Original Research Article

Breaking Communication Stereotypes:
The Discourse of Armenian Velvet Revolution

In its most basic sense, communication – the transmission and reception of information between the addresser and addressee, the generation of certain meaning, and the powerful source of information in the society –is a social multidimensional semiotic system which today, along with traditional oral and written discourse modes, is realized through numerous other media or modes – live-streaming and online text messaging as well as pictures, graphic designs, cartoons, colors, music, clothing, theatre-like scenes/actions, etc.The collection of these modes or elements, contributes to how multimodality affects different rhetorical situations, or opportunities for increasing the audience's reception of an idea or concept. Hence, the present paper aims at outlining the different modes of multidisciplinary communication tactics with a focus on the complex nature of language/discourse/text and other multimodal communication practices in terms of the aural, spatial and visual resources or modes used to compose the message of the 2018 Armenian Velvet Revolution. The case study shows that the Armenian Velvet Revolution is a master-class in the application of multimodality, i.e. various modes of communication to convey information and impact the public, thus securing the success of the Revolution.

Keywords: Armenian Velvet Revolution 2018, communication, multimodal semiotics, recontextualization

1. INTRODUCTION

Being one of the key concepts in linguistics,the term *communication* has promoted several definitions by linguists. The term can broadly refer to "every kind of mutual transmission of information using signs or symbols between living beings (humans, animals), as well as between people and data-processing machines" [1]. In the narrowest sense*communication* means "the transmission and reception of information between a signaler and a receiver" [2]. If we look at other perceptions of communication defined by communication theorists, we can come across characterizations such as "Communication is the generation of meaning" or "communication is a ubiquitous and powerful source in society" [3]. I would add here that communication is also a social multidimensional semiotic system; that is, communication is a resource for meaning across the many and constantly changing verbal and non-verbal contexts of human interaction.

The perception of communication as an omnipresent, all-pervading powerful source in society and a social multidimensional semiotic system – has been brought to life in the course of Armenian Velvet Revolution of 2018 (March 31 to May 8) when communication, along with traditional oral and written discourse modes, has been realized through numerous other media demonstrating a completely new culture of protest: live-streaming

and online text messaging, as well as pictures, images, symbols (of people and objects), graphic designs, cartoons, colors, music, clothing, theatre-like scenes/actions and other artistic expressions that convey the message of the Revolution. Obviously, the Revolution can be a genuine object of study not only in political and social sciences but it can also serve as an authentic material of investigation from the linguistic perspective, within the frames of Multimodal Semiotics in particular.

2. MULTIMODAL COMMUNICATION AND MULTIMODALITY THEORY/MULTIMODAL SEMIOTICS

M. A. K. Halliday's[4, 5]Social Semiotic Theory provides the basis for the study of semiotic resources other than language (e.g. image, architecture, music, mathematical symbolism, gesture, etc.), and, significantly, the interaction of semiotic resources in a field known as Multimodality Theory, Multimodal Analysis, Multimodal Semiotics or just Multimodality. In early 1990's, Michael O'Toole [6]applied Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar and the tools it offered to examine visual expressions of communicating messages. At the same time Gunther Kressand Theo van Leeuwen [7] started developing a social semiotic visual approach with a focus on print media. In it they propose a framework for the analysis of image, which draws on the broad semiotic aspects of Halliday's Social Semiotic Theory. The authors made use of the functional linguistic system networks as a heuristic framework for theorizing meaning as choice, and their works laid part of the foundation for Multimodal Semiotics. Halliday's view of culture as "a set of semiotic systems" [8] is the major platform for research in the field of multimodal analysis/studies today, as evidenced by the foundational works of O'Toole, Kress & van Leeuwen.

In its most basic sense, multimodality is a theory of communication and social semiotics. Multimodality describes communication practices not only in terms of linguistic/discursive/textual but also in terms of aural, spatial and visual resources or modes used to compose messages [9]. Where communication means are concerned, multimodality is the use of several modes/media to create the message. The collection of these modes, or elements, contributes to how multimodality affects different rhetorical situations, or opportunities for increasing an audience's reception of an idea or concept. Everything from the placement of images to the organization of the content – creates meaning[10]. This is the result of a shift from isolated discourse/text being relied on as the primary source of communication, to the image being utilized more frequently in the digital age [11]. Significantly, Halliday's theory also lends itself to computational approaches which are currently being developed to advance the theory and practice of multimodal analysis [12].

