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Storytelling in Satirical Drawings

Abstract: In 2012 Jonathan Gottshall published a book entitled *The Storytelling Animal. How Stories Make Us Human*, in which he claims that what distinguishes man from other animals is that people have minds that are able to create stories. Moreover, Gottshall (106) mentions an experiment conducted in the 1940s by Heider and Simmel, whose results show that “if you give people random, unpatterned information, they have a very limited ability *not* to weave it into a story”. While in the aforementioned experiment the stimuli that triggered stories consisted of geometric figures, in the present article attention shall be paid to satirical drawings. They will be discussed with reference to selected mechanisms derived from cognitive linguistics that are applied in satirical drawings in order to activate the stories needed to interpret the given drawing. The paper is divided into two parts, one of which includes a brief theoretical overview of storytelling, and the second containing a description of selected mechanisms, i.e. metaphors, conceptual blending, and figure and ground distinction, that trigger the story-like interpretation of cartoons. Satirical drawings will be perceived here as examples of contemporary multimodal texts whose interpretation and creation involve the application of the storytelling properties of the human brain. References to both verbal and non-verbal aspects of cartoons will demonstrate that the cognitive mechanisms discussed here exceed the boundaries of verbal language.

Keywords: multimodality, cartoons, storytelling, metaphor, conceptual blending, figure and ground

Dostoyevsky (1848), in one of his works, asked “But how could you live and have no story to tell?” The rhetorical character of this question is supported by a theory according to which people may be referred to as *Homo fictus*—fiction man—who are immersed in stories throughout their whole lives and who find stories to be as important for them as “water is for a fish” (Gottschall 3–4). This statement refers both to human existence perceived in the short-term perspective of a single person’s life and in the long-term perspective with reference to the existence of the whole of humankind. The nature of the stories present in people’s lives varies when observed from the perspective of history, as well as when investigated from the perspective of a single person’s changing age. Similarly, the stimuli that activate story-like interpretations can be found in different spheres of human activity, and they include both linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena.

In this article, stories will be discussed with the aid of selected tools from cognitive linguistics. The possibility of applying these tools for the activation of stories in texts including both visual and verbal elements illustrates the fact that mechanisms such as metaphors or conceptual blending are related to our cognition and are not limited to verbal language.

1. An overview of storytelling

The definition of a *story* given by the Oxford Dictionary states that it is “an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment”.¹ However, the functions of stories go far beyond mere amusement, insofar as “all forms of communication can be seen fundamentally as stories” (Cooper, Rives and Saxby 2). According to Herman, “stories are accounts of what happened to particular people—and of what it was like for them to experience what happened—in particular circumstances and with specific consequences. Narrative, in other words, is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process and change” (2). Furthermore, “*story* refers to the chronological sequence of situations and events that can be reconstructed on the basis of cues provided in a narrative text” (Herman 193). The cues mentioned above do not have to be represented by verbal language, as observed in the following definition: “A story or narrative is a connected series of events told through words (written or spoken), imagery (still and moving), body language, performance, music, or any other form of communication”.² Additionally, certain forms of very basic storytelling are also displayed by animals in the form of behaviours in which scenarios for future events are anticipated through activities like “building nests, or storing food for winter”.³ However, the art of telling stories is ascribed particularly to humans, whose life is full of stories that are manifested in almost every sphere of human life.

1.1. Storytelling in the short-term perspective

The earliest manifestation of stories in human life appears in childhood, when stories seem to be “psychologically compulsory” (Gottschall 11). In fact, children spend most of their time involved in some kind of stories which seem to serve mostly for their entertainment. However, when observed more closely, it appears that every activity related to stories teaches children some important information about the world (Gottschall 26). The fact that stories are such an integral part of children’s behaviour is used in education, because, as “a story tends to have more depth than a simple example”, it fosters remembering and understanding, as well as attract-

¹ “Story.” In: *Oxford Dictionary on Lexico.com*. Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/story>. 29 Apr. 2019.

