
However, these may not be the most salient choices for a creator to take; nor do they necessarily occur in that order. Using these alongside McCloud’s other notions (notably ‘transitions’) with a group of sixth form comics creators led me to reconsider approaches to comics creation, as well as reading, in my PhD research ‘Making Meanings with Comics: A Functional Approach to Graphic Narrative’. In this work, I take models of meaning-making from the functional linguistics of M.A.K. Halliday, and adapt that framework to specify how comics make meaning. As a linguistics-inspired approach, this takes seriously the production of meaning as well as the reception.

In this graphic article, I give a brief illustrated overview of this view of comics meaning making, and present a set of new ‘choices for the comics creator’ which arose from it. These new choices include: Choice of Character Design, Choice of ‘Verb Style’, Choice of Framing, Choice of Density, Choice of Metonymy. I offer a critique of McCloud’s choices, and account for the proposed alternatives, indicating the theory that led to them with illustrative examples, drawn in the main from my own comics created in that sixth form workshop alongside students. The article is drawn digitally and incorporates extracts of comics pages as well as diagrams to illustrate the approach to comics that informs the five ‘choices’ described.

Keywords: Comics; drawing; Halliday; linguistics; McCloud
From 2006-2010 I worked alongside students to create “24-Hour Comics” - one a few days each year.

I found it HARD to work out what was happening with my and my students work, and struggled to find useful THEORY.

MCLOUD suggested FIVE “CHOICES” from his own theory of comics - but these didn’t match well to what students were doing and the problems that arose.

What’s the moment here?
There are many...

Why doesn’t it flow? Why doesn’t flow?
I’m not doing
Stick figures and angles

I needed to figure out a way to ARTICULATE the choices we seemed to be making using a more cogent model...

Which I found in M.A.K.
HALLIDAY’S MODEL OF MEANING-MAKING.

“A FUNCTIONAL approach - 3 “META-FUNCTIONS” all languages (social semiotics) must enact...

1) IDEATIONAL - representing experiences
2) INTERPERSONAL - engaging people & interacting
3) TEXTUAL - creating structured TEXTS

This last one undermines the other three...
This led to 5 NEW choices for COMIC CREATORS...

1. Choice of CHARACTER DESIGN

Character design was where I and my students tended to START...

Character design is METAfunctional - it serves identity purposes, representing characters, but also textual - characters are what you DRAW over your...

I found some students... wonderful artwork hard to follow because the repeated elements were indistinct to me...

When I tried one year to simplify to just SHAPE...

I found it prevented its own problem of REPRESENTATION!

The choice of style for your characters impacts general style, pace, the speed at which you can work, and space for personal markers...

Abstractions tend to serve me INTER-personal functions...

My style has remained forward focused!

HATS, HAIR, CLOTHES mark identity and personality.

How can a CIRCLE comb his HAIR to get ready to go out?

What are MY POKERS?

How do I work?

Attunes, the textual and ideational didn’t work. Some majors had the time came implied by the shifts in character design here.

Attunes, the textual and ideational didn’t work.
2. Choice of Verb Style

For Halliday, verbs aren't just 'doing words'. The process includes being, sending, eating and more.

In comics we need to show what happens. And verbs work in a grid according to the resources of comics we use.

We can arrange processes in a grid according to the resources of comics we use.

We can use distinct lines to make explicit what happens.

We can use distinct lines to make explicit that happens with conventional codes.

Or 'cheat' and incorporate wordings to show the process.

And all can work simultaneously to communicate the processes of comics - creators choose not a "moment" to draw, but compose many events, usually clustered into panels.

Even 'creating' doesn't evade the other ways of drawing what happens - it expands and enriches it!
This leads us to the concept of Density.

1. **Density**
   - **Verbal**
   - **Non-verbal**
   - **Material**
   - **Relational**

In large part, we realise processes by selecting a view to appear in a sequence of concrete linear event from a “non-typical” set of events. The continuum of processes types.

**But in comics drawing it’s more simultaneous.** The work’s structure and orientation represent much.

- **If you draw someone speaking or thinking:**
- **And a reader of comics will read the process step by step:**
- **So if you want to leave the reader in the middle:**
- **This is a pattern of tendencies, and some of this...**

How rich do you want your story to be?

**Do you want a lot happening at once to allow your reader?** Do you want the reader well in the middle of the world?

Redundancy can help clarity of density.

The density can help the reader think through the moves and work out the way the narrative.

**REDUNDANT MENTAL RELATIONAL**
Choice of Framing reflects McCloud's choice of frame but distances this from photography. Angle, distance, cropping...

...or a matter of nesting, two-dimensional frames...

In Hypotactic, subordinating relationships.

Parataxis and Sequence has been stressed in comics...

But Hypotaxis of enclosure is key too! Panels project worlds like words delusory project thought!

This sort of nesting lends comic depth as we enter into characters' minds and pasts... whether the framing is paratactic as handled here...

Or hypotactic as here, where an element of story starts in a balloon but is then promoted to the level of panel with a matching modal border.

And of course we can also use framing in some ways McCloud suggests—to trim, exclude—and to evade the commitments I mentioned previously.
So this leads to 5—choice of metonymy.

How much do you need to include in the frame? How much can you leave out?

Despite the stack of commitments to redraw...

Using ellipsis and fury of substitution to show only part of the image...

This sort of textual vacillation is behind Wally Wood's "22 panels..." and it activates readers' search for something.

The functions served by verbal conceit features—make one part of a few depend on another—on realizations of similar function in images...

Repetition of image of substitutions (crowd)...

For all others... including Ellsworth Kelly's empty walls... naturally.

Metonymy and synecdoche...

Semantics, iconic across pointers and tails (content and connector).

What can be left implicit, to carry over from previous drawings?

In a rapidly drawn 24-hour comic, especially the relief from redrawing of dropping your characters down a hole is welcome!

Even the dark patchy ink is multifunctional:

And text for sound and abstract line.

And purpose too—purposely unpersonal.

Marginal illustrations to the drawing with "game" of leaving an open hand for a reader to assemble.
So, reflecting on the choices I was making in the light of a metafunctional perspective led to...

2. Choice of "Verb Style"
   How to represent the processes that move the text forward, by using implication and abstraction.

3. Choice of Density
   How many such processes to cluster together, bearing in mind how they stack...

4. Choice of Framing
   How to present these and how to show their status in the narrative.

And finally, 5. Choice of Metonymy
   What to exclude, how to evade repetition and keep the text cohesive.

Bibliography


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References


Comics Extracts