Thus, the common framework of Hallidayan theory allows for the investigation of traditional and non-traditional semiotic signs and modes, semantic shifts and extensions of signal-word capacities, recontextualization or recomposition of original discourse, metaphorical expansions of meaning to achieve certain communicative aims. This occurs as traditional semiotic resources interact and combine through information technologies, design and arts.

3. MULTIMODAL STUDY OF THE DISCOURSE OF REVOLUTION

Compared to previous mass demonstrations in Armenia of 1988 and 2008 [13],the 2018 rallies wereexceptionalbecausetheycreated a completely new culture of protest. The Revolutionwascharacterised not only as *velvet* and *non-violent* but also as a revolution of*love, solidarity* and *tolerance*. The mentioned high-frequencyqualifying adjectives and nounswereused as semiotic and semantic signal-words for the Revolution. The correctlyapplieddemocraticprinciples, rhetoricalstrategies and multimodal tools of communicating the message of the Revolutioncontributed to the increase of massive street protests, road blockages and labor strikes, helped to overthrow the twodecade-long authoritarianrule in the country, and swept a new government to power.

The discourse of the Revolution had its own defined audience, and made rhetorical decisions to improve the audience's reception of the given discourse. In this same manner, multimodality evolved to become a sophisticated way to appeal to the discourse audience – the huge number of demonstrators. Relying upon the canons of traditional Aristotelian rhetoric in a different way than before, the multimodal discourse of the Revolution had the ability to address the audience more effectively. Multimodality did more than soliciting the audience; the effects of multimodality were already imbedded in the audience's semiotic and technological understanding.

The Armenian revolution provided excellent examples of multimodal communication in general and multimodal semiotics in particular. The appearance of multimodality, at its most basic level, changed the way the revolutionary audience perceived information: the comprehension of revolutionary discourse came via specially contrivedsemiotic signs – words and symbolic imageswhich were quickly perceived by the public as revolutionary messages. The most vivid ones will be discussed below [14].

1) The political *My Step* protest march was initiated by the leader of the self-style domestic (without international presence) Revolution – the deputy of the Armenian Parliament NikolPashinyan [15]. As a linguistic unit, *my step* or just *step* is an important semiotic sign in terms of its semantic function

(perceived by the citizens of Armenia to make their own steps to change the existing regime), discursive/textual function (the point of departure for what follows), interpersonal function (it is the subject making a call) and experiential function (it is an agent for action). It is perhaps for these reasons that the linguistic unit is also mapped as a single tone unit which appeared and was coded later in different colorful instances. In other words, as the Revolution evolved,***my step***/***step*** changed its semiotic effect by being placed with preconceived meanings in new contexts – aural, visual, or digital.This in turn created a new meaning for the audience. One such example is the chant ***Make the step to reject Serzh*** (shortly – ***Reject Serzh***). The semiotic sign, i.e. the semantic signal-word ***step***wasextended to become a slogan addressed to the infamous former President and Prime Minister SerzhSargsyan.The demonstrators poured onto the streets, chanting the phrase which sounds catchy in Armenian. The sloganappeared on social media as a hash-tag [16]. Metaphorically, ***rejectingSerzh***and his corrupt regime meant rule of law,healthy institutions, decent pay, better education, advancement.

Another example of extension of semiotic (as well as semantic) meaning in a new context is the song-anthem ***My Step, the Song of the Citizen*** (music and arrangement by HaykStver) which enjoyed great popularity for its original musical and technological solutions. The experiential meaning (calling for action) is mostly conditioned by the repeated usage ofthe lines ***I am not alone, not alone*** and ***I am walking*** appealing people to join in the protests, marches and demonstrations. Initially ***I am walking*** and ***I am taking my step*** utterances, after having realized their functional aim of consolidating people, were changed into ***We are walking*** and ***We are taking our step*** in the last lines of the song. The lyrics created by the leader of the Revolution and recited once by him at a gathering, made an immense emotional impact on the public. In brief, the lyrics reads: ***Today I am taking a step***, ***I am taking my step today***, ***This is the path of a sparkling hope***, ***It is the writer of a new history***, ***I have lost, over and over I have lost***, ***And I have seen the smirk of the lie***, ***But will is stronger than stone***, ***And my soul does not give in, I am not alone, not alone, We go forward and forward***; ***And in our concentrated hearts*** , ***One can see the sun of hope burning strong.***

