Reading as designing: A multimodal approach to literary texts

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The theme of the current paper has arisen from the context of teaching literature to undergraduates in Japan. I will base my discussion on several examples of visual translation done by my students. They were asked to visualise what seems most crucial to them in the story they read in the literature class. The paper explores the relationship between the choice of represented participants and what is perceived as a salient element in the story; namely, how written words in literary texts can be translated into visual manifestations and most importantly how the given visualisation is motivated by the reader and what it indicates about their interpretation of the written text.

The paper first gives a brief outline of some issues of reading in the age of the internet and its impact on reading in general in terms of social semiotics. It will then draw attention to some specific data in order to explore the relationship between the affordances of two modes. What is there to tell the story and show the world-view of the reader? The data shows how different readers position their point of view, from which the story is appreciated. By looking at how the given text can contribute to a more active understanding of the story.

The paper therefore explores some positive outcomes of a multimodal reading of literary texts. My proposal here is that the approach can actually enhance awareness towards language use rather than pushing it aside – in order to visually translate the verbal narrative, one needs to have a precise focus or a specific perspective from which the story is read and interpreted. The current research demonstrates the potential of reading as a more open-ended and creative sign-making activity.

KEYWORDS   visual translation, motivation, point of view, salience, affordance

1. Introduction

   With the advancement of communication technology and the increasing use of screens rather than paper, reading is getting less and less 'just a matter of getting meaning out of printed words'. Information that used to be conveyed via writing has now been replaced by visual elements. There are domains where language used to play a primary role, which has been replaced by visual images. Take school textbooks and newspapers for example, the proportion of visual images is growing larger (Kress 2003). Among various genres of texts, it is literature that seems to be quite resilient to the current changes in the landscape. That is, most novels are still being *written* and reading novels means reading written words on the page. There is a newly established category of novels named 'graphic novel' that exemplifies the shift of conventional landscape of what a novel is like, that can be looked at and not just 'read'.

   This paper will attempt to explore what can be done about the *reading* of literary texts in the era of visualisation. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), and Kress (1997) have demonstrated reading is a far from passive activity; reading gives rise to highly creative activities depending on *how* the reader approaches and views the given texts. Then how can reading be practically creative? Within the pedagogical context, how can the act of reading and what is gained through reading be *proved*? There is no doubt that reading comprehension and essays on an assigned literary text are commonly recognized as a 'test' of the reader's understanding and interpretation. I would contend that genuinely rich and profound texts can be re-interpreted across different modes, as is often pointed out, for example, about plays by Shakespeare that have been originally written in the format of play can be made into drama, film, dance and music. In this sense, trans-modal interpretation of literary works is far from a new phenomenon. It goes without saying that the same meaning cannot be conveyed once writing is translated into another mode(s). By the same token, there is no such thing as a completely accurate and faithful translation.

   Writing about literary texts is indeed one form of transformation between a single mode: writing. In this paper, I'd like to propose that trans-modal approach to literary texts is effective in a number of ways, particularly in the context of teaching literature. Firstly, it can activate the reading experience as a whole, often shunned by the students as a monotonous and tedious activity; they are expected to focus on a specific theme in the story. Secondly, some literary devices (such as narrative and point of views) that are unique to writing should be represented in the visual representation but how? The linearity is the one crucial feature that differentiates writing from visual images, which capture one particular instance of the whole story. Thirdly, in order for the reader to visualise the written text, I would argue, that an even closer and focused reading into the texts should be required and it provides one pathway for 'close reading', as Carter (1982:64) argues that 'a close analysis of features of language can show how some key literary meanings in the story are made.'

A trans-modal approach to literary texts, which are conventionally single-modal, can prompt a positive awareness towards how the language works in the text; hence it makes it possible for the reader to draw closer attention to the linguistic aspects such as choices of words and, more generally, the style of writing. A few examples of this trans-modal interpretation will be shown for the discussion with reference to the above-mentioned points. In so doing, I would like to consider and re-consider the role of language and pedagogical implications of multimodal approach to literary texts. In short, this is an attempt to demonstrate an act of reading through visualising.