² “Literary Terms.” Retrieved from <https://literaryterms.net/>. 10 Nov. 2019.

³ J. Gold. *Story Species*. Retrieved from <http://storyspecies.com/>. 29 Apr. 2019.

ing students' attention, and their curiosity about how the story ends keeps them focused (Green 2004).

As people grow older, the nature of stories, which appear in films and TV series, novels, poems, songs, and many other less obvious instances of fiction, changes. As Gottschall (2012) observes, activities such as sports, including combat sports in particular, television shows, advertisements, speeches in court, journalists' reports, religious traditions, video games and even conversations between friends are built around stories. Similarly to children, adults also respond better to content that involves a certain narrative. This statement is confirmed by the experiment entitled *Significant Object Project* prepared by Rob Walker and Joshua Glenn (2009). The researchers' hypothesis was that "narrative transforms insignificant objects into significant ones".⁴ The experiment was conducted through the e-Bay selling platform, where certain objects were listed for sale with an accompanying description in the form of a story created by writers participating in the experiment. The objects that had been bought by the researchers for a total of \$128.74 were sold for \$3,612.51, which proves that "stories add measurable value" to things,⁵ which is applied for example in advertising.

The aforementioned observations concerning the short-term perspective illustrating the presence of stories in human life confirm the statement that the human mind has storytelling properties, a fact which shall be further emphasized in the description of satirical drawings and the manner in which they are interpreted by their recipients. In turn, the following section of the paper will briefly refer to the long-term, i.e. historical perspective, paying particular attention to the issue of how stories evolved, leading to the multimodal instances we encounter today, for example in the form of satirical drawings.

1.2. Storytelling in the long-term perspective

While the previous section of this paper focused on a short-term perspective according to which stories were described with reference to different stages of human life, here the long-term perspective, i.e. the one describing the presence of stories in different stages of the history of man, will be discussed.

When discussing the long-term perspective on narrativity, it should be noted that instances of stories are found as early as in prehistoric art, or more precisely in cave drawings. These were not only the art of that period, but also a form of communication which enabled people to pass their stories on to subsequent generations. The oldest cave paintings come from 32,000 years ago, which seems to support the theory that the interpretation of visual signs used in this kind of narrative can be perceived as intuitive for humans (Curtis 11). Whereas the oldest cave paintings most frequently present animals such as horses, bears or lions portrayed without

⁴ "Significant Objects." Retrieved from <http://significantobjects.com/about/>. 3 May 2019.

⁵ Ibid.

other elements on an empty background, it is possible to find traces of narrative in this kind of art. Hence, in some cases, these drawings create sequences which, as observed for example by Szyłak (5), constitutes an attempt at creating narration.

Whereas sequences in the aforementioned instances of art could help people, for example, to express the flow of time or movement, the stories expressed with the aid of such means could not convey complex messages. Therefore, techniques used in communication of this kind started to evolve, and about 12,000 years ago petroglyphs, i.e. another graphic method of transcribing various information, appeared. The difference between this form of transcription and the previously described cave drawings was that petroglyphs involved symbols such as curved lines, spirals or circles instead of images. Due to their symbolic character, petroglyphs can be considered a pre-writing system, and were later, i.e. in approximately 3100 BC, replaced by the oldest existing language, i.e. Sumerian,⁶ which at the beginning also consisted of pictographic elements that were gradually replaced with more efficient signs, leading to the development of language consisting of symbols representing the sounds of speech.

This brief outline has been included in order to highlight the fact that conveying stories from the very beginning involved both visual and verbal means. Moreover, nowadays the interaction of these two modes in various types of text is a very popular phenomenon, allowing complex stories to be conveyed in concise forms. The ability to decode such forms is, like storytelling, a distinguishing feature of humankind.

