Flag-waving: Visual arguments, verbal reconstruction, and speaker intentions

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First, a note about my title: * Actually, what I’m talking about could probably be more accurately described as multi-modal arguments rather than merely visual ones.

My talk today has some theoretical components, but I’m really interested in talking about three methodological issues.
I’m taking it for granted that there is such a thing as visual and multimodal argumentation. A number of scholars have made arguments for their existence and I won’t repeat them here. (Consider Birdsel and Groarke, Blair, DeLuca, Dove, Govier, Kjeldsen, Pineda & Sowards, and Tseronis.)

Rather, I’d like to address three concerns that, given that literature, still remain.

1. First, there is at most a small number of systematic empirical studies. Existing studies, though well founded I think, have not been performed according to any systematic empirical approach to data gathering or analysis but have instead involved examples handpicked by researchers to illustrate their points. I want to see if a qualitative empirical study can bring insights. (Blair 2004; Kjeldsen 2012; Roque 2012; Van den Hoven 2012.)

2. Second, most existing studies exhibit a focus on a limited range of media that are just verbal plus visual, such as advertising, painting, art, etc., rather than on multimodal performances. Even Tseronis (2018) who this year argued for multimodal arguments, ends up analyzing merely visual and verbal images in posters. There are some studies that are exceptions but I would like to extend that work. (E.g., DeLuca (1999), who described the way that three activist groups used their bodies to make arguments; Pineda and Sowards (2007) who considered the case of immigrants waving Mexican and other Latin American flags during protests.)

3. Third, none of the studies I’ve found so far has included an invitation to
participants to explain the argumentative stance of their multimodal performances. In other words, I’m wondering what we can learn by asking the “speakers” of multimodal arguments to reframe their messages verbally. This study addresses all three of these concerns. But first, a couple theoretical points...
First, I want to draw a distinction between the argument and its verbal reconstruction. One view that is consistent across theories of pragmatics, including the speech act theory of Grice and Searle and the relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson, is that a speaker’s utterance is only evidence of her meaning. Let’s consider an example.
Here the sentence the speaker utters can be de-coded using the rules of syntax and semantics, but the pragmatic context in which she utters that sentence provides evidence to her audience of what she means. In this case, for example, the sentence appears to express the speaker’s desire to know whether her host has any salt. But the pragmatic context of her utterance gives the audience evidence that the speaker would like him to give her some salt.

Multimodal argument, I believe, works a little differently—there need not be any verbal sentence at all (though if you are of a semiotic bent, you might think that certain symbols, like flags, can be decoded in a similar way). Instead, the speaker’s multimodal argumentation consists of her performance’s visual and material characteristics within the pragmatic context. It may be evidence that she is making an argument (or it may not). But in any case, the verbal reconstruction of a multimodal argument is not the actual argument any more than the audience’s interpretation of an utterance is the utterance.

The pragmatic model of interpretation goes a level deeper for me in terms of interpreting communicative performances. I use a version of Sperber & Wilson’s relevance theory that I call cognitive pragmatic rhetorical theory or CPR theory. Relevance theory itself is not unknown in argumentation theory—the work of Steve Oswald particularly has attempted to bring the two together.
Sydney harbour bridge (steel arch bridge). Image © 2014 Duncan c. Creative Commons license CC BY-NC 2.0 https://flic.kr/p/pnXgDm

[read title]

My paper for this conference and a forthcoming book chapter provide more detail on CPR theory. I’ll touch on a couple key items here.
According to... <read title>

In short, a goal of the speaker is to change the listener’s mind, his cognitive environment.

So let’s look at the cognitive environment in more detail.
In CPR theory, cognitive environments include assumptions, goals, and emotions. Of course, like all models, this one simplifies at the risk of oversimplification. There may be other types of cognitive components, and assumptions, goals, and emotions are not always mutually exclusive.

Assumptions are beliefs about the world that can be expressed in propositions or declarative sentences. E.g., *It is sunny today; Mary just said ‘Good morning’ to me; Mary wants me to have a good morning.* Goals are “Consequences (end states or otherwise) desired or unwanted by an agent and capable of motivating an agent to action.” E.g., *Lose 15 pounds in the next 2 years. Don’t let this talk crash and burn. Get people to whom I talk to like me.* Emotions are what we commonly understand as emotions, like love, anger, joy, fear.

All these components influence the mind’s processing of communication in the context of the principle of relevance...
[Read]

The idea of a ratio or fraction here is a metaphor. Not to be taken literally, of course. For you as an audience, the probability that you’ll properly interpret a joke if I tell one is affected by relevance, which is the ratio of the cognitive effect you expect to get (perhaps enjoyment from a good joke) to the effort you need to invest in interpretation (possibly trying to figure out some pun I’ve constructed). BTW, I’m not telling you a joke.

