Multimodal Social Semiotics and Comics in ESL Education

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Visual narratives and L2 learning

Multiple theories and ideas exist as to how visual narratives enable communication between people and, additionally, make cross-cultural communication possible. Visual narratives, including "sequential art" (Eisner, 2006, p. 5; McCloud, 2000, p. 42), represent a fascinating class of materials, and they are a form of text saturated with cultural assumptions accepted among groups of people. Visual narratives are used to communicate values, beliefs, ideas, fears, and desires not only of individuals, but also of entire groups of people. At the same time, as an art form, visual narratives are also necessarily representative of the subjective understandings of the world, as interpreted and presented by the author of a given artifact (text). According to the Russian semiotics expert Makhlina (2010), "We always feel the author in the artwork but never can fully reproduce him/her for ourselves through his/her artwork"; indeed, "only the various types and forms of his/her understanding can be cognized through the acquisition of the sign system of the author's language, since the author always uses one of the possible [options] and not the one and only possible 'absolute language'" (pp. 50-51). Therefore, it can be argued that visual narratives are quite flexible in the way they present such beliefs and ideas; and, in addition, visual narratives represent a particular way of looking at life.

More specifically, visual narratives exist to communicate meaning not only through verbal literacy but also through multiliteracies (The New London Group, 1996). Therefore, visual narratives are both traditional in their origin (McCloud, 1993) and quite innovative. Thus, they are dependent upon the ability of the author and the reader to find a common language in an environment that is constantly changing. From this perspective, visual narratives create opportunities for a dialogue between cultures that is, at its core, a dialogue between people. For instance, visual narratives are used in educational materials throughout the world, and learners often find visual literacy materials particularly accessible (Lapidus, 2008). In fact, comics from one culture may be read and adopted by readers from a com-

pletely different culture with pleasure (e.g., see McCloud, 2006; Schodt, 2005). For example, Schodt (2005) describes the connection between the popularity of Japanese animation in the US and manga, i.e., modern Japanese and Japanese-style comics.

At the same time, however, visual narratives can also represent a set of unique challenges for researchers and teachers, and from a strictly cross-cultural communication point of view, they often contain things that are not easily translated from one language to another. These challenges can be conceptualized as beneficial to the learning process, and these benefits are quite extensive. In what follows, I explore the value of comics from a social semiotics point of view. Social semiotics is itself a relatively new field (Hodge and Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010); as an area of inquiry, it possesses a number of challenges of its own. In juxtaposing multiliteracy materials and, specifically, visual narratives with some of the key views on social semiotics, I seek to uncover these benefits and the potential that comics may have in the second language (L2) classroom from the semiotics point of view.

"The semiotics of culture" in the Eastern European (and, in particular, Russian) tradition is related to "cultural anthropology," writes Makhlina (2010, p. 283). She continues, "In England, the field closest in terms of the amount of scientific material is called social anthropology, and in France and Germany, [it is called] ethnology" (Makhlina, 2010, p. 283). Furthermore, English is truly an international language that makes play possible (Lapidus, 2013), where the Vygotskian idea of play as learning is tested (Vygotsky, 2008a, 2008b). In other words, an additional level of complexity is added to the situation by visual narratives becoming an alternative to the exclusive use of traditional English language texts when teaching second or foreign language courses, making cross-cultural hermeneutics possible in the actual classroom. In this context, it's important to point out that no single type of materials can provide all of the solutions for the cultural anthropologist, i.e., the L2 student. Nevertheless, I postulate that visual narratives can play a greater role in L2 education precisely because they create challenges and unique opportunities to interact with the world around us.

Social semiotics is a particularly suitable tool for this examination of visual narratives because it provides us not with a stable set of truths, but with many emergent views on how meaning is constructed and communicated across cultures. Cross-cultural communication implies a certain duality. On the one hand, we are first introduced into a particular environment, with its set of cultural rules that we acquire naturally, often with our first language. The second language (L2) follows, and with it, the rules of the second culture; the third culture follows, and so on—the L2 cultural negotiation process continues. In second language learning settings, this process is complex and involves constant re-examination of what we already know, i.e., schemata, from the very basic facts and rules, such as the writing system, the alphabet, the phonology of the second language, the basic pragmatic rules, and so forth, to the more advanced understanding of how semiotic systems function and evolve.