2. Visual transformation of literary texts

2.1 Reading as a sign-making

The section will briefly review how the act of reading has been considered in the domain of literary criticism and related areas of studies. Barthes (1978) argued that the status of the author should be mitigated in order for the text to be fully appreciated. This well-known notion of the 'death of the author' not only challenged the status of the author, but also proposed more active involvement on the part of the reader rather than allowing them being a passive receiver of what is on the pages. Kress (1997), in relation to this issue, considers reading as 'internal sign-making' and that what comes out of such kind of reading is highly motivated depending on the reader's interest, and their socio-cultural conditioning. Affect, which derives from the reader's 'enthusiasm and involvement' (Kress, 1997: 68) is another important factor that contributes to the overall meaning making of texts:

...reading is the making of new signs, by the reader, internally, silently. These signs are, like those made outwardly, *motivated* conjunctions of forms and meanings, and it is this, which in fact provides a guiding principle for the reader in attempting to establish the meaning of the text. This search, as with outwardly made signs also, is guided by the reader's interest. Reading is a contested activity socially, and inevitably theories of different kinds develop around it, theories which are social and cultural metaphors, which lead to prohibition, circumscription, and concession, around the process of reading. As always there are choices to be made here. My guiding principle is: what kind of reader do we want to produce, and for what and whose ends? (Kress, 1997: 47)

As Kress points out above, the main focus has always been on the authorial intentions and the reception of the reader, let alone what is expected of the reader to do, has been less focused upon. Practically speaking, particularly in the context of teaching literature, however, how *well* and *what* the students 'read and understand' about literary texts is often tested and assessed through writing. Writing about written texts is evidently one transformative action

and its 'end-product' can demonstrate how the text was consumed, up to a point. As writing about literary works serves as a verbal manifestation of motivated signs, it should follow that visual transformation of literary works should be considered likewise. The validity of reading literary texts through visualisation, where more than one mode of communication is involved, will be taken up in the next section.

2.2   Social semiotics and multimodality

As is discussed above, the paper takes the stance that reading literary texts should be viewed as more than just a matter of writing. Behind this is the notion that, regardless of modes of communication, there is a meaning made, which is never arbitrary but always mo-tivated. A Social semiotic approach to communication, which is followed by multimodality, proposed by scholars like Hodge and Kress (1988), Kress (1997, 2003, 2010) and Van Leeuwen (2005) has its grounding in Halliday's (1978) notion that language is one of the many semiotic modes that contribute to the meaning making and communication between *any* text (in the sense 'text' is not restricted only to pages with writing) and *who* is involved *how*, be it a reader or writer. What is relevant here is that texts are not viewed as an entity with so-called pre-scribed meaning; the meaning is *made* through the interaction of readers with the text in front of them (labelled as 'interpersonal metafunction' in Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996), which they argue, essentially varies depending on the interest and socio-cultural conditioning of the sub-jectivity of the reader. The crucial point is that what is visually represented engages with the viewer of the image in one-way or another. For the textual analysis of students' visual trans-formation of the short story, the paper will draw attention to the following three categories at work in any kind of texts, which are proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996): interpersonal metafunction; textual metafunction and ideational metafunction. Visual transformation data will be discussed in relation to the first two categories in particular.

The relationship between what is visually represented and the viewer can be viewed in terms of interpersonal metafunction, depending on, what Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996)) call, 'interactive meaning' created through three domains: 'contact'; 'social distance' and 'attitude'. 'Contact' has two different realisations: Demand and Offer. In the former case, the represented participant is depicted as 'gazing at the viewer', namely with 'eye contact', while the latter is characterised with the absence of the gaze, with no eye contact. 'Social distance' between the represented participants and the viewer is manifested depending on the type of shot (which is originally used for film analysis); intimate/personal meaning is created by close shot and more impersonal meaning is realised with long shot. What Kress and Van Leeuwen call 'attitude' is related to a perspective with which a represented participant is depicted. They can be rep-resented either from a frontal angle ('involvement') or from an oblique angle ('detachment'). Besides, the choice of vertical perspective is also crucial for representing: 'viewer power' when

represented participants are viewed from high angle; 'equal power' from eye-level angle; 'represented participant power' from low angle.

