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Comics and linguistics

Frank Bramlett

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However we define comics, it is safe to claim that in general they consist of two main components: images and language. With some exceptions, the vast majority of comics include linguistic elements: speech balloons, thought balloons, narrative boxes, sound effects, and ambient language (language used in the background, as on store fronts, t-shirts, restaurant menus, and the like). Comics scholarship examines the language used in comics to say something about narrative, character development, even the nature of comics themselves. And while fitful linguistic analysis of comics began in the early 20th century, only recently has the academic discipline of linguistics been brought to bear on comics studies, resulting in a rapidly growing expanse of research. This essay will discuss the concept of “language of comics,” explore several approaches to language and linguistics, and then attempt to address linguistic scholarship as it intersects with the study of comics.

Exploring the “language of comics”

Since at least the 1980s, many scholars who write about comics have relied on the notion that comics are a language. Both Will Eisner and Scott McCloud write about “the language of comics,” and this metaphor “gives scholars and artists alike some common ground for discussing their research and art” (Bramlett 2012:1). For example, the idea of “the language of comics” is

appealing because sequencing in language (e.g., order of words in a sentence) aligns very well with the notion of sequencing in comics (e.g., the order of panels in a comic strip). As a metaphor, the phrase “language of comics” has a powerful, almost poetic attraction, but Eisner and McCloud “may have interfered with the study of language *in* comics because they called for a language *of* comics” (Bramlett 2012a:1). However, from a linguistic point of view, comics are not and cannot be a language.

Despite the difficulties with “the language of comics” as a scholarly principle, some research has endorsed the view that when comics artists create their work, they are employing a system called “visual language” (Cohn 2012: 93). This is not exactly the same as saying there is a “language of comics,” but it is consonant with an approach called mentalist/cognitive linguistics (explained at length below).

The scope of language and linguistics

Linguistics is a large and complex discipline, involving brain science, social science, digital humanities, language acquisition, language policy, and many more. It is doubtless not surprising that there are deep and divisive disagreements about how to define linguistics, and these disagreements are rooted in competing definitions of language. Some linguists attempt complex, comprehensive definitions, taking a mentalist/cognitivist approach:

Language is [...] a distinct piece of biological makeup of our brains. Language is a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently. (Pinker 1994: 18)

In contrast to the study of language as a mentalist/cognitive system or as located solely in the mind, language may also be understood as located both in the brain and outside the brain.

Language can be defined from a sociocultural aspect in that it is learned, is culturally varied, is variable, is group-specific, is historical, and is governed by convention (Coulmas 2013: 8).

Sociolinguistics concerns itself mostly with variety, and its focus is to understand that speakers of languages “are creative agents, able to choose their verbal means and, in so doing, prone to cooperate” with each other (Coulmas 2013: 15). Many linguists believe that language is as much social as it is anything and reflects extraordinary diversity: “[linguistic] diversity means two things: the multiplicity of human languages—6,000 is a conventional count—and the enormous variety of coexisting forms in every language. This diversity is the result of many contingent factors working on human speech and behavior” (Coulmas 2013: 5). The debates within linguistics about what counts as language and about what counts as linguistics have a bearing on the way that the analysis of comic books is carried out. The remainder of the essay explores a variety of strands of linguistic research in comics studies, beginning with a discourse analysis approach.

The language in comics: dialogue

Most language in comics resides in speech and thought balloons, and even before balloons became conventionalized, a great deal of language in comics was meant to be understood as speech, even language printed on the shirt of a young child in Outcault’s *Yellow Kid*. Through these devices, readers have access to the way characters talk to each other. The analysis of language includes the study of speech exchange systems, for example, through conversation analysis (Wooffitt 2005) or interactional sociolinguistics (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). In everyday

conversation, speakers usually orient to a system of turn taking in which turn allocations are agreed upon by the participants in the moment of the conversation. In other words, depending on their needs and desires, speakers will take longer or shorter turns, and will sometimes interrupt each other.

