

○ **C. PAINTER, J. R. MARTIN, & L. UNSWORTH,**  
***READING VISUAL NARRATIVES: IMAGE***  
***ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS***  
(SHEFFIELD, EQUINOX. 2013. PP. IX, 172)

---

*Review by Alexis Birner Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of British Columbia*

---

This book seeks to provide a framework for examining the semiotic systems of both language and images in children's picture books by providing some relevant meaning systems for the visual semiotic. According to Painter, Martin and Unsworth, 'picture books need to be taken seriously as a bimodal form of text in which the visual modality plays just as important a role as the verbal one in creating meaning and shaping readers' (p.2). The authors have two intended objectives for writing this book: first, to contribute insight useful for the better understanding how picture books make meaning, especially through the visual mode; second, to contribute to the field of multimodal discourse analysis by extending the social semiotic account of the visual mode and understanding how it can be considered in relation to the verbal or written meaning (see pp.2-3). The book is targeted at educators and researchers with a background in visual discourse analysis, who are looking to extend their understanding beyond what is discussed in Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996, 2006) account of visual grammar. As the book draws heavily on multimodal discourse analysis theory, it is not recommended for someone with a limited or beginner understanding in the field. The book's five chapters provide specific examples and analyses of the picture books chosen for this study.

The data included in the authors' research began with 40 picture books, which was then further extended to 73. The authors do not specify exactly what they mean by a picture book, apart from it being a bimodal text (p.2), or how picture books make meaning, but one can presume that this is done by reading the image and the 'verbiage', or words (p.10), simultaneously. Each of these books was analysed using metafunctions. Most of the books used in the study are well-known by educators and librarians, and are likely to be used in educational contexts. The authors applied their proposed framework for analysing the picture book narratives using a lens that incorporates multimodal discourse analysis theory (p.11) to many of the picture books, and even provided specific examples. The method for analysis is clearly explained; however, the criteria for selecting the 73 picture books are somewhat limited and vague. The reader is left to assume that this framework could be applied to any picture book, so long as the verbiage and image are both equally important in presenting ideas and helping create meaning.

In the first chapter, Painter, Martin and Unsworth draw significantly on the pioneering research on visual grammar by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), whose work is used as a theoretical framework. The authors state that although Kress and Van Leeuwen's research is valuable for understanding and making sense of a broad range of images, it is not sufficiently developed for addressing key elements of a picture book, such as ambience or the relationship between images in a sequence. The field and research of multimodal discourse analysis have clearly evolved since Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) significant work, thus many of their approaches to multimodal discourse analysis need to be modified in order to be more relevant to the analysis of a picture book. Each of the chapters in this book elaborates on one area of visual meanings and illustrates how this framework now functions using examples from picture books.

The second chapter focuses on the interpersonal metafunction, which the authors describe as being 'both interactive and personal' (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 15, as cited in Painter, Martin and Unsworth, 2013, p. 30). In this chapter, the authors explore the visual meaning systems relevant to the relationship between the reader and the depicted character as outlined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Arguably the most beneficial aspect of this chapter is the extent to which the authors use current picture books to provide various examples of interpersonal metafunctions, such as focalisation, pathos and affect, ambience and graduation with accompanying pictures from well-known picture books. Each visual system has multiple examples from a variety of picture books, allowing the reader to compare and contrast how picture book authors select different meaning systems to achieve particular effects. Also appealing about this chapter is how the authors highlight the importance of ambience and colour in picture books, and how these two features play a significant role in all three metafunctions. The authors further elaborate on ambience by providing a visual network of choices in ambience (see p.36). They note that their work on ambience has been designed specifically for children's picture books, and that students and educators alike could use it 'productively' (p.36). However, unless an educator has an extensive background in multimodal discourse analysis, it is unlikely that they will be able to apply the authors' work on ambience effectively. Additionally, their work on ambience is 'designed particularly for the register of picture books' (p.36); nevertheless, most students capable of applying such notions about ambience would be in a grade or level deemed too old to be using resources such as picture books. Younger students would need to be provided with a far more simplistic method of analysis. Obviously visual elements such as mood, atmosphere or colour could be analysed with students who are at a level to read picture books, but not to the depth that is proposed in this book.