Textual metafunction is related to how visual represented participants are positioned in the visually transformed text and the linguistic notion of information structure of Given and New is paralleled with the visual domain of Left and Right, respectively. 'Salience' is another entity to be focused here, as they state, 'The viewer of spatial compositions is intuitively able to judge the 'weight' of the various elements of a composition, and the greater the weight of an element, the greater its salience' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996: 202). I would therefore incorporate the notion of salience to connect visual transformation into thematic points along with its relevance to the title of the story.

3. Visual transformation of 'Cat in the Rain'

I would like now to move on to looking closely at what happens when written words are translated into visual images by focusing on actual sample cases that indicates part of the reading that students did: a drawing the students created after reading a short story by Ernest Hemingway 'Cat in the Rain'. This is the course titled 'Seminar: British and American Literature,' which is one of the compulsory courses for literature major undergraduates with its general goal as *reading* literary texts. *What* and *how* they are introduced as course materials are left up to each instructor. Conventionally, students are expected to translate parts of the text into Japanese and the primary emphasis is on grasping what is going on in the story and it has been often the case the process of reading, that is, how each reader negotiated meaning across two different languages, has been marginalized.

The instruction given to the students was 'Read the short story and visualise whatever images you wish about the story'. The class size is 21 (10 male students, 11 female students, age ranged between 20-21), all literature-majored undergraduates. More than two thirds of the students are beginners to intermediate readers of literature in English and many of them seem to be underconfident about reading authentic English texts (as opposed to abridged versions specially tailored for learners of English). Some of them, male students in particular, expressed how challenging it felt them to read literature in English without a Japanese translation.

The rationale of choosing this particular short story for this small project lies greatly in its style of writing. The whole text is short (approximately 1,000-word long) and it consists of only two scenes (the wife and husband in the hotel room and the wife goes out to fetch the cat in the rain), and what is more, there are very few adjectives used (this is often pointed out about Hemingway's style of writing as a whole) so that the students can expand and elaborate their reading, in other words, it can potentially allow more variations for visual transformation.

3.1. The story

'Cat in the Rain' was published in 1926 and is set in an Italian holiday resort; the story be-gins with a description of the setting. The hotel that the American couple is staying in faces a square with a war monument and palm trees around it. It is raining. The nameless wife (while the husband is addressed as 'George') looks out of the hotel window and sees a cat outside in the rain. She goes down to make sure the cat is safe, but by the time, with the help of a hotel maid, she has gone down, the cat has disappeared. She sees the old hotel owner, whom she likes; he is always there to serve her nicely and treats her very well. She comes back up to the hotel room and starts talking to her husband George, who is reading. She expresses her disap-pointment in missing the cat and she goes on to mention what is missing in her life; she is not content with how she looks and she wants to grow out her hair. She carries on that she could do with her own silverware and candles until George tells her to stop. After a while, the hotel maid brings the wife a big tortoiseshell cat and that is where the story ends.

 The most common reaction to the initial reading of this story by the students was 'Where is the rest [of the story]?' To some of them, the story is not complete and a sense of suspension is strongly felt as if the story needs more events or tension to make it a proper narrative.   As supporting questions that encourage them to visualise what they have taken in, I gave them another task: to guess the title of the story. It is notable that more than half of the students put a word 'cat' in the titles they guessed and one or two got it very close to the 'right answer' such as 'A Cat in the Rain', 'The Cat in the Rain' and 'Cats and Rain'.

3.2. Visually represented narrative

The story is written in the third-person narrative, which is expected to have an omniscient view in relation to the story. It is interesting to observe some visual translations take on the omniscient position while the others seem to represent a view from a particular character in the story. Take **Figure 1** for example, where both the husband and wife are represented as if viewed from above, namely a bird's eye view; the husband is drawn on the left reading his book on the bed and his wife is seated in front of the dressing table. Others show the view from the window, the public garden with a war monument with palm trees alongside and it is raining. This is what the American wife is supposed to be looking at; in other words, the visual image is a visual representation of the wife's point of view. There is a different version of rep-resentation of the wife's view, where its focus is specifically on the cat 'that is crouched under the table in the rain'.