Arguably, the primary method we use to read a comic book is to study the social interaction of characters, much of which is linguistic exchange. For example, in *Rawhide Kid: Slap Leather*, writer Ron Zimmerman and artist John Severin created a story in which the main character is a gay man. While few of the other characters in the story know that the Kid is gay, readers are supposed to understand through the speech balloons that the Kid plays with language, engaging in witty repartee with his friends and enemies alike. The following conversation takes place near the end of the story arc in Issue 5, just before the big fight scene. Laura is at the jail house to keep an eye on the prisoner, Red Duck. Another bad guy, by the name of Lé Sabre, has come to break Red Duck out of jail, but he decides to make unwanted sexual advances toward Laura before he unlocks the jail cell:

Laura: Stay away from me...
Lé Sabre: Do not be ziz way, my pet. Lé Sabre's charms can be very nice...
<They struggle, and Laura scratches his face.>
Lé Sabre: Ach!
Lé Sabre: I like a kitty that plays — 'ow you zay it? "**Ruff.**"
<The Kid trips Lé Sabre, who falls to the floor.>
The Kid: Good news: *I* like to play "*ruff.*"
<The Kid and Lé Sabre fight.>
Lé Sabre: OOOOOOOOO, Monsieur Rawhide Keed. You and I are not going to "**play**" at all.

(Zimmerman & Severin 2003: n.p.)

In this excerpt, three characters engage in social interaction, and their physical actions and speech illustrate an attempted rape, resistance to the attempt, and a physical intervention that prevents it. The speakers take clearly separate turns: they don't talk "on top of" each other. This

phenomenon is most clearly evidenced by the distribution of speech balloons and the tails of the balloons. None of the balloons in these few panels is overlapping visually—one balloon doesn't lie on top of another balloon; one tail doesn't cross another balloon's tail—so readers may assume that the speakers are taking separate turns with no overlapping speech. Of course, in other panels in *Rawhide Kid*, there is clear overlap of the balloons, suggesting that characters produce speech simultaneously. In addition, these turns are short and don't take up much room on the page; usually speech balloons are designed so that they contain just the speech of a turn, meaning that the size of the balloon will reflect how many words are being produced or how much time is being taken up by the speaker. (For more on character interaction vis-à-vis turn length and turn taking, see Bramlett 2012b.)

Importantly, the *Rawhide Kid*'s turns function in multiple ways: they communicate both a serious message (that the rape will not happen) and an implied joke about sexual activity between Lé Sabre and himself. In gay male communities, this is an example of “camp” practice: when gay men draw attention to heterosexual male privilege—especially as it is founded in gender norms and sexuality—with the express intent to undercut it. In many interactions, the Kid uses joking language and sometimes stern language, much of which can be characterized as verbal camp, which celebrates and critiques a situation, usually one that revolves around or is founded in a heteronormative construct (Bramlett 2010). In this case, the Kid uses the joke about rough play (hinting at sexual activity) in an ironic way to refer to a physical fight. These utterances have multiple meanings in that they respond to a dangerous situation in part by resisting heteronormative constructs and overlaying queer meanings: “The social practice of camp as a masquerade insists that readers/hearers delve into the wide-ranging possibility of meanings created in the moment of camp. This multiplicity is a hallmark of camp and is meant to

disrupt and destabilize discourse coherence, as the Kid achieves in his disruption of [Lé Sabre's] attempted rape" of Laura (Bramlett 2010). Social interaction in this very short scene ranges from dangerous to sarcastic to humorous, and the characters communicate with each other about their identities, their intentions, and their values, all of which is achieved through the language rendered in speech balloons.

