the sub-headline as the visual representation of the article itself.

ample by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996/2006), the forerunners of multimodality who developed a framework aimed at decoding visual communication as a socio semiotic contextualised representation of reality. As argued in *Multimodal Discourse* (2001), Kress and Van Leeuwen evaluated the multimodal approach as a primary tool to “operate common semiotic principles in and across different modes ” (2001:3). The technical framing outlined as an instrument to analyse what elements of a visual communication might be semiotically connected or disconnected, contributed to developing the concept of multimodality. This framing could actually be applied not only to the visual mode, but also to other forms of communication. Following the analysis made by the researchers mentioned above, other scholars contributed to the development of this approach, and analysed the meaning emerging while using various and varied semiotic resources in diverse discourses, among which written, printed and electronic texts, cinema, movements and gestures, architecture, science, mathematics, music, sociology, and also the visual mode⁶.

By applying the systemic functional approach to multimodal discourse analysis, I will examine how linguistic and visual modes, as semiotic resources, are interlinked, and I will provide evidence of how these two intersemiotic systems, can be conceived of as cross-functional socio-semiotic forms, and how they may provide the reading/viewing public with the necessary materials to decode both verbally and visually meaningful messages, as a coherent and cohesive representation of reality.

I will take as an example a cover of *The Economist*, and explore how the verbal and visual metafunctional meanings (ideational, interpersonal, textual), that are “simultaneously configured” (Baldry, 2006), enable us to analyse the different semiotic choices and how they interact in the multimodal discourse.

Here below I will summarize the description and use of the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, to examine the coexistent verbal and visual elements in the cover. The headline, as the written text, which is organised as a syntagmatic processing of linear meaningful parts (words, word groups, clause), will be scanned as a three dimensional patterned unit, in terms of the interpretation of phenomena, according to who the participants are, what processes they perform, under what circumstances (ideational function). The following stage will provide ground for exploring the social relations/interactions between participants. Finally the organisational order of text construction (textual function) will investigate what elements (theme/rheme, given/new) contribute to making the text a coherent and cohesive semantic unit. As for the visual representation, the viewer’s mode of perception does not usually follow a linear sequence. S/he is first engaged in the understanding of the image as a whole. The systemic functional framework applied to visual images, based on the multimodal design and organisation model provided by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996/2006), will

⁶ For an updated bibliography see O’Halloran (2008).

allow us to develop the interpretation of visual depictions in terms of sequential processing phases. The introductory phase mentioned above will trigger the scanning of the depicted elements and the relationships which occur among them, and contribute to building a framed analysis of the single parts. Once the meaning making process/s each part is characterised by are explored, the image will take shape as a composite configuration. Metafunctions contribute to constructing the socio-semiotic meaning/s the image reveals. The ideational function contributes to examining what the participants⁷ do, in terms of which actions they perform, by processing⁸ acts of doing, sensing, being, behaving, saying, reacting, interacting, under certain circumstances⁹. The interpersonal function focuses on how the visual representation involves and interacts with the viewer, in terms of gaze¹⁰, distance¹¹, and perspective¹². The textual function enables the viewer to examine the degree of cohesion and coherence of the represented message/s¹³.

7 Represented participants are people, places, things depicted in the image.

8 Processes can be narrative, conceptual, symbolic. Images can narrate events, provide the viewers with conceptual or symbolic representations of actions.

9 Circumstances reveal where, when, and how participants relate to each other.

10 Visual configurations have two main functions, the former is to create a visual contact with the viewer, who is directly demanded to activate a visual relation with the represented participant/s. The latter, addresses the viewer indirectly; the absence of eye contact offers the depiction to the viewer's scrutiny.

11 Distance establishes the degree of proximity to or farness from the viewer. The closer the shot is, the more intimacy between the represented participants and the viewer is prompted, The longer the shot the less interaction is processed.

12 The image can be created from a horizontal or vertical angle. Images produced from a horizontal angle represent the relation between the frontal plane of the image-producer, and the frontal plane of the represented participants. The producer can choose between a frontal-angled or an oblique-angled depiction. Frontal angle images indicate a sort of involvement between what is represented and who represented it; the viewer will feel the same sort of intimacy being positioned in front of the depiction. Oblique angle images display detachment, the producer did not feel intimacy with what s/he represented. As a consequence the viewer will feel the same state of detachment. Scanning the image from a vertical angle, the viewer will be involved in a relation of superiority (high angle), since the producer depicted the image looking down at what s/he would represent. The viewer will feel in a position of equality (medium angle), since the producer depicted the image as feeling the same level of solidarity. The viewer will feel in a state of inferiority (low angle), since the producer showed the power of the represented participants over her/himself.