Therefore, the second language learner becomes a skilled negotiator of cultures by acquiring new sets of rules, often juxtaposing these new rules with the rules he/she knows first and then, through some basic comparative analysis of the cultures, learning how to work and communicate in a second culture. On the other hand, this process is not entirely linear for most L2 learners, nor is it just limited to the memorization of these rules and facts. Fundamentally, the process of L2 cultural negotiation may be conceptualized as the constant oscillation between two cultures or, sometimes, more than two cultures in order to acquire new rules for all cultures in which the learner is immersed. In other words, it can be argued that L2 cultural negotiation is a deeply introspective process (Lapidus, Kaveh, and Hirano, 2013), where interaction with the world outside and specifically with materials in a second language leads to the constant growth of awareness of the world around the learner in all its diversity.

Intercultural personhood and multimodal social semiotics

"Intercultural personhood" (Kim, 2008, p. 359) arises out of this process, and autoethnography is becoming a popular method for researching this process in formal educational settings (Hanauer, 2010; Lapidus, Kaveh, and Hirano, 2013). But, there is also a third option that does not exclude the first two. Vygotsky (2008a, 2008b) writes about imagination and fantasy, specifically, as a key ingredient in learning as such. Visual narratives create opportunities for us to fantasize, especially so in those situations where we do not have the exact schema that would allow us to interpret the meanings and even preconceived notions invested by the author in the text. Makhlina (2010) writes, the existence of "the polysemy of the expressive means of art is an indisputable fact. Both in music and painting, and in any art form, the sign cannot be unequivocal. The content [i.e., the meaning that the author puts in it] is read by the recipient, the addressee" (p. 349), also noting, but "it is not always the same. Sometimes, the content [that the recipient re-constructs] can be even more complete than what the author had conceived himself/herself" (p. 350).

From this perspective, visual narratives create an important destabilizing factor in language learning. Indeed, it is important to look within, but it is also important to react with output (Swain and Lapkin, 1995). This makes second language acquisition concrete and measurable to the input that the environments we interact with provide (Krashen, 1985). But, visual narratives introduce into this seemingly perfect system a degree of doubt by injecting into it additional variables, such as non-verbal communication, emotional literacy, and empathy. In turn, doubt leads to questions about our identity and proficiency, both in terms of second language acquisition and specifically in regard to whether we actually know the rules of the L2 culture.

The latter goes beyond the formal requirements often expressed in curricula because educational systems are not normally defined by how destabilizing they are but by how well they capture desired out-

comes and alignment with the existing norms. However, if the fundamental function of education is not to indoctrinate students, but to provide them with ample opportunities for critical thinking (Freire, 1993) and learner autonomy (Nunan, 1988), the fantasy component in how visual narratives are read, interpreted, and related to the overall goal of second language acquisition by language learners adds an element of productive confusion to the fairly stable educational systems, thereby shifting the focus of the learning process to the learner.

Social semiotics (Kress, 2010) seeks to uncover the complex interaction between the sociocultural and discourse. Of particular interest for this discussion is the relationship between how this interaction manifests itself via modes related to visual and cultural (or, more precisely, cross-cultural) literacy. Social semiotics looks at the relationship between the sociocultural and the discourses in which it manifests as natural but not necessarily predictable. Multimodality in social semiotics (Kress, 2010), in particular, introduces into the study of meaning and how it is manifested and understood a degree of productive chaos that leads to the questioning of what we know about how meaning is constructed. Construction of meaning via a combination of modes, such as traditional verbal texts (and literacy) and visual stimuli in which the author's personal model of the world is encoded, introduces into the seemingly simple dichotomy of "I understand" and "I don't understand" a radical deviation from the norm. Kress writes, "In Social Semiotics, if I want to be understood, by preference I use the resources that those around me know and use to make the signs which I need to make. If I am not familiar with those resources, I *make* signs in which the form strongly suggests the meaning I want to communicate" (2010, p. 64, author's emphasis). Specifically, from the pedagogical point of view, Kress believes that the emergence of the topic of multimodality in social semiotics makes obvious the need to understand how learners construct meaning: "Clearly, the agency of learners now has to be taken seriously and placed at the centre of pedagogic attention" (2010, p. 145).