The language in comics: dialect and other code choice

The relationship between linguistic codes and comics encompasses far more than principles of conversation alone. For much of the 20th century, linguists studied dialects based on geographic regions (e.g., English spoken in the Midwestern U.S.), but they also began to study social dialect, varieties of language used by groups of people who share similar social characteristics, like socioeconomic status or ethnicity. A third major focus of study in sociolinguistics is situated language use, varieties of language used in identifiable social situations, like language of the court room, or the classroom, or the locker room (Coulmas 2013). Aside from obvious differences in language choice (e.g., comics written in French, Japanese, Dutch, or Turkish), it is very easy to see the linguistic choices that writers make when it comes to representations of dialect in comics. Many characters in Will Eisner's *Contract with God* use a New York City dialect and in some cases use English words derived from Yiddish (e.g., *cookalein*). Similarly, Takashi Okazaki's *Afro Samurai* contains a measure of Japanese and a range of different kinds of English, including African American English (Bramlett 2012b).

For many decades, the study of *eye dialect* has figured prominently in the literary analysis of a range of works. Authors like William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Charles Dickens are frequently cited for their use of eye dialect, defined as strategic manipulation of

spelling to approximate a character’s pronunciation (but see Preston (1985: 328) for helpful distinctions between *allegro speech*, *dialect respellings*, and *eye dialect*). Given that comics artists represent spoken language via a written language system, the notion of eye dialect (and related concepts) is essential to the study of language in comics. For instance, Walshe (2012) analyzes a large corpus of Marvel superhero comics to study the use of Irish English dialect forms, focusing on characters like Banshee, Siryn, and Shamrock. Using Marvel’s online digital database, the study examines “150 comic books compiled from 28 different series by 28 different writers or writing teams” (270).

Table 1. The distribution of supposedly typical Irish English features in the corpus (adapted from Walshe 2012: 285)

Feature	Number of comic books (out of 150 possible)
Aye	32
Lad	32
Boyo	24
Lass	14
darlin’	13
begorra(h)	3
top o’ the mornin’	1
broth of a boy	1

Table 1 shows a select number of features identified in the corpus. As Walshe explains, “the representation of Irish speech in the Marvel universe involves a combination of supposedly typical Irish English lexicogrammatical features [e.g., vocabulary choice or verb conjugations], as well as a system of respellings and contractions to indicate an Irish accent” (284). He concludes that some of the features arise from nineteenth-century caricatures, but most of the features are more often associated with Scottish English rather than Irish English, for example, Scottish forms of negation like *cannae*, *dinnae*, *didnae*, *nae*, and so on (285).

A similar question arises when we consider comics that contain two or more different languages. Breidenbach (2012) surveys a number of comic strips (*La Cucaracha*) and editorial cartoons by Lalo Alcaraz in order to measure the extent to which the Spanish language, the English language, and varieties of the two are represented. Discourse analysis reveals several combinations of language and identity in *La Cucaracha*: Chicano English; Pocho; Spanglish; and Mock Spanish, among others. For example, Alcaraz uses Mock Spanish for humorous and satiric effect, substituting *Cinco de Marcho* for *Cinco de Mayo* and modifying a well-known fast-food restaurant advertisement campaign: *It's Finger-Lickin' Bueno* (Breidenbach 2012: 226). Further, Breidenbach shows how Alcaraz plays with linguistic codes in order to poke fun at people in the U.S. because of their politics (left, right, and center), regardless of whether they identify as Latino/Latina, as well as how he manipulates “language choice and language ideologies [...] to enact his [own] Chicano identity” (235).