2) Another semiotic/semantic signal-word was ***dukhov*** which quickly became the second hash-tag of the Revolution. The word is a combination of the Russian ***dukh***(***spirit, ghost, risk***) and the Armenian grammatical ending ***-ov*** which makes the word mean***go forward bravely***, ***without fear***, and ***in high spirits***. Changing into other modes, this slogan not only appeared in the song of the hip-hop artist Hrag, in graphic design and cartoon comics, but was also quickly commercialized and appeared on t-shirts and hats worn by the demonstrators, thus increasing the communicative value of the message.

3) The aspirations of transparency were reflected online as Pashinyan used live-streaming(the Facebook Live) to explain his followers what decisions he was making, and what their respective conduct and actions would be. This mode of communication endured even as Pashinyan moved to the Prime Minister's office. Arriving at his new post, he gave the Facebookers a guided tour of the corridors of power. It was the first time in the history of Armenia that common people saw and heard what had always taken place behind iron curtains or closed doors. Impatiently waiting for the next live-stream became a refrain heard across the country. Live-streaming started to be widely used by other protest leaders and protestors not only on the Facebook but also Instagram and other social networks. Although the online mode of communication consolidated the image of the Revolution as one made by young people, its different forms (Facebook, Skype, Whatsapp, Viber, etc.) became inseparable sources of information for people of all generations.

4) Bezemer and Kress [17], two scholars on multimodality and semiotics, argue that the receivers understand information differently when the text is delivered in conjunction with a secondary medium, such as image or sound, than when it is presented in alphanumeric format only. The text draws the viewer's attention due to "both the originating site and the site of recontextualization". Meaning is moved from one medium to the next, which requires the audience to redefine their semiotic connections.

Recontextualizing (recomposing) an original discourse/text within other mediums creates a different sense of understanding for the audience, and this new type of comprehension can be controlled by the types of media used. After the originating site (the written or oral text with or without the initial image) is perceived and comprehended, the recontextualized site (the recomposed linguistic unit or image), can be perceived even when presented in a significantly modified version. Moreover, worked out carefully and used in transformed artistic modes, both sites become more expressive and make a stronger emotive impact. This is obviously evident in numerous symbolic images[18] of the Revolution: music, chants, slogans, faces, designs, cartoons, theatre-like actions and memes [19] which, with or without the accompanying printed word, were comprehended to the fullest.

Some positive and negative symbolic images [20] defined as multimodal communicative semiotic signs of the Armenian Velvet Revolution, will be discussed below.

- Pashinyan and his team's walk from Gyumri to Yerevan at the very start, indicated that they were following in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi.

- **The dog Chalo or initially Kaylo (*step*) who walked with Nikol's team all the way to Yerevan, indicated to devotion to the cause of the Revolution and became one of the famous faces of the Revolution.**
- **The bandage that Pashinyan wore after injuring his hand on the barbed wire that blocked the way to the Parliament [21],his beard grown during the march to Yerevan, his camouflage shirt and his backpack (all imitated by the demonstrators) became signs and slogans of the Revolution and objects of artistic recontextualization in different designs and cartoons. They symbolized people's solidarity with the leader.**
- **Demonstrators wore white to show the purity of the protest and desire for democratic government. Change of color of clothes and balloons most probably symbolized the different strata of population participating in the demonstrations.**
- **Besides the traditional V-signs (decoded as *victory*), non-traditional open hands (decoded as *weaponless*), the Viking clapping (accompanied by the chant of wooing) of Iceland football fans was also deployed as a symbol of victory and an unarmed hand [22].The wooing could be a sign of the Viking will power as well.**
- **May 8, 2018 was the day when the leader of the Revolution was elected Prime Minister. Immediately after this, a truckload of snow was brought from Mount Aragats and dumped in the middle of the jubilant crowd in Yerevan's Republic Square. The joyful protestors staged a celebratory theatre-like snowball fight. The white snow and the open hands which let the snowballs fly, encapsulated the aspirations and expressed the essential features of a non-violent revolution, the victory, and the beliefs of the young people for a better future.**
- **There were other pieces of street theatre reflecting the culture of the demonstrations and rendering communicative messages through symbolic semiotic signs. The localized protests targeting Armenia's transport network (halting the work of the government and showing that the authorities were unable to cope) worked successfully. The protestors quickly adopted this idea of undermining the system by blocking roads. They congregated at road crossings all over the city. These mini-demonstrations evolved their own culture and became theatrical sites for both performer and audience protestors. One road was blocked by a piano on which musicians played jazz. Children strung together toy cars to create another obstruction. Mothers closed one road with their prams while groups of young students and schoolchildren enjoyed playing volleyball to stop the cars. Others created a party-like atmosphere by dancing or barbecuing in the streets. People were determined to protest peacefully, aware of the protests of 2008 when ten demonstrators were killed.**

