Communication and Perception of Visual Language in Comic Books, Khai Hua Roh: Smile of the King and Maha Sanook: When the Prince became King

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Abstract
HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej passed away on October 13th, 2016. The comic books, Khai Hua Roh and Maha Sanook, published special editions presented in visual language, to mourn the King under the themes “Smile of the King” and “When the Prince became King”. The researcher aims to study the intent of the illustrators’ and the readers’ perceptions using this form of visual language and messaging. The research found that there were three types of cartoon characters: realistic, semi-realistic and symbolic. The meaning derived from this form of visual language comes from the accompanying text. Without text, the researcher interpreted the images from the context and situation presented, including comparing them to actual photos. For visual language recognition, it was found that all of the readers had media exposure bias related to King Rama IX, but differences in perceptions. Age, education, occupation and residence did not influence their perceptions. Personal interests, recognition, emotions toward persons or events, attitude, upbringing, knowledge base and individual experiences, did affect their perception.

Keywords: Communication, Perception, Visual Language, Comic Books

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**Introduction**

Helen Lloyd (2015) perceives visual language as “the language of images”. Josiah Kahane (2017) defines visual language as “a system of communication using visual elements.” Visual language is a type of nonverbal communication and comic books utilizing this medium, allow their illustrators to communicate their message to the masses, giving comic books an important role in media.

Khai Hua Roh and Maha Sanook are two Thai comic books still in circulation for more than 40 years, published by Banluesarn Publishing. These comic books have a large following with over one million copies sold monthly. After the passing of His Majesty the King Bhumibol Adulyadej on the 13th of October 2016, the publications needed to change their content to reflect this loss. In order for the comic book publishers to express their condolences for the late King, a few covers were changed, content was added, and some comics even added a special edition to their upcoming publications. For example, Khai Hua Roh published a special edition entitled “Roy Yim Khong Bhraraja”, meaning the Smile of the King. At the same time, Maha Sanook published an issue entitled “Muea Chao Chai Glai Pen Bhraraja”, meaning when the Prince became King, again to reflect their condolences for King Rama IX passing. The special issues of these two comics express their message primarily with the use of visual language.

Figure 1: Khai Hua Roh
Objectives

The research’s objectives are to study:
1. the types of visual language used,
2. the visual language and the impacts of the accompanying text,
3. the readers’ perception using this form of visual language and messaging, including what influences those perceptions, and
4. visual language as a communication medium.

Methodology

The study of the intent of the illustrators was conducted using cartoon illustrations from Khai Hua Roh: Smile of the King and Maha Sanook: When the Prince became King. The samples used were ten illustrations each from “Khai Hua Roh: Smile of the King” and “Maha Sanook: When the Prince became King”, for a total of twenty illustrations. The illustrations selected were chosen specifically so no text would be included in the illustration or by removing any text which part of the illustration was.

The study of conveying messages through visual language in comic books was performed on a target group of thirty-six people, regardless of age, gender, education or occupation. The group selected included only those who were interested in His Majesty the King Bhumibhol Adulyadej, determined by observing the individuals’ social media accounts and personal communications. Data was also gathered by interviewing the executive committees of the Bunluesarn Group and the editors of “Khai Hua Roh: Smile of the King” and “Maha Sanook: When the Prince became King”.

Figure 2: Maha Sanook
Conclusions

Types of Visual Language

The research concludes that there are 3 types of visual language presented in the comic books’ special issues: realism, semi-realism and symbolism.

1. Realism are illustrations that are anatomically correct, realistic and are clearly related to the royal history and royal virtues. For example, photos when the King was a child, photos of the King playing instruments or showing respect to his mother, are images familiar to the readers and are seen in different media forms including still images and videos.

2. Semi-realism are illustrations that don’t emphasize the anatomy or realism but the important features or specific features from people, animals or things. Usually comic books use caricature if they need to draw a non-fictional character, but for the special issues, semi-realism is used instead of caricature. The semi-realism in the special issues include images which are similar to the character’s identity to help the readers remember the actual person. For example, the glasses on the King’s face, the King working while wearing the coat of arms, the body position of the King, Thong Daeng’s lying down position, et cetera.

3. Symbolic illustrations are illustrations that characterize the emotions surrounding a person, an animal, thing or an incident. From the researcher’s observation, the illustrators used their imagination colored with societal context and the current situation, including the illustrator’s personal viewpoint. For example, the illustration of the world crying, the illustration of Thailand changing into a black ribbon to express condolence, the illustration of the Royal Barge Procession, the illustration of heaven crying or raining, et cetera. This allows the symbolic illustrations to express emotions and stimulate the same in the readers.