It is notable that the choice between the first- and third-person narrators here is greatly connected with where the students positioned themselves in relation to the characters. The female student who drew the view from the window commented on her drawing: 'I felt sorry for the wife being stuck in the hotel room and her husband being indifferent to her. She's on

holiday but all she could see is the view from their hotel room. That's so sad.' In fact, there are 4 other female students who made a similar visualisation based on the same reason. These students said that they couldn't help identifying themselves with the wife, who was neglected by her husband. In this sense, this is a visual manifestation of empathetic views towards the female character in the story. The view from the window is all that is given to her and she is deprived of freedom. It is interesting to point that there was no male student who drew the wife's view as a salience.
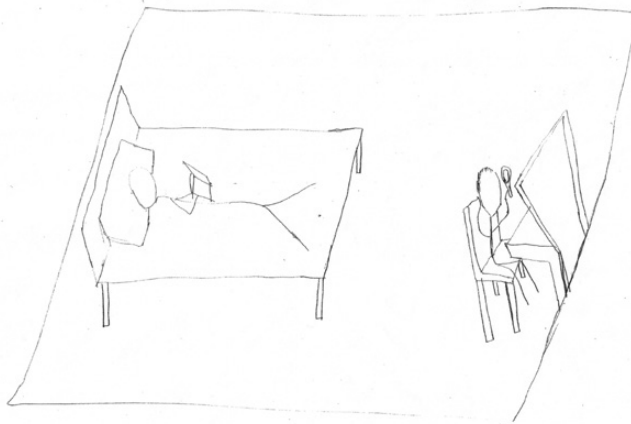

Figure 1. Student's drawing representing the hotel room with two characters

There was a notable tendency among the male students, who drew an overall view of the setting in the hotel room (5 out of 10 students), while others (3 students) focused on the depiction of the cat in the story. One of the students in the latter group, explained the reason why he had chosen the cat out in the rain as, 'I think I drew the cat because it seemed to be a key to understanding this story.' There is another interesting comment (by another male student in the same group) on the cat, who claimed that the cat was not really there, but the wife made that up to draw her husband's attention. This is a notable point that shows one aspect of gender expectation towards women and a few female students shared the same opinions with this male student.

The choice between the first-person and third-person narrator is no doubt a crucial factor for literary texts and in the case of 'Cat in the Rain', a cat is first introduced in the third-person narrator (the omniscient narrator). However, the question arises as to the truthfulness of what it tells the reader. Wood (2009) argues that the third-person narrator cannot be reliable and justified as having an omniscient view while the first-person narrator cannot be always be labelled as 'unreliable':

So-called omniscience is almost impossible. As soon as someone tells a story about a char-

acter, narrative seems to want to bend itself around that character, wants to merge with that character, to take on his or her way of thinking and speaking. A novelist's omniscience soon enough becomes a kind of secret sharing; this is called *free indirect style*, a term novelist has lots of different nicknames for – 'close third person' or 'going into character' (Wood, ibid: pp. 8-9).

I'd like to note in my textual analysis how this free indirect style can be visually transformed in the students' drawings and what kind of motivation is behind the visual representation of the characters in the story. This is one of the points where the interface between writing and visual images can be explored, in other words, it exemplifies how multimodality *can* come into the meaning making of a literary text.

3.3. Salience as representation of affect

The section will look at the relationship between what is chosen to be the salience factor(s) and what is considered to be the theme of the short story. Roughly speaking, there are two types of represented participants as a salient element in the visualisation: a cat and the American wife. Some students (more prominent among the male students than female students) drew a cat right in the middle of the paper while others put the American wife as the central figure.