Like Lalo Alcaraz, many comics artists employ multiple linguistic codes in their comics. In *La Perdida* by Jessica Abel, readers see the main character, Carla, travel from Chicago to Mexico City in search of a stronger sense of identity or sense of self. Part of Carla's experience is her process of acquiring the Spanish language. Many of the pages show the slow start that Carla has, but the reader understands that eventually Carla speaks passable Spanish. Figure 1 shows Carla attempting to use Spanish with some new acquaintances. In these two panels, Abel shows codeswitching (e.g., English and Spanish spoken together in one speech balloon), English spoken with a Spanish accent, and ungrammatical Spanish produced by a native speaker of English (Abel 2006: 30). As a helpful guide to the reader, Abel also provides translations below certain panels. As Breidenbach argues about Alcaraz's comics, the use of linguistic codes demonstrates a lot of information about states of mind and identity of the speakers. Unlike

Alcaraz, however, Abel does not satirize here. Readers encounter a very sympathetic rendering of social interaction in a multicultural, multilingual setting. (In some editions, *La Perdida* contains a glossary of mostly Spanish terms that Abel considers important for the comic.)



Figure 1. From *La Perdida* by Jessica Abel. Used by permission.

The language in comics: language variation and change

In addition to research in representations of dialect and language, some linguists use comics as a way of understanding language variation, in particular how a language can change over time. The concept of language variation is multifaceted, but in general it is the notion that when speakers wish to communicate a meaning, they have options to choose from (Coulmas 2013). A simple example is that an English speaker may use the form *is not* or *isn't* or *ain't*, depending on communicative needs. Since comics can represent a range of social situations, it is reasonable to expect that language in comics will also evince language variation.

Gert Meesters (2012) constructed a corpus of comics to trace grammatical and lexical development in the Dutch language spoken in Flanders. There is some variation in Dutch across borders (Belgian Dutch and Dutch Dutch, for instance), and Meesters explains that these dialect differences are similar “to the relationship between American and British English,” noting that

the “clearest difference is the pronunciation” (163). The corpus contains *Suske en Wiske*, which Meesters identifies as “the most popular Flemish comic in history” (165). The study explores grammar and lexicon in order to determine whether the different varieties of Dutch have become more alike or more different over the course of the publication history of *Suske en Wiske*. For instance, Meesters examines the personal pronoun *gij* (a kind of English ‘you’); auxiliary verb *gaan* for future tense; and conditional clauses introduced by auxiliary verb *moest*, among others (175). The study concludes that Belgian Standard Dutch and Dutch Standard Dutch are becoming more alike but there is a different spoken variety of Dutch that is growing in importance. Meesters explains the limitations of the study by citing the size of the corpus and the fact that it includes written representations of language rather than the analysis of spoken language data; however, the study demonstrates a very rich potential for the use of comics in studying language variation and change.

Language in comics: cognition and multimodality

To this point, the essay has discussed language as a social phenomenon, created through social interaction. Since comics are centrally about characters and their relationships, this approach serves a vital function in comics scholarship. However, the concept of language as a brain-based phenomenon has also contributed significantly to comics scholarship. Cohn (2012) advances the argument that people who draw comics rely on their mental faculties of visual language in order to render the visual forms of comics. His approach borrows from traditional linguistic notions, like phonology, morphology, and syntax, to explain the formal properties of comics and the relationship that these forms have in comics panels and pages:

The notion of a 'visual language' fills the gap in categorization for describing the cognitive system at work in graphic expression. When individuals acquire or develop systematic patterns of graphic representation, along with the structures necessary to string them into sequences, they effectively use a visual language. (Cohn 2012: 97)

The argument here is that people who draw comics rely on an internal, cognitive system that provides forms and rules for using those forms. Cohn also proposes the idea that all people in all cultures have this visual language facility, positing, for example, American English Visual Language and Japanese Visual Language, among others.

There is also a strong trend in cognitive research devoted to explaining the role of cognitive metaphor in comics. While some research centers on linguistic metaphor, Forceville explores this relationship between language, cognition, and the visual in a study of what he calls *pictorial runes*, "non-mimetic graphic elements that contribute narratively salient information" (Forceville 2011: 875). Pictorial runes merit investigation in comics because they have a relatively fixed form and "thus have characteristics in common with language that most other types of visuals do not" (876). Forceville categorizes some of the pictorial runes in *Tintin and the Picaros*: speed lines; movement lines; droplets; spikes; spiral; and twirl (877). For linguistics, it is important to recognize the similarity that pictorial runes have to metaphor because they "visually suggest events that are literally unrepresentable, such as movement and emotions" (876). Additionally, pictorial runes suggest something about the way we think about the world. Cognitive linguistics helps to explain the ways that readers of comics can recognize thoughts and emotions when they are drawn on the page.