This juxtaposition of the personal with the sociocultural echoes Kress' earlier statements on social semiotics. Indeed, whereas "*semiotics* is the general study of *semiosis*, that is, the processes and effects of the production and reproduction, reception and circulation of meaning in all forms, used by all kinds of agents of communication," Hodge and Kress (1988, authors' emphasis) write, "social semiotics is primarily concerned with human semiosis as an inherently social phenomenon in its sources, functions, contexts and effects" (p. 261, authors' emphasis). To Kress, texts have "features of internal and external cohesion and, as an integrated meaning-entity, of coherence" (2010, p. 148), but interaction with these texts becomes a subjective experience. Fundamentally, in my interpretation, it means that the agency of learners does more than merely help capture "the social meanings constructed through the full range of semiotic forms, through semiotic texts and semiotic practices, in all kinds of human society at all periods of human history" (p. 261). Kress (2010) continues,

> *Social semiotics* and the *multimodal* dimension of the theory, tell us about *interest* and *agency*; about *meaning(-making)*; about processes of *sign-making* in social environments; about the *resources* for making meaning and their respective *potentials* as *signifiers* in the making of *signs-as-metaphors*; about the *meaning potentials* of cultural/*semiotic* forms. (p. 59, author's emphasis)

In practical terms, it means that the dialogue between the author and the reader becomes complicated by the necessary subjectivity that is only to a certain extent socially conditioned.

Indeed, Makhlina (2010) writes,

> In the sign-image, in addition to the object, the creator of the image is also reflected. Image is the result of active cognitive-theoretical human activity which consists of mastering the object mentally and transforming it. Even when the image is obtained through mechanical means (e.g., photography), it involves a subjective point which appears in the selection of the object, camera angle, etc. (p. 34)

In the much-acclaimed graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, Yang (2006) writes about a Chinese-American boy who discovers and constructs his identity. Initially feeling apprehensive about his heritage, he learns about the Monkey King and his personal journey. As he begins to understand his own development as a person and how challenges will be overcome, he also re-connects with cultural roots that are deeper than simply ethnicity or language. Yang weaves into the visual narrative a clever and often direct critique of stereotypes. These stereotypes are understood to have emerged as important to address not from an abstract study of cultural diversity, but from his own experiences as well as what he has observed in the field. Yang's approach illuminates clearly that an author invests in the image his/her own experience or views. At the same time, it would be a mistake to only see the act of drawing and writing *American Born Chinese* as a subjective experience. The visual narrative, in this case, is a manifestation of a set of social issues and topics (such as discrimination and Otherness) that are relevant to the lives of many, many culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Importantly, a reader investing emotionally and intellectually in reading this visual narrative goes beyond simply identifying the stereotypes and learning about Chinese Americans as a cultural group. Instead, the fundamental questions of identity, inner peace, and self-discovery that Yang explores allow for more than simply decoding; the reader is invited to construct his/her own interpretation of the protagonist's experiences.

Therefore, semiosis is a complex process, and the range of forms and modes that make it possible is perhaps almost infinite from the "multimodal social semiotics" (Kress, 2010, p. 13) point of view. The wide range of possibilities exists through combinations of approaches that authors take to communicate meaning to readers, necessarily leaving the domain we traditionally associate with formal education, verbal literacy (The New London Group, 1996), and seek-

ing other ways to negotiate with the learner. Visual narratives and semiosis in the context of language learning enjoy a complex relationship, in that one does not exist without the other. In other words, the introduction of the seemingly chaotic and even unpredictable visual literacy mode (which we link closely with L2 cultural negotiation, or learning the pragmatic rules of a given culture) into the learning and teaching process has potential because it shifts the center of attention from teacher-controlled materials to the learners themselves. Thus, the teacher has to give up some of his/her power when working with visual narratives, which is especially interesting from the point of view of curriculum design; at the same time, learners acquire the ability to better control the meaning-making process. Fundamentally, semiosis in a multiliteracy-oriented classroom becomes less of a controllable process, from the curricular point of view, and thus, the introduction of new modes into the learning process is liberatory (Freire, 1993).

English language learners (ELLs) as meaning makers

Interestingly, this power afforded to the constructor of meaning who works in a sociocultural context can be found in the works of Voloshinov (and, therefore, it is believed, Bakhtin). Voloshinov/Bakhtin (2010) believes that language and context are closely intertwined. In particular, it is important to point out that he does not see the study of language as viable without studying the context in which language is used. A speech act, he writes, is understood when the participants in the conversation have a shared set of understandings as to the environment in which the conversation is taking place: "An exact expression (and not a linguistic abstraction) is born, lives, and dies in the process of social interaction between participants in this speech act" (2010, p. 157). He describes this as being connected to a certain moment of being, and thus, even though the implied behind the speech may not be obvious to people not participating in the conversation, it is obvious to those who are participating in the conversation. The specific situation in which the conversation takes place is an important part of the meaning of the words that the participants use to communicate. Therefore, he writes, anything that is said consists of meaning manifested through words and the implied, i.e., hidden behind the words. It is possible to argue, therefore, that the social and communicative, which in this case involves awareness of even the physical properties of the environment in which the conversation takes place, can bring about an understanding of the sociocultural aspects of the participants' lives.