Figure 2. Student's drawing representing the wife looking herself in the mirror

Figure 2 is drawn by a female student, who positioned the cat in the centre of visual space considered the cat as the primary focus of the story and her drawing is parallel to the title she came up with: 'A Cat in the Rain'. Obviously, the cat plays a significant role in the story as this female student put, 'at some symbolic level rather than literary level'. **Figure 2** shows a cat depicted in the thought balloon that is emitted from the wife. Here the cat is a projection within the American wife and it should be noted that there she is depicted faceless. I asked the student the reason why the wife had to be faceless, this female student said, 'She is not given a name with no identity, therefore no face'. It seems to be a skilful and relevant visual transformation from written text with its crucial point picked and reflected in its visual representation. The point is that if she had been assigned to write about the story, she might not have picked this aspect of the story as something worth noting, but the visualisation is now giving a clue to expand and elaborate her interpretation of the story and perhaps leads to exploring what lies possibly behind the story by asking a question: why the woman is not given a name. The fact that the female character has not given any name while the male counter part is can lead to an interesting question: to what extent the visual representations of the students reflect the social and cultural stereotypes which condition their way of reading this short story.

Figure 1 is in fact an example that makes use of abstract representation of the American couple staying in the hotel room. Here, the bodies are drawn as abstract figures, which do not even reveal the gender of the person depicted (unless one has read the short story) let alone its details. I propose that this is a visual representation of third-person narrator in **3.2** in that it is a birds-eye-view as if the couple were watched from above. In other words, their action, the husband is reading while the wife is looking at the mirror, is represented as factual.

In relation to the notion of affect, it is a detached aloof representation of the couple. The wife and husband are 'detached' turning their back against each other and what is more, compared to **Figure 2**, no detail is given about their physical appearance let alone their facial expressions. What does it signify? The male student answered, 'It's so common for the couple to be like that. I don't think they are bored with each other after so many years being married'. What this student was trying to convey was that 'It could happen to any couple, husband and wife', and it seems to me that these abstract figures are a visual representation of 'generality', therefore no definite specific depiction. In other words, it could happen to *anyone*, and it is not a unique case that is particular only with this couple. When I mentioned this to the student, he said, 'I didn't think that far but I just wanted to show them as one *type* of couple, rather than individual husband and wife'. There is something else worth mentioning here: it is the positioning of the two figures, but this will be discussed in the next section (**3-4**) in terms of visual composition. Visual transformation of a short story thus allows the students to read into the story and get its gist, which might not have happened if their feedback is done only through writing such as essays and reaction papers.

One of the most common salient represented participants in students' visualisation is a

cat. **Figure 3,** drawn by a female student, is an example that placed the cat in the middle of the space. To apply the notion of interpersonal metafunction, it can be taken that the cat is depicted with a close shot, with a frontal angle, with a high angle. This signifies that the cat is represented (to the reader) as something close, intimate and something to be 'looked down on'. The equivalent part in the text goes:

The American wife stood at the window looking out. Outside right under their window a cat was crouched under one of the dripping green tables. The cat was trying to make herself so compact that she would not be dripped on. (Hemingway, 1926)

Figure 3. Student's drawing representing a cat in the rain outside the hotel

In terms of narrative, there is a shift in the kind of narrators. The first sentence starts in third-person narrative, which ends up with the sentence 'The cat was trying to make herself so compact that she would not be dripped on', where the wife's point of view is somehow inserted. It is the wife who is supposed to be looking at the cat in the rain and it is reasonable to think that she is feeling sorry for the cat at the same time it is an objective description of the event. In other words, this sentence is a free indirect thought of the wife.

What seems to be significant in this visual transformation is that the reading, that is, the wife's empathy towards this 'poor kitten' in the rain, is visually manifested in that the cat is given full details about its appearance (with the implication of affect) as opposed to the detached abstract representation of the character as is observed in **Figure 1**. As is often pointed out that use of adjectives and other details are spared typically in Hemingway's writing and the cat's appearance is not mentioned in the text. This aspect of writing makes **Figure 3** even more meaningful because it demonstrates the student's reading into the cat as a character

now in a different mode than writing. What is more, the interactive meaning that the cat conveys in relation to the viewer is that the cat is looking up with eye contact ('demand' contact), with personal (social distance) as opposed to impersonal. The perspective that it creates is that of 'subjectivity' with a direct frontal angle and it is also allowing the viewer power with a high angle, as if the cat is been looked down on (the viewer power). This is a representation of the 'poor' cat in the wife's inner thought more than just what is described in the third-person narrative.