2. Multimodality

The observation that language is multimodal in nature and that texts consist not only of verbal signs is undergoing a renaissance in contemporary linguistic studies. In these approaches to linguistic analysis, the concept of text refers to such phenomena as “films, ballet performances, happenings, pieces of music, ceremonies, or circus acts” (Nöth 331). Similarly, contemporary stories involve the application of various modes, such as, for example, in an opera performance, where “there is a libretto—a linguistic text—which is sung or recited and which is linked to the musical text. In addition, there are the facial and bodily expressions of the singers, as well as costumes, scenery, lights, etc., all of them units of meaning which the producer, conductor, stenographer, singers and musicians—and possibly dancers—seek to bring into a meaningful relationship with each other” (Johansen and Larsen 119).

However, the issue of multimodality is also related to language on a more basic level, insofar as the distinction between linguistic signs that were traditionally con-

⁶ I. J. Gelb. *Sumerian Language*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sumerian-language>. 23 Jul. 2019.

sidered symbolic and arbitrary (e.g. de Saussure) and iconic signs based on resemblance is not as clear as it seems. As observed by Saraceni (22), the two kinds of signs can be placed on a continuum insofar as pictures may also be symbolic (e.g. pictures on toilet doors denoting men and women), and verbal signs can also be iconic (e.g. hieroglyphs). Therefore, even stories that seem to be monomodal, i.e. written on paper with the application of verbal language only, have some multi-modal properties. Hence the language used to transcribe them has a certain material form with a specific size, colour and font that often carry some additional meaning or lead to different interpretations.

2.1. Cartoons

As observed above, the contemporary perspective on text implies that it can be expressed in more than one mode, at the same time making the messages being conveyed more appealing. Moreover, the “semiotic landscape” (Kress, Leite-Garcia, and van Leeuwen 257) which surrounds people nowadays has changed, for example due to the presence of media, and it involves messages in which image frequently dominates over language. While the aforementioned researchers claim that the methods of communicating messages are innovatory, people do not need to be trained to decode them. It seems to be intuitive, like the ability to create stories, due to the fact that communication from the very beginning involved pictures, sounds, gestures, etc.

This section of the paper will be devoted to cartoons, i.e. instances of texts which combine visual and verbal elements to convey the messages intended by the author. What is particularly interesting about cartoons is that they tell complex stories that are included in a very concise form. It may be surprising how complicated narratives may appear in the mind of a recipient of a cartoon, even though he or she encounters a very limited number of stimuli. In my research conducted in 2014, I distributed incomplete parts (either verbal or visual) of cartoons to participants who were asked to write a short interpretation of what they saw. The results of the experiment, apart from showing that the interaction of both verbal and visual elements is essential to be able to interpret cartoons according to their author’s intention (Hardukiewicz-Chojnowska, “The interaction” 58), proved that people are able to create a story even when they encounter an incomplete part of a cartoon.

Consequently, when the recipients encounter a complete cartoon consisting of a depiction of a single scene presented both with the aid of an image and a verbal message, their brain provides a story that has a beginning which is not seen, a core, a fragment of which is presented in a single “snapshot”, and even a possible conclusion, anticipating what might happen next. As Fludernik observes, “the narrativity of the situation represented is usually aligned with the story which the picture is meant to illustrate. The moment that the photo, painting, or drawing captures as in a snapshot derives its significance from the framework within which it is to be set” (158).

In order to decode the story in the way that was intended by the author, the recipient needs to refer to the elements, both visual and verbal, that were selected by the author in a very well-thought-through manner, as well as to the context in which the cartoon was created. As I observed in my research from 2015, the selection of elements in gag cartoons, i.e. ones that are intended to comment on contemporary events in a mocking way, is motivated by humour.⁷ In order to achieve a humorous effect, the cartoonist selects images and words that interact with each other and direct the recipient's interpretation to the intended interpretation. Because cartoons show only a limited number of elements, in order to interpret the scene that is being presented in a proper way the recipient needs to activate the knowledge of the world that he or she has in their minds, and refer to his or her own experience, thus allowing him or her to build a whole story on the basis of the stimuli they have encountered. Therefore, to create a whole story on the basis of a single scene presented in a cartoon, a number of operations needs to be undertaken by the recipient, who needs to take into consideration almost every element that he or she is looking at, insofar as all the details presented in the cartoon are to some degree meaningful. On the other hand, the process of decoding a cartoon takes place very quickly; the time it takes for the story to appear in the viewer's mind may be measured in seconds.⁸