However, Voloshinov continues, the context in which this interaction takes place can be quite broad. For example, he writes that it can be limited to the room in which the conversation is taking place at that particular moment in time. At the same time, he continues, the implied and understood by both parties can actually extend far beyond this physical space, thus including membership in various cultures and sociocultural groups, which is similar to the concept of "imagined communities […] with whom we connect through the power of imagination" (Kanno and Norton, 2003, p. 241). This

means that the negotiation of meaning is taken further away from the specific room in which the conversation is taking place, he writes, as the implied becomes less and less "constant" (Voloshinov, 2010, p. 153), or stable.

Importantly, he continues, "Any word that is pronounced in reality [written consciously], and not just remaining in the lexicon, is an expression and product of the social interaction between these three: speaker (author), listener (reader), and the one about whom (or which) they speak (character [hero]). A word is a social event. It does not exist as some abstract linguistic value and cannot be psychologically extracted out of the isolated subjective consciousness of the speaker" (2010, p. 157). In turn, if speech "finds in it the social interaction of the speaker, listener, and the character [and is] the product of their living communication" (p. 158), the character (a superhero protagonist, for instance) is thrown into chaos and presents himself/herself as a means of negotiating dangerous waters and finding semiotic solutions for the L2 reader.

Indeed, Voloshinov's insistence on the social nature of words and, more broadly, language is interesting from the point of view of using visual narratives in the classroom. Sequential art, in particular, lends itself to a rich tradition of thought on what language is and how it functions. Fundamentally, the social nature of how meanings are constructed and transmitted echoes Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 2008a) and is thus applicable to contexts in which communicative language teaching is used (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011).

Voloshinov's thoughts are remarkable, especially because language teaching can be conceptualized as the transmission of knowledge from the more experienced interlocutors to the less experienced ones, which fundamentally underlines the importance of interaction in the language classroom. At the same time, we know from Vygotsky's thoughts on language development that learners never passively absorb the linguistic input that is presented to them. Especially in terms of Vygotsky's swimmer's metaphor (2008b), it can be argued that the three entities that Voloshinov writes about—the writer, reader, and character(s) —are similarly swimmers who have a high degree of control over the direction in which they swim.

This presents an interesting challenge from the point of discourse analysis of sequential art because the third participant in this interaction, the character, suddenly comes alive. This goes contrary to the idea that word exists to capture the meaning invested in it by the writer and also against the idea that understanding either happens or does not. Kress (2010), in particular, applies the idea that partial understanding is possible in situations in which multiple modes are used; in our case, these include visual narratives and sequential art. The character then becomes not simply a tool in the author's hands or simply a means of communicating broadly generalized cultural values but an entity that takes on a life of its own. Much has been written on literature as a reflection of the sociocultural (e.g., Hirsch, 1987, 2007), and the idea that artifacts, such as texts, produced by authors are reflections of their context is not new. However, with sequential art, it can be argued that the character may not be a sim-

ple reflection of the cultural values which the author may or may not inject into the character. Quite the contrary is true—if the character becomes a somewhat independent entity, and if the interaction between the character and the reader produces a set of meanings that do not necessarily match fully the meanings invested in the character by the author, then L2 cultural negotiation becomes a phenomenon only indirectly related to what the author wished or did not wish to express through the character.

From the cross-cultural hermeneutics point of view, these challenges indicate diversity as not simply the existence in the world of various ethnic groups, but also of diversity as a uniquely interpersonal phenomenon, where different people, with their individual-specific schemata, interact and yet never completely understand each other (Vygotsky, 2008b). In turn, if it can be argued that understanding is never really complete, then meanings created by the reader are necessarily unique and even potentially independent of the context in which the author created the actual sequential art. At the same time, from Voloshinov's point of view, form and meaning are essentially negotiated by all three. Perhaps it can be argued, then, that the character has its (or his/her) own meaning that can never be completely understood by the author *or* the reader. Therefore, even though the character is not an actual living being, it can be perceived as such by both the reader and the author. In practical terms, it means that the character embodies something that can never be completely cognized. We instinctively look in these characters for a connection to our own background and context, and we also try to understand what the author's context was when the piece was created (which is why comics can be conceptualized as an excellent culture teaching tool), but the mystery behind what the character may *think* and *feel* brings to the L2 cultural negotiation process, once again, that element of chaos—even when the author employs multiple modes to clarify these for us in the panels.