3.4 Visual composition as a manifestation of reading

Finally, I am now focusing on the syntactic feature of visual transformations of the short story. **Figure 1,** as was discussed above, shows the husband and wife in the hotel room and in terms of visual syntax, there is a strong sense of centrality that divides the two people. Arnheim (2009: 133) argues that the centrality in visual representation serves as a divider, which creates polar composition. Notably, there is no specific description that says that the husband and wife are sitting facing opposite directions in the story but the student *chose to* put them the way they are in its visual transformation of the story. This is a visual signifier that signifies a rift between the couple and the student realised that in its visual composition. The centrality creates the domain of Left and Right: the husband is positioned in the Left while the wife is on the Right. If this 'Given-New' is to be applied to **Figure 1**, it follows that the husband is taken for granted (the Given) as the status quo and the wife is the one who makes a move while the husband remains physically 'static': reading a book. The student who drew this illustration remarked that 'the positioning of the husband on the left and the wife on the right came naturally', but 'the husband was drawn first'. I'd like to note the 'writing path', that is, there is a linearity created here: from left to right, namely from the Given to New. The student picked up a sense of disharmony and rift between the husband and wife and transformed its meaning into visual syntax, in other words, along with the choice of abstract representation of the two human figures, his reading of the couple's relationship is visually realised and transformed from writing and its composition is a motivated sign of his reading.

Visual transformation can also serve as one process of understanding of what has been 'read' through the given piece of text. In this way, a trans-modal approach to literary texts has a positive implication for the future of teaching literature particularly in English as Foreign Language context, where the students must go through one extra linguistic filter in order to appreciate the message encoded in the text.

4. Conclusion: Pedagogical implication of trans-modal approach to literary texts

As the examples that I discussed above showed, a single-modal text (such as literary texts) can be approached from a multimodal perspective. Not to make the study easy but to be more creative and allow the reader to engage more with the particular text, rather than being a passive (and imposed) reader. What gets passed in feedback in writing can be elicited through visualisation. As Eaglestone (2016) asserts, literature is not a code. As a single text allows multiple readings depending on the reader's socio-cultural standing, interest and motivations, its interpretation and appreciation can be achieved through different modes from writing: visual transformation is only one of them and as some cases in the paper demonstrated, a multimodal approach can open up different aspects of texts.

The recent shifts and changes in the communication landscape (Kress 2003) give rise to changes in the meaning making potential of writing. Literary texts can no longer have to have feedback exclusively in the form of writing but could also have in the form of visual representation. Meaning making across different modes in this way has a potential for interpretation of the text from a different perspective. Visual transformation of literary texts can therefore provide an opportunity for the reader of the text to view the story from a different point of view. The richer the literary texts are the more potential they have for multimodal reading.

By introducing a trans-modal reading of literary texts, the taken-for-granted notion of the linearity of information that writing carries will be challenged and re-considered. Involving visual elements into teaching literature, where writing has been served as conventionally the primary mode of communication, does not necessarily make the given text accessible, easy and even enjoyable, but can pose yet another challenge because the message in one mode has to be transformed into another mode. The findings in this paper have demonstrated that teaching literature give rise to research potential, that is, to explore the possibility of literary texts in terms of trans modal reading. This is where an active (rather than a passive where the students were simply given some knowledge) reading of the text becomes possible. A trans-modal approach to literary texts has its strength in the sense that this research has come out of actual teaching and has reinforced the point: teaching and research can and should be closely connected to full potential. It is an inspiring point that reading and understanding literary texts (writing) in terms of visual 'translation' can actually lead to the re-assessment and closer examination of how writing works, therefore for a better and more profound understanding of literature.

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