Language as a Model for Visual Communication and Graphic Design

A language is a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings through signs (sounds, visual gestures or marks) having understood meanings. Our language is our principal communications system and its grammar and rhetoric are the primary model for other forms that combine pictorial and verbal communication: film, video, digital imagery and graphic design. Graphic design gains richness from the combination of multiple language and optical forms—words, pictures, signs and colors—into complex communications.

Rhetoric (or figure of speech) is the art that deals with the use of spoken or written discourse. Its object is eloquence, which is defined as effective speech. “According to Aristotle, its concern is with discovering all the available means of persuasion...either to inform (rational appeal or logos), to delight and win over (ethical appeal or ethos) or to move (emotional appeal or pathos). Artists should not ignore the vocabulary of rhetoric because it uses unfamiliar terms and very precise definitions of similar concepts, for rhetoric actually defines many communications techniques used daily by graphic designers to solve problems.

Figures of speech that show a relationship or resemblance are most important and have parallels in visual communications.

A few examples of rhetoric:

- simile - metaphor - personification
- metonymy - synecdoche - pun
- hyperbole - antithesis - irony
- parody - allegory - litotes

**Simile**

A comparison between two unlike things using “like” or “as” to make the comparison.

- “The grade on his paper was like a slap in the face.”
- “Her heart is as hard as a rock.”

*A visual simile is created by Dietmar Winkler in an announcement of an exhibition of sculpture by Alberto Giacometti. Winkler configured typography to look like one of Giacometti’s sculptures.*

**Metaphor**

A metaphor is also points out resemblance, but does so by substitution, where proper domain has been altered.

- “The ship plows the sea” is a metaphor.
- “A ship moves through the ocean like a plow through the field” is a simile.

*In a book jacket for William Faulkner’s Light in August designed by R.D. Scudellari, the shade pull becomes a metaphor for a noose and, by extension, death. The design works on two levels of understanding. The rain-splashed detail of a window in late afternoon creates a pervading resonance and mood, and the noose-like form signifies impending doom.*
**Personification**

Personification is the representation of inanimate objects or abstractions by a human image. For example, a cupid signifies love. Anthropomorphism is attributing human traits, thoughts, action and speech to animals or even inanimate objects. The illustration below by John Tenniel of the White Rabbit from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* demonstrates this concept.

**Metonymy**

Metonymy is using the name of one thing to stand for another related thing. When newscasters state “The White House said today...” we know they mean the president and his staff.

In the poster published by the Twentieth Century Bookstore in Tel Aviv headlined “Independence Day,” Yehudah Raviv photographed an Israeli flag and a Palestinian flag tied together by a large knot. These intertwined flags become metonyms that stand for the Israelis and the Palestinians, signifying the peaceful coexistence of the two peoples. Daniel J. Walsh of Liberation Graphics observes that May fifteenth is celebrated by the Israelis as their Independence Day and the Palestinians observe it as the Day of Disaster, the day they lost their land to the Israelis.
**Synecdoche**

Synecdoche is the use of a part to represent the whole, or vice versa. It achieves a powerful effect in a booklet explaining the movement problems of some handicapped people. The detail of the hands of a person teaching a handicapped person to open a jar represent two people—helper and handicapped—and their relationship.

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**Puns and Parody**

The essence of a pun is the use of words in a way that suggests different meanings or plays upon similar sounds or spellings. Also, the phenomena of a pun indicates that one symbol can have two or more meanings or that two or more symbols can have similar or identical images but different meanings.

Puns can be visual, verbal or a combination of both. At the top right, Joseph Michael Essex created a visual pun—a photograph of a child’s blocks—in the design of stationary for Ira Block.

At the bottom right, is an example of a parody (also a verbal pun) where, in an ad for a TV channel, fun is poked at the Chanel No. 5 perfume. A parody is when a piece imitates the style of some other work, often with humorous or satirical content.
**Puns cont.**

This poster designed by Jim Jacobs Studio for nontraditional productions of classic plays achieve remarkable impact through a visual verbal pun. Titled “Uncommon Shakespeare” to express nontraditional productions, the illustration is William Shakespeare is made uncommon by his twentieth-century clothing.

**Hyperbole**

Hyperbole is exaggeration for the sake of emphasis. In the piece below, hyperbole is achieved by exaggerating the image. One soldier would be unlikely to read or carry that many books, however, it emphasizes the need.
Litotes

The opposite of hyperbole is litotes, which is an understatement using a negative as a way to express an affirmative, such as “He’s not a bad photographer” to mean that he is a good photographer. This can be a very effective in visual communications as evidenced by the piece below. The one-word headline “Lemon” is probably the most negative thing one could say about a car. It implies defective manufacturing. The text explains that this particular vehicle did not pass inspection due to a blemish on the glove compartment chrome strip so it was not shipped until this minor defect was corrected. A negative understatement becomes the entry point to tout outstanding quality control, inspection and attention to detail.

Antithesis

Antithesis is the sharp contrast between two opposing ideas or thoughts to intensify their difference. “The revolution promised freedom but brought slavery” is more intense than “The revolution brought slavery.” Antithesis, though the sharp contrast between freedom and slavery increases the emotional fervor.

Antithesis is used in this poster directed toward high school students to warn of the hazards of drunk driving. Taking one last drink before departing—“Having one for the road”—contrasts sharply with a photograph depicting the loss of a leg in a traffic accident.
Irony

Irony is a deliberate contrast, presenting the opposite of what would be expected. The situation would be ironic, for example, if a fire truck caught fire and burned. In the magazine cover, illustrator Theo Rudnak depicted mighty naval warships as sitting ducks. The cover signifies the irony of naval power that might not be effective in wartime.

Allegory

An allegory is a symbolic representation. A literal device or character is used for an idea or principle. The Statue of Liberty is an allegorical figure for freedom. The United States is signified by the allegorical figure, Uncle Sam.

In a poster for the Colorado Music Festival, Barry Zaid symbolized the pastoral joy of music by the allegorical figure of Pan, the ancient Greek god of forests and shepherds who created the first reed pipe, playing music high on an idyllic mountain.

All abstracts from *Type and Image: The Language of Graphic Design* by Philip B. Meggs