Fundamentally, this is one of the mysteries we look for in the gutter between the panels. In addition to helping us construct the process which is followed from panel to panel, the gutter puzzles us with its empty space because it suggests that there is more to the narrative than we can immediately perceive (McCloud, 1993). Perception, from Vygotsky's point of view, is a necessary component in meaning making (2008b). But, when perception is triggered by the empty white space in the gutter, personal connection with the character becomes one of the tools we use to visualize the journey from one panel to another. Makhlina (2010) writes,

> The transformation of an object (which is not tantamount to intentionally distorting its form) thus characterizes any image. Everything said about the sign-image outside of art refers to the artistic image, as well, except with that important proviso that the degree of departure and dissimilarity from the original will be higher in the arts, all other equal conditions notwithstanding. Here, one adds to the abovementioned subjective factors what is called the artist's 'personal vision' of the world. (p. 34)

For example, in the visual narrative "Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History," Getz and Clarke (2011) write about slavery and one woman's quest for justice. This quest for justice is contextualized within a broader conversation about human rights and the history of colonialism. On the surface, the authors' intentions are simple—they want to show what it was like for a woman to be in this situation centuries ago. But, the deeper level to the visual narrative is in that it offers opportunities to understand the authors' views that slavery is not merely ancient history. On the contrary, the mental images created by the reader in the gutter are only at first images of exotic foreign locales. They are quickly superseded by the images of futility, hopelessness and despair, but also of hope and eventual redemption.

Furthermore, in language teaching, we look at empathy as an important component of language learning, and the principle of empathy as a tool that we use to make sense of the world around us remains true in the case of visual narratives. In other words, empathy is not simply feelings, but an actual cognitive tool that, for a moment, infuses our very being with what we feel the character *may* be experiencing internally, in his/her soul. There is a strong poststructuralist aspect to this process, because this model presumes that empathy takes us beyond simple categories of ethnicity and cultural norms and, instead, makes an impact on our psyche as a cognitive device. Makhlina (2010) writes, "The new layers of investment lead to the concretization of the content and the dismemberment of discourse into smaller syntagmatic units" (p. 18). Second language acquisition, if we think of it as a series of challenges on the obstacle course that is the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 2008a), thrives in hermeneutic chaos.

Interestingly, from the second language acquisition point of view, the role of input is also not something particularly new. In some schools of thought (e.g., Chomsky, 1965), input allows us to activate and manifest what is already built in (innateness); in others, input is the stimulus and empirical data that make second language position possible (Krashen, 1985). In fact, as noted earlier, Swain's output hypothesis similarly links input to meaningful production in one's second language. Here, I argue that, in the empty gutter space, multimodality allows us to access meaning in more than one way, and at the same time, it allows us to construct meaning in ways that are not necessarily directly related to the intended meanings that were originally invested in the piece by the author or the character. Fundamentally, this opens up new possibilities in terms of what the ESL reader actually learns from sequential art that he/she reads. Elsewhere, I (and co-authors) have argued for the application of autoethnographic analysis to language learning and teaching (Lapidus, Kaveh, and Hirano, 2013), and the interaction between the reader and the character is a good example of stimulus that brings out the autoethnographic. In other words, interacting with the character, the reader instinctively tries to compare his/her experience with that of the character, even though the character's experience can only be imagined. Because this interaction takes place with something that is itself the construct of imagination, the experience has to be liberating for the reader. Suddenly, the reader's experience becomes im-

portant (as an emotional determinant, not only schemata), and the meanings constructed in the process are legitimized. Makhlina (2010) writes, "The artistic sign is a term denoting the reality not in the purely objective existence of art, but rather in its functioning" (p. 348), and thus, sequential art from the social semiotics point of view is a conduit for what the reader does to make meaning. At the same time, the imagined experience and schemata of the character are also legitimized, with the character no longer simply being an empty vessel whose sole function is to embody the author's views and personal positions. Of course, it would be naïve to think that the complete separation of the character from the author is possible. Nevertheless, this so-called troika (author, reader, and character) destabilizes the simple dichotomy "expert versus non-expert" and offers the ESL teacher something less structured and more unpredictable.