13 From a horizontal reading path, elements will be analysed according to their position, from left to right, where elements on the left represent the Given (known information), while those on the right the New (new information). From a vertical reading path, elements will be analysed according to their position, from top (the generalised essence of information,) to bottom (the concrete essence of information). Both horizontal and vertical reading paths will include the analysis of foregrounded and backgrounded elements, and centralised or marginalised elements. Both foregrounded and centralised elements usually correspond to core factors, while backgrounded and marginalised elements are of secondary importance.

3. 2. MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE IN THE ECONOMIST.



The image above corresponds to the cover of the February 28th-March 6th 2009 issue.

This image introduces and summarizes an article commenting on the crucial situation which will oblige the Western European leaders to find a way to face a disastrous crisis. Some Eastern European countries, unprepared for EU membership, became effective members of the EU thanks to the monetary support of Austria, Italy and Sweden, and subsequently wasted the billions borrowed on construction and consumption booms, which turned out to be catastrophic. The collapse in the Eastern world has put the EU in serious danger. The journalist believes in the need to stop any further currency collapse, and suggests that the EU should share this pain, by sustaining both the borrowing and the lending countries. Moreover s/he is strongly convinced that some external support from other collaborating European institutions would help while Eastern countries should carry out some proficient structural reforms. The article ends by underlining that only a collective sacrifice could save Europe; this is done by focussing on the costly bill which must be paid.

3.2.1. THE HEADLINE

The key words “the bill”, “Europe”, and “break up” of the headline, in terms of what may damage whom/which entity, attract the reading public’s attention. The anchoring function of language will guide the reader/viewer into the analysis and interpretation of the image itself.

The bill, which usually corresponds to a piece of paper indicating how much you have to pay for a given service, has been provided here with the power of being able to destroy a strong institution. The sub editor of *The Economist*, who is used to providing a flourishing and stylistically deviant use language, employs the term bill as a metaphor¹⁴. When something is talked or thought about (target domain) in terms of another thing (source domain)¹⁵, we call it a metaphorical use of language. Here the debts (target domain) accumulated by the Eastern European countries have been thought and talked about in terms of a bill (source domain) and are listed in the bill itself. Both debts and the bill are supposed to be paid, both relate to a monetary vision of the world which implies money as the necessary means to activate relations of debit and credit.

The use of epistemic modality with “could”, focussing on the possibility of a collapse, implies a condition, thus motivating the reader’s curiosity to find out under what circumstances this possibility might occur. Epistemic modality which is pivotal in argumentative texts, such as articles of comment like the editorial in question, is aimed at mitigating a statement and indicates the addresser’s point of view. The condition which the modal summarizes, corresponds to the need to share the bill among the borrowers, the lending countries, and other European institutions mentioned in the article (the European Central Bank, the IMF, the commission’s structural funds, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the European Investment Bank) in order to save Europe.

Borrowing the words of Barthes (1964/1986, 1977) , who assumed that what images mean is closely related to what the verbal text accompanying them writes, the headline appears to “sublimate, patheticize and rationalize the image” (1977:25), monitoring the viewer’s reception of the verbal message.

3.2.2. METAFUNCTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE HEADLINE

Exploring how language in the headline was intended and produced to interpret occurrences, in terms of configurations of processes, participants, and circumstances, I examined on how the elements mentioned above contributed to making the text coherent and cohesive and provided, here below, a framework of my analysis.

14 As Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003) defined it, metaphor is the phenomenon whereby we talk and potentially think about one thing in terms of another .

15 See Lakoff (1993: 207).

TABLE 1 – IDEATIONAL FUNCTION

The bill	that	could break up	Europe
Participant = actor	relative	Material process = doing (possibility)	goal

TABLE 2 – INTERPERSONAL FUNCTION

The bill	that	could	Break up	Europe
subject	subject	Finite (epistemic modality)	Predicator +adjunct	complement
Mood: declarative indicative		residue		

TABLE 3 – TEXTUAL FUNCTION

The bill	that could break up Europe
UNMARKED THEME	RHEME

The actor of the message, the bill, being presented as the subject in a thematic position, contributes to concentrating on the newly provided information; the rheme, which underlines a possible catastrophe concerning the breaking up of Europe, includes the goal of a material process of doing.