- **Music was the main stay of the protest culture. Young musicians and musical students regularly gave street concerts at which dancing and singing was encouraged. Not only modern music but also patriotic and military songs were usually heard at demonstrations. The culmination of the musical revolution was the arrival in Yerevan of SerzhTankian, best known as the front man of System of Down. His arrival and his performance of an Armenian folk song on the city's Republic Square encouraged tens of thousands of supporters of the Revolution.**
- **Even those who were unable to leave their homes or who didn't want to join street protests – played a role. In Yerevan during the demonstrations, when something important was going to happen, at 11pm every night people opened their windows and banged pots and pans together for fifteen minutes. During the marches of young people in the streets the elder people started the banging to express their solidarity with the protestors. At first this form of protest was designed for the disabled, physically unable to take part in the demonstrations, but it soon became a general phenomenon. Every evening was a symphony of domestic protest as metallic clanging echoed across the city. Thus, pots and pans too became symbols of the Revolution.**
- **Small acts that used satire and black humour usually referred to the former President and Prime Minister SerzhSargsian or his party. Popular memes linked Sargsyan with the famous Soviet cartoon character Cheburashka, which has the body and face of a bear but the large ears of a monkey. Instead of a dog at the end of a leash, women used to drag Cheburashka along for a walk through Yerevan. A coffin was carried through the streets with Cheburashka's portrait inside. At anti-Sargsyan gatherings people chanted *Cheburashka leave* and everybody immediately perceived the message. Sometimes fluffy Cheburashka toys were publicly burnt. Cheburashka made many other semiotic appearances on social media feeds and cartoons. It was also quite frequent to see demonstrators in black armbands carrying coffins with wreaths. However, they called on others happily to join the merriment of the "funeral" or "burying" of the Republican party and the old regime.**
- **The faces of the Revolution, common Armenians of all generations were very popular symbols. Among the faces of the Revolution was an 82 year-old woman whom the Armenian internet named the *Grandmother of the Revolution* or the *Veteran of the Armenian Revolution*. The young girl standing with open hands very close to the barbed wire, with eyes full of tears, the disabled war veterans participating in the demonstration, the kissing couples, small kids sitting on their fathers' shoulders, the trumpet boy**

and many others became the most popular faces of the Revolution.Recontextualization of their images in creative graphic design and social media helped fuel the momentum of the Revolution.

Thus, through the application of rhetorical multimodal communication modes and tools, extension of semantic meanings and recontextualizationof specially contrived semiotic signs – words and symbolic images (slogans, posters, hash-tag, songs, anthems, lyrics, live-streaming, chants, music, faces, graphic designs, cartoons, theatre-like actions and memes) the Armenian Revolution made policy decisions, rendered its message to thousands of people and enhanced rhetorical opportunities to secure the reception of its ideas by the protestors.

4. CONCLUSION

Communication can benefit by applying multimodality, especially when several mediums are juxtaposed to create an individualized experience or meaning. Multimodality is the application of social semiotic systems to facilitate the audience to create their own meaning from the perspective the multimodal modes provide. Through the use of different modes, the audience is further engaged in creating comprehension.