Visual Language and accompanying texts

Visual language is a nonverbal communication medium. From the research, if the visual language is pristinely communicable then the text is unnecessary. Readers can interpret some of the images without accompanying text by absorbing what the illustration needs to convey which shows that the viewpoints of the illustrators and the interpretations of the readers are similar.

But if the illustration’s content is vague, text is also necessary for comic books to make the reader understand what the illustrator is trying to convey. As it is mentioned in Cohn (2012)’s study of comics, linguistics and visual language, most visual language appears with written language. For example, some images of Villa Vadhana do not have people in its photos and cites real black-and-white photos. The villa was later demolished so whenever it is presented, the result is different from what it actually looks like. Therefore, it is necessary to have a description on the illustration to let the readers who have never seen the image understand what the illustration is trying to convey.
At the same time readers looking at the same illustration can have different feelings and interpretations. Helen Lloyd (2015) stated “Visual language is a distinct form of communication, different from oral and written language, but as powerful, descriptive, and emotive.” The characteristic of visual language is that it profoundly conveys in ways which may not be possible in other languages. Cohn (2012)’s study about emoji shows “visual language used in comics creates “grammatical” sequences of images in a way that makes them much more similar to spoken or sign languages.” That is to say visual language has potency in communication between humans greater than written language. Visual language has the potential to communicate more effectively than texts.

**Visual Language Perceptions**

Even though the purpose of the publishers and the illustrators of the two special issues wish to impress the readers with their stories, they also desired to create satisfying stories about the King, easily readable and understandable by children. However, all of the symbols expressed may not be appropriate. If the time or the context of sadness has passed, the way of using these symbols may not be proper anymore. In other words, not every part of visual language can be contemporary in every era. According to the semiotic theory, when there are changes in circumstances, the meaning of the original source will change. When the sign has changed, we also might have a different reaction or action to the same sign. For example, as time passes, the reader might not feel the same sorrow once felt from viewing the visual language originally or might not even remember what the visual language relates to.

While visual language might still convey clearly, in time the feeling of new readers or old readers might not have the same emotions or feelings as before. As the publishers of the special issues stated, the readers might still understand the content, but the emotional response might be different from the current generation, given those who were raised under the King’s reign are attached to Rama IX and feel more strongly than those who do not have a firsthand understanding of the King.

Therefore, acknowledgement visual language as a medium is affected by experience, interest and knowledge. The demographic information of the sample, regardless of age, education, occupation and residence, have no correlation to the acknowledgement of visual language by each reader, however experience, interests and knowledge do relate.

This complies with Lloyd’s visual language education resource for New Zealand students (Lloyd, 2015) as it is stated “Whatever any student perceives or feels in response to an artwork is valid. All students bring their own unique perspectives, life experiences, and personal preferences to bear when viewing images, …”

**Visual Language as communication medium**

Cartoons are symbolic illustrations to represent a person, an animal, an object or places that are close to reality. Cartoons are not drawn realistically to convey the viewpoint of the illustrators. Therefore, cartoons are a style of visual language that are used for communicating through comic books since readers do not need a lot of detail from both the drawings and the text. No matter the age or the education of the readers,
they are able to understand the format easier than others. But the two special issues are different from the generic comic books.

Therefore, if visual language is needed to convey effectively, in the event Khai Hua Roh and Maha Sanook need to publish another special issue in the future, it is necessary to consider the title and the timing of the special issue. The publishers need to know whether special issues are appropriate for the characters of the comic books, including content appropriate for comic books.

For the illustrators that invented visual language in comic books, despite conveying frankly, sometimes there are signs that need to be acknowledged and interpreted differently by the readers. Therefore, the illustrators must understand and analyze the readers acknowledging different experiences and interests. For example, in the illustration of people wearing black suits or red suits, the illustrator didn’t intend to convey a political viewpoint, but the symbol of red can be interpreted as political if the reader has recognition or experience beforehand. In this way, visual language may unwittingly create a conflict. From the perspective of media publishers which do not produce comic books, visual language is used in other types of mass media such as television, cinematography, print, advertising, music videos and videos. If visual language is used without text or non-verbal language so readers have an opportunity to create their own interpretation from the image, publishers should present clearly and not in an obscure manner for their conveyance to match their goals as much as possible, and to protect from a conveyance which may not match the objective or differ from reality.

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References


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