3.2.3. VERBAL AND VISUAL: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCESV

This image caricatures three Western EU politicians at the restaurant, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and the former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown; they have just finished their meal and are worryingly looking at the bill they are supposed to pay. It will be my concern in this paragraph to examine how, when the verbal and the visual mode are semantically connected, they have a stronger impact on the addressee. I will explore how *The Economist* uses a verbo-visual multimodal approach to activate a verbo-visual process of communication between the producer and the reader/viewer. The use of a strongly stylized marked language becomes a visual multimodal metaphorical¹⁶ caricature of Europe in grave danger, with the bill as the

¹⁶ When both target and source domains are represented in a single mode either verbal or visual metaphors are monomodal, but target and source domain are rendered in two different sign systems (visual, written, or spoken), or modes of perception (smell, taste and touch), even if the A is B format is maintained, metaphors become multimodal. In the image the bill, as the source domain, is both verbalised and visualised.

cause of Merkel's astonishment, Sarkozy's despair, and Brown's hopeless search for money in the British state purse. The bill which represented the actor of a material process of doing in the headline, here becomes the phenomenon of a mental process of sensing, while the sensors are visually shaped as three metonymically represented participants, a plurality of members, symbolising Europe, the synecdochical whole and goal in the headline. In the image there is a fourth foregrounded represented human participant, absent in the headline, the waiter, who as a metaphorical source domain metonymically indicates the EU commission (target domain), in charge of managing the EU budget, and financial programmes. The waiter, as the actor of the visual process of giving the bill, functions as a link between the bill, the costly result of risky and probably wrong decisions, and the three politicians, who underestimated the financial jeopardy of allowing the Eastern countries mentioned in the bill to become members of the EU, but who will be directly engaged in deciding how to manage the future of Europe.

3.2.3.1 THE IMAGE: VISUAL SYMBOLISM

Here below are listed and analysed the metaphors, metonymies and stereotypes, used as stylistic visual interpretations.

TABLE 1 – METAPHORS

METAPHOR	SOURCE DOMAIN	TARGET DOMAIN	MAPPING*
1	the bill	debts	Both must be paid
2	waiter	EU commission	They are both in charge of managing and providing some service
3	British purse	British state funds	Both need to be filled with money, and both seem to be emptied
4	butterfly	money	The former is flying away, the latter has flown away
5	clients	Merkel, Sarkozy, Brown	All are intended to pay; as clients they will pay the bill, as members of the EU in danger they will have to pay the Eastern countries' debts

* Mapping indicates the semantic correspondences between the source and the target domain (Lakoff,1993)

TABLE 2 – METONYMIES¹⁷

METONYMY	ENTITY/PERSON	REFERENT
1	Angela Merkel	The head of government in Germany
2	Nicolas Sarkozy	The president of the French Republic
3	Gordon Brown	The head of the British government
4	The waiter	The EU commission

TABLE 3 – SOCIAL STEREOTYPES¹⁸

WHAT	WHERE (Society)	Cultural habits
A. Merkel drinking a cup of coffee	German flag	Drink usually tasted in Germany
N. Sarkozy drinking a glass of wine	French flag	France is well known in the world for the production of wine
G. Brown drinking a cup of tea	British flag	Typical British drink

3.2.3.2 VISUAL AND VERBAL SYMBOLISM IN THE BILL

The bill is both a visual and verbal metaphorical representation of the debts which must be paid to get over the crisis. In order to name the indebted countries, the verbal mode provides a list of the typical dishes from these countries, as well as from weaker Eastern European countries, Greece and Ireland. The source domains (the dishes) and the target domains (debts) both belong to The Eastern European countries (mapping). The list ends with “Silvio to go (if only)” a harsh and sarcastic addressing Silvio Berlusconi,¹⁹ as one of those who supported and financed the countries in question. The expression “if only” is ironic, and expresses a paradoxical wish to be dealing with food and with debts.

¹⁷ A visual metonymy is a figure by which the representation of a referent is replaced by the depiction of an attribute or of an entity related to in some semantic way. There is a directly or logically contiguous relationship between the substituted element and its referent.

¹⁸ Stereotypes are standardized and simplified conceptions of groups based on some prior assumptions. they provide a quick identity to what/who they write about or represent.

¹⁹ Silvio Berlusconi is usually strongly criticized and attacked by *The Economist*, which disagrees with his political views, and with the decisions he takes.

3.2.3.3 METAFUNCTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMAGE

Visual representations are subjective interpretations of performances processed by represented participants under certain circumstances. The producer provides a personal interpretation of how the participants relate while doing and/or sensing, which is aimed at being communicated to the viewer, whose sensibility and sensitivity of reception, and competence will activate effective and proficient communication. The ideational, interpersonal and textual functions, as useful tools to scan visual information, will increase learners' reflection and language production.

Here below I have analysed how the image may be considered a coherent and cohesive process of production, reception and interaction.