This dissolution of tradition in ESL contexts has been illuminated most recently by Chun (2012). While he does not focus on comics per se, his work deals with the combination of the visual and verbal modes to communicate values, e.g., to discuss globalization with ESL students. As Chun correctly points out, English language learners deal with information presented multimodally (charts, graphs, illustrations, and so on) on a regular basis, including while working in academic environments. Chun disagrees with Kress on the more recent origins of semiotics and believes, also correctly, that multimodality has existed for a very long time (for a more detailed treatment of the history of sequential art, see McCloud, 1993). Interestingly, Chun compares an issue of *The New York Times* from one hundred years ago (all text) with one from fifty years later (mostly text, a few pictures) and a more recent, modern issue (online, many more images and changes in terms of how they are organized). In essence, while multimodality has been an important part of the human experience for a long time, its legitimatization as a popular form of communication is a more recent phenomenon. Thus, to Chun, Web 2.0 and the more globalized modern community create "powerful forms of alternative pedagogy." Chun's framework is based directly on Kress and Freire, and in particular, he deals with "critical literacy" viewed through the lens of multimodal social semiotics by questioning the expert-versus-non-expert dichotomy I mentioned earlier.

Thus, not incidentally, Chun is interested in emotional intelligence and agency when discussing a cartoon in which two co-workers who do not get along are portrayed. For example, Chun (2012) explores the signifiers used in the cartoon, including one character's glasses and hair as juxtaposed with a colleague who is "nicely groomed." In doing so, he highlights a visual representation of gender roles— the scientist is male, implying that cultural assumptions are invested in the cartoon. Chun positions himself as a proponent of the view that language enables meaning-making. For example, he believes that being multilingual helped the protagonist in the graphic novel *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1991) survive, which means that Spiegelman's father can serve as "a powerful example" to language learners. Indeed, Chun (2012) indicates that learners who do not know about

World War II are still able to understand the meaning and find an emotional connection with the protagonist, i.e., one of the Bakhtinian heroes, in *Maus*. He also believes that there is a connection between the "history and scapegoating of selected groups" and English language learners in the United States that makes it possible to empathize with the protagonist in *Maus*.

Chun (2012) offers ideas as to how this can be applied in the classroom, including students "researching their own family histories and constructing narratives," "creating their own graphic novels, blogs, YouTube videos," and engaging in "cross-modal critical analysis" that may include working on "a class blog and/or wiki project" (similarly to Lapidus, 2008). This is particularly significant from the Russian social semiotics point of view, because sequential art represents a complex manifestation of more than one plane of meaning making. Makhlina (2010) writes,

> Art as a universal language of culture is, on the one hand, a manifestation of this culture in its specific systems, i.e., of the concrete historical lifestyle of people of different ages and ethnic regions. On the other hand, it is the assertion and development of the reflected lifestyle and culture. It is a complex mechanism of the dialectic of culture and the arts, lifestyle and its resultant art. (p. 285)

However, as earlier noted, if "the polysemy of each of the expressive means of art is of a dual nature," then "its different meanings depend on the situation and context in which it is applied," she concludes (p. 349). Thus, the play that takes place between the author, the reader, and the character(s) in sequential art can be seen as a learning opportunity for the reader not only because he/she may learn something about the context for which the specific work of art was created, but because he/she may learn something about his/her now imagined future. Referring to Bakhtin's views, Makhlina notes, "Artwork (text) can never be translated 'completely' because, he explains, 'there is no potential single text of texts.' Furthermore, any work, i.e., text, 'always is, to some extent, a free revelation of personality that is not predefined by an empirical need'" (p. 50, citing Bakhtin, 1979, p. 285).

Thus, in conclusion, sequential art, in its Vygotskian social functions, goes far beyond simply reflecting the spirit of the times or the personal values of the author and, instead, presents learners with an opportunity to explore the way they themselves construct meaning and orient this process toward fantasizing about their future. This, in turn, is not limited to utilitarian functions with which we sometimes associate classroom materials; instead, multimodal social semiotics allows us to illuminate comics' infinite potential as tools of liberation for the language learner. Specifically, the reader experiences in the characters a reflection of his/her many possible futures, and out of the dialogue with them, the author, and—importantly—oneself, a greater awareness of language and culture emerges.

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