In the following subsections of the paper, selected cartoons by Andrzej Mleczeko will be described with reference to mechanisms derived from cognitive linguistics that are perceived as tools triggering the interpretation of the stimuli that are provided. The relationship between these elements and the intuitive ability to interpret combinations of various signs as stories support the claim that metaphors, conceptual blending, and figure and ground duality exceed the boundaries of verbal language and may be applied in the analysis of texts combining various modes of expression.

2.1.1. Metaphor

The history of metaphor studies reaches back to Aristotle. However, it was the observation made by Lakoff and Johnson (3), according to whom metaphors exist both in "thought and action", that opened up possibilities of investigating this concept beyond verbal language.

In cognitive theory, we talk about conceptual metaphors, i.e. those which "consist of conceptual domains, in which one domain is understood in terms of another" (Kövecses 4). The two domains are referred to as source and target. Whereas the source is "the conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain", the target is "the conceptual domain that

⁷ See unpublished PhD thesis (Hardukiewicz, "A cognitive intersemiotic study").

⁸ The time recipients spent looking at a cartoon before they decided they understood the message being conveyed was measured in an eyetracking experiment in 2015 (Hardukiewicz, unpublished PhD dissertation).

is understood in this way” (Kövecses 4). Furthermore, understanding domain A in terms of domain B is possible due to the existence of correspondences between the domains in question that allow for certain elements to be mapped from the source domain onto the target domain (Kövecses 6). Whereas some metaphorical linguistic expressions illustrate the existence of conceptual metaphors that exist in the human mind, it is also possible to express them with the application of modes other than verbal language. As Forceville (383–84) observes, there are both monomodal and multimodal metaphors. Whereas the first term refers to “metaphors whose target and source are exclusively or predominantly rendered in one mode”, multimodal metaphors are “metaphors whose target and source are each represented exclusively or predominantly in different modes”. Therefore, a metaphor is a tool that is very frequently used by cartoonists insofar as it may carry complex content with the application of a limited number of elements. In the case of cartoons, the applied metaphors “emerge from the composition of several verbal and visual signs, which through their particular relation to one another, together produce the idea” (El Rifaie 80). Furthermore, the function of metaphors in cartoons is not aimed at explaining one domain with the aid of another in order to provide a better understanding of a more abstract concept, but rather at creating a surprising juxtaposition that will create a humorous effect.

The cartoon presented below includes a metaphor that could be referred to as HOUSEHOLD CHORES ARE A BALL AND CHAIN. The metaphor is expressed both verbally and visually. The ball and chain are presented in the drawing. The recipient knows that they refer to household chores when he or she juxtaposes the second part of the drawing, i.e. washing up, with the verbal part uttered by the man, saying: “I help as much as I can”. On the basis of their knowledge of the world, the recipient knows that a stereotypical husband does not help a lot at home. This fact is strengthened by the exaggeration included in the comparison of household chores to a ball and chain, which together with the depicted scene create a humorous effect. Additionally, the picture includes a contrast between the man wearing slippers and the woman wearing high heels, which suggests that the husband can take a rest after coming home from work, while the wife does not even have time to change her outfit because she has a lot of things to do.

