

Comics as a Pedagogical Approach to Language Teaching

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Abstract

In language pedagogy, educationists constantly look for new, innovative and effective materials to enrich the teaching and learning. This article aims to see the relevance of comics as a teaching tool. It analyses the linguistic devices (lexicalization process) used to make comics an interesting read and highlights the semiotics of attractive colours used to make comics more appealing. Both these features contribute to the use of comics as a pedagogical method.

Keywords: Language pedagogy, teaching strategies, Hindi comics, idiom, metaphor, slang

Introduction

Learning is influenced by pedagogical methods. Language teachers use different learning strategies to get their learners involved in the learning process (Djamarah & Zain, 2010). Comics are an excellent source of entertainment. People of almost all ages love them. In language pedagogy, comics are used to boost creativity and promote better learning through visuals. The sequential format of comics introduces narrative storytelling and the structure of sentences do not necessarily follow the set patterns. These features make comics interesting to read, while the visual cues help children decode unfamiliar vocabulary. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) treat images seriously as linguistic forms in communication. They stress redrawing the boundary between the mode of writing and the visual arts as well as introducing the concept of design to education. Additionally, children with learning disabilities like dyslexia might find it easier to parse a comic page than the pages of a traditional book, and may even feel more accomplished doing so (Smith et al., 2019).

Cultural references and contexts are used to teach languages. Comics become relevant to language learning because they provides exposure to the culture of that particular language. They are full of common idioms, metaphors, and slang, as they present language that native speakers speak. Comics are representations of the “oral in writing” (Ramos, 2006), whereas as per Eisner (2010), comics are a vehicle for creative expression, an artistic and literary form that works with arrays of figures or images and words to tell a story. Children never get tired of reading the Hindi comics on *Phantom*, *Rake Chacha Chaudhari*, *Pinki*, *Billu*, etc.,

Writing and producing comics is an expensive job. In comics, the artist draws a series of pictures of a particular scene, and thus a sizeable number of hand-drawn figures go into making one single frame of the story. Several coloured drawings with captions are put together to show a particular character’s movement and fit a story. Thus, the whole process of lexicalization, the process of making a word to express a concept, enjoys a vital position in the production of comics.

The quality of comics depends on the visualizer and the artist who conceive the idea and the scenes. British information scientists Burford et al. (2003) define nine levels of visual information. Of these, four are considered levels of ‘abstraction,’ i.e. levels of content which are not available in the picture but must be abstracted by the viewer against the background of previous knowledge and experience. The abstract level in art criticism refers to colours, lines, geometrical shapes, and so on. The role of words (signs) is to keep the story moving. Words (signs) are a semiotic creation and make expressions a reality. Lexical innovation, compounding, onomatopoeic expression, and syntactic simplification help simplify the language used in comics.

Words as signs consist of the signifier and the signified in the Saussurian sense (Chandler, 2007). Strictly speaking, this definition is applicable to the linguistic sign only. In the case of a non-linguistic sign, the signifier may not be an audio image, but visual, tactile image involving other senses. Here too, the sign has to be accompanied by an immediate signified concept to have semiotic relevance. There are a number of signs without a natural or logical relation with the object or idea denoted by it. In comics, linguistic signs like *Banta Dhar* or *Maha Banta* or *Gulup* do not have any direct or natural relationship with the object or idea they denote. Still, they create an authentic picture for the readers.

Objectives of the Study

This study has the following objectives:

- To analyse the linguistic devices (lexicalization process) used to make comics an interesting read.
- To highlight the semiotics of colours used to make comics appealing. (Since the pictures are black and white, the colours are not visible. They have to be imagined through the text)

Methodology

The data were collected from different Hindi comics using the library method. The first step was searching for the appropriate material (Hindi comics of our interest like *Chacha Chaudhary*, *Billu-Pinki*, *Phantom*, etc.), second by observing the verbal messages conveyed through the process of lexicalization and third by observing the visual messages conveyed through the special use of colours in these comics. The collected data was analysed descriptively based on the semiotics.

Findings and Discussion

The findings on the lexicalization process and semiotics of colours in comics are discussed in this section.

Lexicalization Process

Lexicalization is a process of adding words, set phrases, or word patterns to the lexicons of a language to express a concept. Here, we show five lexicalization processes, namely, reduplication and echo words, lexical innovations, Rhythm Patterns, Onomatopoeia, and compounding.

Reduplication and Echo Words

Reduplication is a word-formation process in which meaning is expressed by repeating all or part of a word. Reduplication and echo words connect two or more words through the similarity of sounds. This similarity of sounds draws the readers' attention, and persuades them to think of their possible connection, comparison and contrast. The role of reduplication and echo word in word formation, foregrounds the idea and reinforces the meaning. For example:

tirgit tirgit d^ham 'sound of an object falling slowly'
ye c^hoti m^ot, ki a:ʈʈba:zi 'a small dangerous play'

ḍʰi:re ḍʰi:re ḍono ba:lak ‘slowly both the kids’
apni apni jageh par ‘in their own places’
apne apne dʰang se palne lage ‘getting raised in their own way’
ḍeṭye kanya viḍyut,prava: ‘very sharp and brilliant girl’
ba:r ba:r socne lagi ‘started thinking again and again’

The emphasis on the common words or newly coined words involved in reduplication enhances the communicative effect of these expressions.