TABLE 1 – IDEATIONAL FUNCTION

Represented participants	processes	circumstances
A waiter	Narrative: material transactional unidirectional (giving the bill)	Locative: foregrounded at the restaurant
Three clients (Merkel, Sarkozy, Brown)	Narrative non transactional: mental (feeling, thinking)	Locative: foregrounded at the restaurant
The bill	Symbolic: it displays its status in terms of what it represents, and as a consequence how the participants must react	Locative: foregrounded at the restaurant
Couples	Narrative: material transactional unidirectional (eating, looking at the foregrounded entities)	Locative: backgrounded at the restaurant

TABLE 2 – INTERPERSONAL FUNCTION

GAZE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants/viewer: no eye contact (offer image) • Participants/participants: no eye contact
DISTANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The waiter: medium close shot • Merkel: close shot • Sarkozy: close shot • Brown: medium close shot • Backgrounded couples
PERSPECTIVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horizontal angle: oblique (all participants) • Vertical angle: medium

TABLE 3 – TEXTUAL FUNCTION

<p>Top left (ideal/given) The Economist logo</p>	<p>Top centre Headline Backgrounded couples</p>	<p>Top right (ideal/new) Main topics in the issue Backgrounded couples</p>
<p>Centre margin Foregrounded elements: the waiter The bill</p>	<p>Centre Foregrounded elements Merkel, Sarkozy The bill, the cup of coffee, the German flag, the glass of wine, the French flag, the table</p>	<p>Margin Foregrounded elements Brown sitting on a chair, the British purse/flag, the butterfly, the cup of tea, the bill, the table</p>
<p>Down left (real/given) The restaurant floor, the table, The magazine bar code, the price of the issue</p>	<p>Down centre The table, The prices of the issues in the world countries</p>	<p>Down right (real/new) The table, The prices of the issues in the world countries</p>

The image develops material processes of doing (giving, displaying, eating) and mental ones (thinking, feeling) which involve different characters, from human beings – a waiter, three foregrounded clients, two backgrounded couples of clients- and the bill, which, as a symbolic entity, displays the reasons why the above mentioned participants act and/or behave as they do. Among the three centralised participants, (client/Merkel) one is vectorially linked to the bill (transactional unidirectional involvement), while the other two clients (Sarkozy and Brown) sitting at the table, are showing their feelings as a reaction to what the bill means. The waiter seems emotionally detached from what is happening (eyes closed, head up), he is providing the clients with a message saying “the following problems must be solved if they want to rescue Eastern Europe, so the bill must be paid”.

The depiction is offered to the observer (no eye contact) as a message to be argued about (close, close medium shot); the level of solidarity (vertical medium angle) the producer probably felt for the subject of depiction enables the viewer to feel the same sort of intimate interaction.

Finally, the central position of the salient factors, both human beings (the waiter, Merkel, Sarkozy, Brown) and objects (a cup of coffee, a glass of wine, a cup of tea, the German flag, the French flag, the British purse, a butterfly) seem to frame the subject of discussion and, by directing the viewer’s attention on the core message of the image, he/she feels inclined to communicate on what is displayed. Dell Hymes’ principles of communication which the image respects and reflects can be paraphrased as follows: *The Economist* (who) is addressing its reading public (whom) by showing three Western European politicians in despair over Europe (what); it uses both the cover and an article of the *Leaders*

section of the issue (where) to communicate its concern about the future of Europe (why), by providing an example of how a stylistically deviant visual language (how), supported by a writer-oriented verbal mode, may have a strong impact on the learners, thus triggering communication as an excellent tool to improve speaking skills.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Shaping a syllabus which meets learners' needs, in terms of modules and units useful to build their linguistic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic competences, and which allow them to enjoy what they will be involved in doing, in terms of being intrinsically motivated and becoming interactive participants of their learning process, is a tricky issue. The choice of a communicative approach, as pivotal to moulding the syllabus, allows both teachers and learners to share strategies aimed at determining what pillars communication should be rooted in. The core foundations of a proficient communicative-oriented syllabus which I experienced as an English teacher at the University of Trieste in the Communication Sciences degree course, and which I shared with my students, may be summarized as WHAT (topics) triggers stretches of proficient interaction, makes WHO (both teacher and learners) feel responsible for HOW (verbal and visual tools) negotiating activities are organised, under what circumstances (WHERE), to achieve what goals (WHY).

Dell Hymes's principle of contextualising the use of language to mould communicative speech acts enhanced the process of selecting linguistic tools. The verbal and visual language of journalism as a topic directly related to the learners' degree course, became an opportunity to have learners' increase both their verbal and visual receptive skills of reading and productive skills of speaking through multimodal instruments.

My analysis of how Halliday's functional approach as a socio-semiotic principle to analyse language and language functions in a context, applied to the multimodal discourse of *The Economist*, provided evidence for the Barthian principle of anchorage, according to which, images are closely related to the verbal language placed in their proximity. Multimodal discourse analysis may be conceived of as a proficient language learning tool because, focussing on the different language modes, it provides multi-layered steps of understanding and decoding language.

When engaged in activities of skimming and scanning pieces of information, learners are usually asked to share their process of decoding, thus exercising both receptive and productive skills and activating effective communication.

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