It is this relevance ratio that determines in part how your communications will be received and . . .
• Your micro-rhetorical performances (lexis, stylistics)
• The trajectory of your performances (invention, arrangement)
• The visual, social, and bodily aspects of your performances

Relevance operates at every scale

So... We have some theoretical machinery: how do we put it to work in the instant study?
As part of a larger study, I’m interested in how speakers deploy the US flag in civic discourse. I attended the 2016 Republican and Democratic National Conventions in the US, where the major parties anointed their candidates for US president—Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. At each convention, I approached, briefly interviewed, and photographed persons carrying or wearing the flag. There were 68 of them in total; I’ve analyzed 14 examples for my talk today; and here they are.
I included participants like number 005 here, who had parsed flags: that is, reconfigured elements of the flag, like the image of the flag parsed into the three letters U-S-A here.

As you can see, in some cases, folks actually carried flags (sometimes regular, American flags, other times modified flags) but in many cases their flag gear was clothing.
For this project, my research question was “Do persons wearing or carrying the flag verbally reconstruct their visual performances as argumentation and if so, how?” I asked participants very brief questions about what message (if any) their flag gear communicated to folks and how they thought it did so. I didn’t ask them if they were making arguments with their performances, though some certainly did.
I used a convenience sample, walking around these conventions for about 25 hours, talking to everyone I could get to in that time with flag gear. I estimate that I spoke with about 20% of the folks in my immediate environment who had flag gear.
I was interested in clothing in part because wearing flag clothing in the US was considered countercultural and even a form of disrespect for the flag until around the beginning of the 1990s. I was interested if the participants would verbally characterize parsed flags in their clothing differently than other kinds of flags.
In this sample of 14 participants, 10 of them were wearing flag clothing, and the rest carried actual flags. Some other participants not pictured today carried other gear, including flag backpacks and the like.
I coded the data deductively, looking for evidence of the theoretical constructs that I identified in advance. These photos and transcripts of the interviews are available at the website of the broader project www.star-spangled.org

Not all of it is up there yet, because I was hoping to finish uploading transcripts yesterday when I spilled water on my laptop.
I looked for evidence of arguments first in participants’ visual performances and then analyzed them alongside their verbal performances.
So let’s consider an example of my interpretation. In the case of Participant 018, I attempted to find evidence of the speaker’s beliefs or assumptions, goals and emotions, and I tried to imagine what he might think his audience’s cognitive environments were. I then asked him.

Let’s listen to the interview.
When I first “read” this speaker’s performance, I assumed he was relying on contextual assumptions of his audience, for example: that an upside down flag signals distress and that the circle A signifies anarchy.

One can readily construct an argument with the standpoint We should abandon religion and political masters. The premises could be that religion and political masters are placing our country into distress, and that we should abandon those things that place our country into distress.

The speaker’s verbal performance introduces at least two complications:
1. He says he holds the “no gods” “no masters” view BECAUSE he’s an anarchist. But there’s really no way to see that causal connection in his multimodal performance.
2. Though he acknowledge the role of the upside down flag as a symbol of distress of the person flying it, he says that the flag is upside down to symbolize America’s failure to embrace his message.

In short, my reconstruction was certainly inconsistent with the speaker’s verbal characterization of his argument or message. Of course, the speaker’s verbal reconstruction was a rhetorical performance that I prompted, so he could well have meant something different with the flag before I interacted with him.
1. Systematic empirical studies.
2. Focus on multi-modal performances
3. Speaker input on argumentation reconstructions

Three concerns about visual argumentation needed exploration

So, I've done 14 of these analyses so far, and I expect to finish the remaining 54 later this summer. Remember that I wanted to learn whether each of three methodological stances could provide insights:
1. performing a systematic empirical study;
2. focusing on multimodal elements of speakers’ performances; and
3. eliciting speaker input on argumentation reconstruction.
Based on the analyses so far, I believe I’ve made progress on all three fronts
Even after analyzing just 14 of these performances, I can see that having a larger number of instances gathered in similar contexts and relating to the same symbol reveals a broad range of communicative intents on the parts of participants. Folks who seemed to be engaged in similar behaviors for similar purposes turned out to offer a wide variety of interpretations of their own performances.

This would have been difficult to establish if I had not approached these participants in this systematic way.
In both the visual argumentation theory of Birdsell and Groarke and relevance theory as I have modified it, the material, visual, and verbal contexts of a multimodal performance enrich the hearer’s interpretation of the performance. For example, participant 018 as participating in a protest march, a context that enriched my efforts to interpret his multimodal performance.

Compare that with the analysis of a purely visual and verbal advertisement, which does not have a single material context but might appear in a wide variety of them.
There are a couple interesting things that emerged from the paired verbal performances. For example:

• some participants described their use of the flag, whether as clothing or the actual flag, in a way more consistent with a performance of identity than one of argumentation. In other words, it was about who they ARE rather than asserting any standpoint.

• Several participants readily offered or acknowledged that the flag is multi-valent, that they expected audiences to struggle with interpreting their messages. They spoke of ambiguity, dichotomy, and juxtaposition, suggesting that they were not prepared to be held accountable for any particular proposition associated with their multimodal performances.

• Rather, their multimodal performances can be seen as a kind of strategic vagueness and ambiguity, designed to support a wide variety of weak implicatures by their audiences but not committing the speakers to any particular positions.
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  • More to come

Thank you!