Language in comics: language acquisition and notions of appropriacy

The essay so far has addressed comics and linguistics from a rather neutral standpoint. Generally, linguistics seeks an objective understanding of language (linguistic systems), but linguistics can also help answer questions about child language acquisition, adult language acquisition, language policy (both national and local), and literacy practices. Bound up with these questions is the notion of language ideology, belief systems that affect how the use of language is viewed in the public sphere. Indeed, it is a fact of comics history that politicians, scholars, and pundits worry that the language in comics has a detrimental impact on readers, especially young readers or readers who are vulnerable because of learning difficulties (Nyberg 1998).

Linguistics encompasses the study of language acquisition, both for children who are acquiring their home language(s) and for adult learners of additional languages (O'Grady et al 2009). In the past, psychologists believed that children learned their first languages through observing and imitating the language behaviors of people around them. It is much more likely, though, that children learn their first languages because human brains are designed for the rapid acquisition of linguistic systems through social interaction. In other words, even though the brain is hardwired for language, without meaningful social relationships, language acquisition cannot take place. Research has long shown that the acquisition of language occurs in stages, meaning that children learn certain sounds earlier than other sounds, e.g., English [m] is almost always acquired before [l] or [w]. Likewise, children progress through stages of syntax, beginning with one-word utterances, progressing to multiword utterances, and over time exhibit fuller control over longer utterances. Under normal circumstances, children have control of the majority of their language system by the time they enter school, adding mostly vocabulary after that. Of course, some children take longer to finish this process, and a small minority of children go

through speech therapy in order to correct “problems” with pronunciation, for example the pronunciation of [s] or [r] (O’Grady et al 2009).

Throughout the 20th century, though, various groups were concerned that the language found in comics would interfere with children’s proper use of language. The fear was that comics relied on inferior kinds of language and would have a negative impact on the language of children and teens. Nyberg (1998) reviews some early studies from the 1930s to the 1950s to show the range of findings. Some studies focused on children’s language production and showed that “English found in comic strips carried over into the language of children” (Nyberg 1998: 9). Others looked at reading practices and found, among other things, that reading comics topped the list of children’s favorite play activities (10).

In some ways, the early critics were correct about the fact that nonstandard language forms were used in comics. A 1935 essay in *American Speech* functions as a survey of comics from the late 1920s and early 1930s, cataloguing certain kinds of words on the basis of their representation of regional dialect but also their representation of informal, casual language, especially the use of slang terms found in comic strips of the time (Tysell 1935). The essay looks at the wide variety of lexicon employed across the comics spectrum and the linguistic features and/or functions these terms embody, including character names (e.g., alliteration, prosody, humor); manipulated spelling usually to represent a “realistic” pronunciation (e.g., *can’tcha* for ‘can’t you’); sound effects (e.g., symbols to represent the sounds of anger, mechanical sounds, weeping); oaths and expletives (e.g., *Gosh darn, hot diggity, Gee whinnikers*); epithets (*You dastardly fiend*). This article also covers slang (e.g. terms for ‘to kill’: *to polish off, to zap, to blot out, to bump off, to put on ice*); figures of speech (e.g., *I miss Zeb Doe like a dog misses fleas*); place names (e.g., names of towns: *Hecktown, Minesburg, Junkville Town*); pseudoscientific

terms (e.g., *paramagnetic needle*; *mechanical cranium*); folk etymology (e.g., *annamule* for ‘animal’). The author concludes by addressing the reader directly:

If you have any lingering doubt that the Funnies serve as grammar, speller, and style book of the vulgate, listen to a few street-corner conversations or ask a school teacher or two about the language problems with which she has most frequently to deal. You will be convinced, I am sure, that if the English of the comic cartoons does not direct the speech habits of the common people, it at least crystallizes and gives currency to popular tendencies, thereby playing a material part in the Americanization of the English language. (Tysell 1935: 54)

Tysell was not alone in this belief, and the question of language in comics was incorporated into the 1948 Comics Code: “Vulgar and obscene language should never be used. Slang should be kept to a minimum and used only when essential to the story” (Nyberg 1998).

Importantly, some activists and researchers claimed that “comic books are death on reading” (Wertham 1954: 121). Further, it was suggested that the language in comics often correlated with and perhaps even encouraged reading disabilities and the “language itself expresses an unfortunate attitude—the attitude of the crime comic book” (145). Wertham implicates the relationship of comics and children with learning difficulties but also behavioral problems, and this resonated with society at large and especially governmental authorities. This frightened many educators and parents but, according to Nyberg, a small number of educators “took a more optimistic attitude [and] felt that comic books presented a unique opportunity for educators to adapt the techniques to classroom use, using comics as a ‘stepping stone’ or ‘bridge’ to better reading” (p. 13). Nevertheless, the 1954 Comics Code expanded the restriction and included a section on “dialogue,” which forbade “profanity, obscenity, smut, vulgarity, or words

or symbols which have acquired undesirable meanings” (Nyberg 1998). Arguably, other restrictions were relaxed: “Although slang and colloquialisms are acceptable, excessive use should be discouraged and whenever possible good grammar shall be employed” (Nyberg 1998).

In the 21st-century, scholars promote the use of comics in the classroom to encourage literacy, but now comics are recognized for their value not just for reading words but also for reading images: “Knowledge of linguistic, audio, visual, gestural, and spatial conventions within comics affects the ways in which we read and the meanings we assign to texts, just as knowledge of conventions within word-based literacy affects the ways in which those texts are read” (Jacobs 2007: 24). Concerns about literacy are a mainstay of modern societies, and while the use of comics is increasing in the classroom (especially in universities), the debate about their value will continue.

Conclusion

Prior to 2010, much had been made of the idea of a “language of comics” or “grammar of comics” or “vocabulary of comics,” and while these phrases were helpful metaphors that point to an organized, systematic approach to analysis, they ultimately interfered with a robust understanding of how linguistic science can shed light on comics (Bramlett 2012: 1–4). However, as more scholars approach comics studies using linguistic theory and methods as tools, we are better able both to analyze the language in comics and to attempt an overarching theory to explain systematic forms and sequential relationships in comics.

The breadth of linguistic scholarship is to a large degree reflected in comics studies. Cohn’s argument that comics rely on the artists’ verbal language echoes much of the mentalist/cognitivist program. Scholars like Breidenbach focus on the social interaction in

comics as the basis for linguistic analysis. Other scholars, like Meesters, discuss language variation with little to say about whether language is a mental construct, or a social phenomenon, or some combination of both. The scholarship that comes closest to blending multiple stances can be attributed to scholars like Forceville, whose work encompasses cognitive metaphor and the social nature of language in comics.

Comics readers have access to an overwhelming wealth of comics to study, and there is certainly room for all of these varied approaches. In fact, no single approach could possibly encompass all aspects of comics relating to language and linguistics. This situation creates the opportunity for linguistics scholarship to add to a rapidly growing exploration of comics. However, competing research programs may hinder the creation of a coherent vision of what linguistic comic studies could be. Comics scholars who are interested in blended or eclectic approaches to the field have at our disposal a robust and powerful set of tools for contributions to comics studies.

Related topics: Comics Code; Comics and Education; Comics in Libraries

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Further Reading

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