Lexical Innovations

Lexical innovations bear semantic content. Yet, in comics, such expressions do not bear semantic content as a function of the conventions of meaning in force in the language, since they are not part of its lexicon (Gasparri, 2022). The lexical innovations found in the language of comics distinguishes it from other varieties of language. Even a cursory glance would confirm that a restricted set of vocabulary is employed in almost all Hindi comics. For example:

banta: ḍʰa:r– su:par kama:ndo–maha: banta: ‘power-most powerful-most powerful’
manṭr ḍand–kʰadak–a:ka:f ma:rg ‘A kind of curse/weapon-a sound- sky line’
yogik u:rja:– u:rja: ḍwa:r–swarn pa:f ‘internal strength- door of power-very fast’
fa:itar plem ‘fighter plane’

An effort to use a limited set of vocabulary sometimes leads to some awkward/unique expressions. For example:

ja:ḍui mu:rkʰ ‘idiotic behaviour’
maha: u:rja: kavacʰ ‘very protective shield’
fakṭma:n jingga:lu ‘powerful Jhingalu (Name of a person)’
a:ka:f ma:rg ‘sky line’

These expressions are coined to create special effects.

Rhythm Pattern

Rhythm is more prominent in poetry than in prose. Comic writers also use it for various purposes. For instance, the most frequently used iambic rhythm in the following examples hastens the movement of objects with a feeling of naturalness.

sansana:ya: hawa: me mugḍar sar..... ‘Rolling the weapon in the air’
ham ca:r nahī a:tʰ ca:nḍ laga:ṭe ‘we make something most beautiful’
ham hāĩ takla: toli ‘we are a group of balds’

Onomatopoeia

Another frequently used process of lexicalization is onomatopoeia which enhances the readers' experience of the creative world of mystery. Onomatopoeia is defined as a resemblance between what a piece of language sounds like and what it refers to. Very often, by using the right sounds, comics are able to evoke the required atmosphere and the proper mood. For example:

galap-k^hanak-san-san 'sounds of falling something in water'

sen sen-tarak-j^hen 'sounds of wind'

t^hak t^hak-patak-c^hanak 'sounds of walking'

ḡ^ham-k^harak 'sound of falling something'

The predominance of sounds in coined expressions recreates the thunder and turmoil of the mystery land, and makes the readers' experience almost a reality.

Compounding

Compounding is the morphological operation that puts together two free forms to give rise to a new word. The importance of compounding stems from the fact that there are probably no languages without compounding, and in some languages (e.g. Chinese), it is the major source of new word formation. A greater inventiveness can also be noticed in compounds used in Hindi comics. For example:

swarn pa:f 'very fast'

u:rja: ḡwa:r 'door of power'

manṭr ḡand 'curse/weapon'

candraka:l ke ha:t^h se manṭr ḡand c^hu:t kar ni:ce ja: giri

'a kind of weapon has fallen down from the hands of Chandrakaal'

yu:~ samaj^h lo ki ṭa:nṭrik fakṭiya:~ goli hāi or manṭr ḡand bandu:k

'consider as if the negative powers are bullets and weapon used for cursing is a gun'

Most of these expressions do not require an explanation. They are coined to suit the temperament of tiny tots who get attracted to comic situations and fantasy. Archaic expressions also mark the lexical innovation in Hindi comics. A number of new words and expressions like

rakṭ sarovar ‘‘ ‘river of blood’

gr̥i:fu:l bʰe:rvɪ ‘‘ ‘a goddess associated with Mahavidyas’

brama:nd ‘universe’

Semiotics of Colours

We do not need to make a long argument to see that colours do function as signs, and that by means of colours many things, alien to the readers, are represented. We remember and identify things through their colours. The comic creator uses colours to attract the audience and engage them.

Picture 1: *Yellow the Colour of Positivity*



[Source: Pinki aur Kutkut Gilhari]

The yellow colour around Pinki and her upright full of life demeanour in picture-1 symbolises ‘joy and happiness’. Yellow is the colour of the sun, smiley faces and sunflowers and is iconically associated with warmth (Caviano, 1998). It’s a happy, youthful colour, full of hope and positivity. Yellow is a bright colour that is often used to present positivity in Hindi comics.

Picture 2: *Green the Colour of Disgust*



[Source: Chacha Chaudhary and Corona Virus]

In comics, green colour is usually associated with disgust. In a similar manner, the colour green has been used to represent: the virus in picture-2.

Picture 3: *Red the Colour of Anger*



[Source: Pinki aur Kutkut]

Picture 4: *Red the Colour of Anger*

[Source: Pinki aur Chor Sipahi]

When psychological associations make assignment of meaning to colours, the relationships are often based on similarities, as in the case of red with fire or rage (ibid). In the pictures given above (pictures 3 and 4), the red colour on Pinki's cheeks symbolizes anger.

Picture 5: *Blue the Colour of Negativity*

[Source: Chacha Chaudhary aur Deadly Dan]

Picture 6: *Blue the Colour of Negativity*



[Source: Chacha Chaudhary aur Jadugarni]

Blue colour is associated with coldness (ibid), but in Hindi comics like Chacha Chaudhary and others blue colour has a different connotation. It is mostly associated with some negative power and represents sorrow, and depression. Deadly Dan (Picture 5) and the magician Jadugarni (Picture 6) are in blue, representing the hostile powers against Chacha Chaudhary.

Conclusion

Everything discussed above makes comics an interesting read and helps young learners to learn a new language. The grammar used in these comics has ill-formed sentences. Yet, we cannot deny that these sentences are sufficient to convey the meaning more effectively as it goes parallel with visualization. Thus, these comics can be seen as important pedagogical devices. Effective pedagogical approaches help students achieve learning outcomes, develop advanced concepts and abilities and realize their full potential. We do not claim that the use of Hindi comics in language classrooms is a new idea but we do believe it is an innovative strategy for enriching language pedagogy. It is expected that

its use in the class will make the learners more interested and help in learning Hindi in an enjoyable and effective way.

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