Chapter 3 examines the ideational metafunction and considers picture book images using three categories of meaning: the participants, specifically the identity and attributes of the characters, and how the viewer can infer from an image various other categories such as age

and ethnicity; the processes, in which the picture book depicts some sort of event or action; and finally, the circumstances or background context, which provides details in a visual location for the depicted process. Attention is paid to aspects of their representation in a narrative sequence, and again, the authors provide specific examples of these metafunctions in relation to the picture books chosen for analysis. The latter part of the chapter, section 3.5, applies all aspects of ideational meaning to the book *Lucy's Bay* (Crew & Rogers, 1992). While it is helpful for readers to see all aspects of ideational meaning being applied to one book, one cannot help but wonder if the ideational choices discussed in Chapter 3 would be as easily applied to another or a different picture book. Furthermore, most of the examples the authors provide through examining *Lucy's Bay* show only the illustrations, without the verbiage. The intention of Painter, Martin and Unsworth's framework is to provide a method for reading and analysing picture books as bimodal texts; and yet, much of the analysis presented in Chapter 3 is without the verbiage.

In the final chapter, all three metafunctions are examined as a whole in order to understand how verbal and visual semiotics function together simultaneously as a bimodal text. As previously noted, in order to make meaning through both image and language, the authors argue that the reader must attend to both semiotics. The authors comment that their approach to analysing bimodal texts is to focus on the systemic-functional linguistic dimension of instantiation: 'the relation between the potential for meaning that inheres in the system of language, and the specific, actual text which incorporates limited choices and the realizations from the overall system/s' (p.134). The analysis of both image and verbiage of the book *Way Home* (Hathorn & Rogers, 1994) is excellent, but provides only one example of analysing how the verbiage and image present meaning together. It would be beneficial for the reader to see how this proposed framework can be applied in a way which analyses both the image and verbiage simultaneously throughout the book, instead of doing so only in the last chapter.

Although the authors clearly specify the purpose of the book, and explain their framework for analysing picture books, a criticism worth repeating is that they do not state the criteria for selecting picture books. For a reader with a limited background in picture books, the term *picture book* can be interpreted as many things: a children's story book; a story book with pictures; or more likely the case in this situation, a book which requires the reader to attend to both the pictures and the words simultaneously in order to make meaning. Without clarifying the authors' definition of a picture book, nor their criteria for selecting one to apply to the framework, a reader with a limited knowledge of bimodal texts may try to apply the proposed framework to a storybook with pictures, and be unsuccessful in analysing it. Arguably, this framework would not be as useful in its application to an illustrated storybook, which Nikolajeva and Scott (2000) define as a story with illustrations that simply support or decorate the words, and do not add to the overall meaning of the text.

In conclusion, this book is recommended to those looking to extend their understanding of visual grammar beyond that described in Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) work, to one that includes the visual modality in relation to verbal meaning. It can be useful as a framework for analysing children's picture books as a visual-verbal unity through a multimodal discourse analysis lens. Additionally, the authors draw on specific examples from well-known picture books to illustrate their points, and note that these books were chosen in the hope of providing concrete examples of a multimodal discourse analysis framework for educators and librarians. However, it is recommended that readers have a background in Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) work or in systemic-functional linguistics in order to apply the framework effectively, as the authors draw heavily on systemic-functional theory of language. Teachers or librarians with a limited knowledge of multimodal discourse analysis would have a very difficult time applying this theory, and at best, would only be able to apply a few aspects of it.

---

## REFERENCES

- Bernstein, B. (1990). *Class, codes and control 4: The structuring of pedagogic discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Crew, G., & Rogers, G. (1992). *Lucy's bay*. Nundah, Australia: Jam Roll Press.
- Hathorn, L., & Rogers, G. (1994). *Way home*. Sydney: Red Fox.
- Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Routledge.
- Nikolajeva, M., & Scott, C. (2000). The dynamics of picturebook communication. *Children's Literature in Education*, 31(4), 225-239.