Taking all of the aforementioned details into consideration, the recipient of the cartoon presented here may decode the following story: There is a husband and wife who have returned home after a day spent at work. Whereas the man has some free time, the woman needs to wash up the dishes and do many other household chores. The husband is not very willing to help, but he pretends to do so by sitting next to his wife and holding a ball and chain, which symbolize the abundance of duties that the woman has, and at the same time refer to the stereotypical division of social roles originating in the past, when most women stayed at home. After the woman finishes with the dishes, she will probably start doing another household task, like vacuuming or cooking.

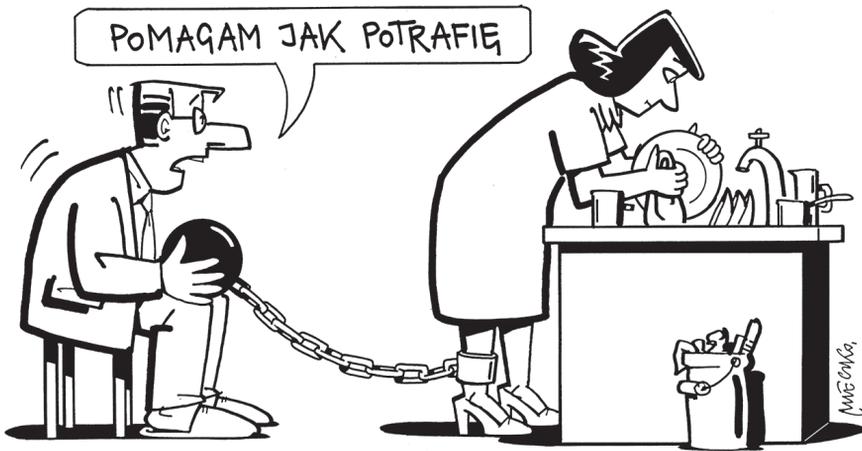


Figure 1: Cartoon by Andrzej Mleczek

2.1.2. Conceptual blending

Another tool that is applied to activate a story and integrate visual and verbal elements included in a cartoon is conceptual blending. According to Fauconnier and Turner, “conceptual blending is a basic mental operation that leads to new meaning, global insight, and conceptual compressions useful for memory and manipulation of otherwise diffuse ranges of meaning” (57). In other words, “blends in cognitive studies refer to conceptual overlay: a functional joining of two ‘mental spaces’ that helps to create innovative meaning potential and facilitates mental reorientation” (Fludernik 160). As Libura (116) observes, conceptual blending is particularly useful in humour, where newly invented meanings of words can create a humorous effect. Additionally, “the comedy ... resides in the clash of depicted elements, in the incongruity of the blended worlds” (Fludernik 158). Furthermore, the products of conceptual blending, i.e. blends, may consist in “creative combinations of words, sounds, images or behaviours” (Libura 116–17) and thus may be also used in the analysis of phenomena other than verbal language.

In the cartoon presented below, the verbal message states that “one needs to have an aim in life”. The conceptual blending here is based on the application of a homonym, *aim*, whose two meanings which belong to two distinct mental spaces are juxtaposed in the cartoon. The first meaning, i.e. “a result that your plans or actions are intended to achieve”⁹ is included in the verbal part, whereas the second

⁹ “Aim.” In: *Cambridge English Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/aim>. 28 Jul. 2019.

meaning, i.e. “the act of pointing a weapon toward something”,¹⁰ is expressed in the visual part of the cartoon. The juxtaposition of the aforementioned meanings in the form of a word play causes two mental spaces, i.e. the one belonging to every-day situations and the one from the military context, to be combined to create a blended space, which creates a humorous effect. Additionally, the funniness of the expression uttered by one of the men portrayed in the cartoon is strengthened by the serious facial expressions of the two characters in the drawing.

Apart from the elements that contribute to the humorous interpretation of the scene, there are other details that direct the recipient towards a proper version of the story hidden behind the cartoon. One such detail consists in the kind of outfits the two men are wearing, which is a distinguishing feature of soldiers. Moreover, soldiers are wearing helmets, which may imply that they are taking part in some military exercise. The soldiers look neat and not tired, therefore it is also possible to conclude that they are not during a war.