The delivery of new multimodal discourse has radically changed along with technological influence. Creators of communication think about the type of audience a discourse/text will be written for, and anticipate how it might be reformed in the future. Recontextualizing or recomposing allows not only the creators but also the audience to be involved in public conversation, adding their own intentionality to the original discourse. This method is especially typical of our digital age as it gives technology an important role in writing and composition.

The vivid examples of multimodal semiotics provided by Armenian Velvet Revolution show that the way the revolutionary audience perceives information has changed – today the comprehension of revolutionary discourse will come via interaction and combination of semiotic resources through information technologies, design and arts, through specially contrived semiotic signs (words and semiotic images) which are perceived by the public as revolutionary messages in acts of nationwide civil disobedience.The present case study has shown that the Armenian Velvet Revolution is a master-class in the application of multimodality, i.e. various modes of communication to convey information and impact the public, thus securing the success of the Revolution.

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12. For example, software for the analysis, search and retrieval of multimodal semantic patterns is being developed to move beyond page-basedmethods of multimodal transcription and analysis. The software can be used to analyze language, images, sound and videos (hypertext in the software development phase) by annotating the media files using choices from system networks, coded as time-stamped annotations and visual overlays. The analysis is stored in a database for later search and retrieval. Considering Halliday's Systemic Functional Theory, it can be stated that the design of the software is the capacity to integrate the full range of semiotic modes (across ranks, strata and meta-functions), within an empirically-derived holistic view on communication. The multimodal analyst can develop, test and apply different theoretical approaches and methodologies to code the analysis; and automated tools (e.g. shot detection, facial recognition, optical flow) provide further help to users of the software, extending the human capacities for perception and analysis of communication (O'Halloran K. Hallidayand Multimodal Semiotics. New Series: A Global Information Bulletin. Semiotix XN-7. 2012:2.Accessed 7 June 2017. Available: https://semioticon.com/semiotix/2012/03/halliday-and-multimodal-semiotics/).

13. As a result of protest movements of 1988, Armenia gained independence in 1991. On February 19, 2008, following a presidential election that was marked by electoral fraud and abuse of administrative resource, S. Sargsyan became the third president of Armenia. His opponent, the first president of Armenia L. Ter-Petrosyan and his supporters refused to accept the results of the election. The second president R. Kocharyan, violating the constitutional order of the Republic of Armenia, announced a state of emergency and army subdivisions entered the capital city. The peaceful demonstrations were met with heavy use of force, resulting in ten deaths and roughly 300 injured on March 1. Shortly after the end of his second presidency on 9 April 2018, Sargsyan became Prime Minister on 17 April, on the 18th day of the Revolution. It was a miscalculation, because his move essentially meant a third presidential term by the backdoor. Tens of thousands, mainly students and high-schoolchildren took the streets.

14. All the materials (audio, visual, digital) discussed here, can be found on the Internet under the heading *The Armenian Velvet Revolution 2018.*

15. When the march started on May 31 from Armenia's second city Gyumri, only a couple of dozen people joined him, and they were mainly journalists. By the time the MP and ex-journalist Pashinyan had reached the capital city Yerevan (306.000 steps had been made and 200 kilometres had been passed by then), thousands more had joined his movement.

16. A hash-tag is a word or phrase preceded by a hash sign (#), used on social media websites and applications to identify messages on a specific topic.

17. Bezemer J, Kress G. Writing in Multimodal Texts: A Social Semiotic Account of Designs for Learning. Written Communication. 2008: 25 (2); 166–195. doi.org/10.1177/0741088307313177

18. Armenian IT (Information Technology) teams of young people worked hard to create and publicize the symbolic images of the Revolution. They created several images of different forms daily which became popular slogans. Mass media and even some social network users were quite active in this too.

19. A meme is an image, video, piece of text or other social semiotic sign (typically humorous but may also be or non-humorous) that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with variations.

20. As the protests were directed against the corruption of the ruling Republican Party and the Armenian political elite, their symbolic images were co-opted (used in a different socio-cultural role) accordingly, i.e. in the negative light. The symbols depicting the revolutionary masses, their leaders and their actions are viewed as positive.

21. This happened the day when police threw stun grenades and several people were injured and detained in the confrontation.

22. Interestingly enough, the Iceland football team and their fans are an absolute example to the world (no violence, racism, bullying or hooliganism).