Therefore, by paying attention to the details shown in the cartoon and by referring to our knowledge of the world, we are able to decode the following story: There are two soldiers taking part in a military exercise. One of them is going to shoot. The soldiers have a friendly relationship with each other, so one of them is telling a joke before shooting. The soldiers seem to be experienced, so the shot will probably reach its target.



Figure 2: Cartoon by Andrzej Mleczeko

¹⁰ Ibid.

2.1.3. Figure and ground

The last mechanism derived from cognitive linguistic theory that will be discussed in this paper is the distinction between figure and ground. According to Veale (64), “the distinction may generally apply to any aspect of cognitive structure where saliency can be redistributed from primary to secondary features, that is, from those elements that are highlighted, marked or privileged to those that are not”. As Stockwell (15) observes, “in most narratives, characters are figures against the ground of their settings”, which will also be observed in the cartoon presented below, where two men talking to each other are presented against the background of a city. However, as the description below will display, the significance of background in the case of cartoons cannot be denied.

As mentioned above, the cartoon under discussion shows two men standing in front of some buildings. One of the men is saying: “I have been living in this country for many years and I’m still sane”. The viewer knows that the situation is taking place in Poland because in the background of the picture there is a building which resembles the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, and on both sides of the picture there are tiny Polish flags. Furthermore, knowing the current political situation in the country and people’s differing views, the viewer interprets the statement made by the man as a critical comment on the reality in Poland. We know that the comment refers to Poland due to the application of the pronoun “this” included in the statement, which connects the depicted visual elements and verbal content with the background of the drawing. The comment is critical because the man implies that the reality in which he has been living could have made him mentally ill. According to common knowledge, things that are disturbing or hard to comprehend may be referred to by a person who experiences them as factors triggering insanity, which is a popular exaggeration that can be observed in statements like “it makes me crazy” or “I’m going to lose my mind”. The body language of the speaker tells us that the fact that he has not become insane is an achievement that he is proud of, which strengthens the interpretation about the reality in Poland. The second man’s body language and the expression on his face suggest that he agrees with his interlocutor, because the man is not angry or tense, so his opinion is probably similar to that included in the verbal message of the cartoon. Furthermore, the cartoon creates a humorous effect due to the exaggeration implied by the statement that living in Poland may make somebody mentally ill.

To sum up, taking all the above-mentioned remarks into consideration, it is possible to create the following story: There is a man, an inhabitant of Poland, portrayed during a walk. He bumps into his friend and they start a conversation. He is commenting on Polish reality, which at least one of the men does not like. What will probably happen next will be the reply given by the second speaker, who may agree with his interlocutor.



Figure 3: Cartoon by Andrzej Mleczko

3. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to discuss the issue of selected mechanisms derived from cognitive linguistics with reference to satirical drawings, in which these mechanisms are applied in order to trigger the interpretation of cartoons in the form of narratives. The analytical part of the paper was preceded by an overview of the development of the issue of storytelling, which was discussed with reference to both short-term and long-term perspectives. The aim of the aforementioned overview was to support the statement about the importance of stories in human life, which in turn supports the claim that people are able to create and re-create stories intuitively. This fact is essential when it comes to understanding how recipients are able to interpret a single-panel cartoon as if it presented a whole narrative. The aforementioned examples of cartoons prove that a skillful storyteller is able to construct his or her works in a way which allows the recipient to decode complete stories, even when he or she is offered a limited number of stimuli. There are three main mechanisms, i.e. metaphor, conceptual blending and figure and ground distinction applied to the cartoons under analysis in order to integrate the language and image included in them and to direct the recipient's interpretation of a given cartoon to the intended interpretation. Furthermore, the application of these three mechan-

isms in the context of storytelling confirms the claim that they are phenomena related to human cognition and that they exceed the boundaries of verbal language.

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