



## A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Visual Poem “N.E.W.S. of Travellers”

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**Abstract:** Since its publication in 1972, the visual poem “N.E.W.S. OF TRAVELLERS” has been translated into many languages and aroused great concern and interest as well as many comments. This paper will elaborate on its linguistic features from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis. The adoption of image, voice and text intensifies its inner implication, expresses and enriches its connotation, creates multiple visual and acoustic effects, and reflects multimodal meanings of the poem.

**Keywords:** multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), visual poetry, Glen Phillips, “N.E.W.S. OF TRAVELLERS”

### 1. MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (MDA)

With the wide spread and use of computers in social life and various industries as well as the soaring development of modern science and technology, human society has entered into information age characterized by the integration of digital technology, multimedia technology and network technology. The traditional single communication via language changes a lot, hence multimodal discourse came into being. Modality is a medium of mutual communication. Man communicates with each other through five senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. Correspondingly, there appear five communicative modalities —modality of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. In communication, if we use one above mentioned sense, it is called mono-modal, when different senses are involved, it creates multimodal.

The term multimodality is used in different fields of language study and different disciplines to refer to different concepts. It can refer to the physical modalities such as seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, etc. Multimodality is also used to refer to the combination of different semiotic qualities of a physical representation, such as the use of color, font size or pictures in a magazine article or a children’s drawing (e.g. Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Mono-modality refers to one type of mode, generally the language, while multimodality refers to the involvement of more than two types of modes. Kress and Van Leeuwen (Van Leeuwen 2005:281) believe that image, color, typography, music and other visual modes can fulfill the three functions (namely the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions) as language. But no matter in which field the term is used, the common theme between all of these uses is the premise that communication is conveyed through more than one ‘channel’, or more than one signal. As ZHANG Delu put it, multimodal discourse refers to a communicative phenomenon of combining various senses of hearing, sight and touch together with means of language, image, sound

and action as well as sign. (ZHANG Delu, 2009). According to Zhu Yongsheng (2007), there are five types of multimodality, namely, visual modality, auditory modality, tactile modality, olfactory modality and gustatory modality.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is an emerging field in communication and information science. It emerged in the 1990s with Kress & Van Leeuwen as its representatives. It studies images, sound, music and gesture. It can focus on anything from color, typography, and layout in newspapers, advertisements, and websites, to interior design, architecture, costume, product design, packaging. It involves the studies of facial expressions, postures, actions, images, pictures, tables, music, intonation, web, simultaneous interpretation, PowerPoint, font size, composition, sound sensation, feelings and animation. Multimodal discourse offers a theoretical framework and a new perspective for the study of communication and expression of discourses in the modern world. MDA is to analyze and integrate the representational, interactive and the textual meaning realized by the different semiotic modes.

## **2. VISUAL POETRY**

Visual poetry is also called pictorial poetry or concrete poetry. It can be defined as poetry that is meant to be seen—poetry that presupposes a viewer as well as a reader. It is conceived not only as literary works but also as works of art. Whether the visual elements form a rudimentary pattern or whether they constitute a highly sophisticated design, they transform the poem into a picture (Bohn, P.15). According to Xia Riguang, visual poetry disconnects normal order of sentences, changes the normal arrangements of verses, isolates and highlights the visual features of poetry (Xia Riguang, 2003:3). It breaks with conventional poems' rhymes, structures and writing patterns, integrating multiple modes of images, texts and cartoons (Xia Riguang, 2003:3). By combining the art of time and space, it appears novel, creative and unique, and causes a great impact and a deep impression on readers' visual sensation. Its visual and audio effects are far more than what words in conventional poems can express. Using multimodal discourse to analyze visual poetry provides a new perspective for poem appreciation and comprehension.

## **3. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE WA POET GLEN PHILLIPS**

Born in Southern Cross in 1936, Australia, Dr. Glen Phillips has taught in colleges and universities for over 50 years and is now an Honorary Professor at Edith Cowan University (Perth) and Director of the Landscape and Language Centre. He is a patron, founder, life-member and first chairperson of the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers Centre. He writes poetry and fiction and is a noted reader of his work nationally and internationally. He was a founder of the highly successful *Poetry in Motion* performance group in the 1980s and is represented in over 25 anthologies and some 50 Australian and international journals. His poetry has been broadcast on national radio and television and translated into several languages and has won popularity in many countries including China, Italy, Japan, Singapore, America and Britain. To date he has published 30 poetry collections, including: *Six Seasons: Poems of Australian and China* (2012), *A Show of Colours: Poems of the Yilgarn* (2011), *Red Shift Cosmology* (2010), *Shanghai Suite* (2009) and *Singing Granites* (2008 with Anne Born). He co-edited *Lines in the Sand* (2008) and John Kinsella's landscape lectures in *Contrary Rhetoric* (2008). His newest books of poems are, *Heilongjiang Summers, Etruscanini, Dugite Country, Kandimalal, Morning Star to Evening Star, A Suite of Rooms* and *Nanjing Threnody* (all 2013) and *Gold in Granite, Dryandra Dreaming* and *The Secret of Love* (all 2014). *Over the Hills & Far away: Poems of the Wheatbelt* (2016) and *Crouching Tigers, Hidden Dragons: Chinese Poems* (2017). In 2018 he published *In the Hollow of the Land: Collected Poems*. In 2019 he published *Primavariants* with US poet John Ryan and in 2020 *Far and Wide*, his first short story collection (in English and Chinese).

Also in 2020 he again published with John Ryan in the USA their collection *Seeing Trees* (Pinyon). He’s been an ASA member since 1970 and FAWWA ‘Fellow’ since 1969 and is a life member of the FAW, KSP Foundation and Peter Cowan Writers Centre. Themes of his poems center on love, story telling, philosophy, ecological environment, customs and cultures of Australia, China and Italy.

Glen has had published some 1000 poems and more than 40 short stories, most of which have also been translated into Chinese. He has completed a number of joint projects with writers, translators, composers, choreographers and painters. He has received prizes, awards and commissions for his work and has taught Australian Literature and Writing for the past 60 years in Australia and many other countries, most recently for extended periods in China.

**4. MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF VISUAL POEM “N.E.W.S. OF TRAVELLERS”**

This visual poem remains poet’s most published and most translated poem!

**“N.E.W.S. OF TRAVELLERS”**

they at the four-fiNgered board  
 where four roads meet pause  
 to ease their burdened ache

|  |   |
|--|---|
| i<br>came out<br>of darkness<br>briefly but with<br>kindling joy. the dry<br><b>W</b> ood blazed well, branches<br>burnt at a touch.<br>warm them, i<br>into darkness<br>went. | you<br>came to me<br>out of the light.<br>lambent you were with<br>the light; you lit the dark-<br>ness in me. When you left mE<br>did you depart with the<br>wounds of knowledge<br>and with power<br>bless'd? |
|--|---|

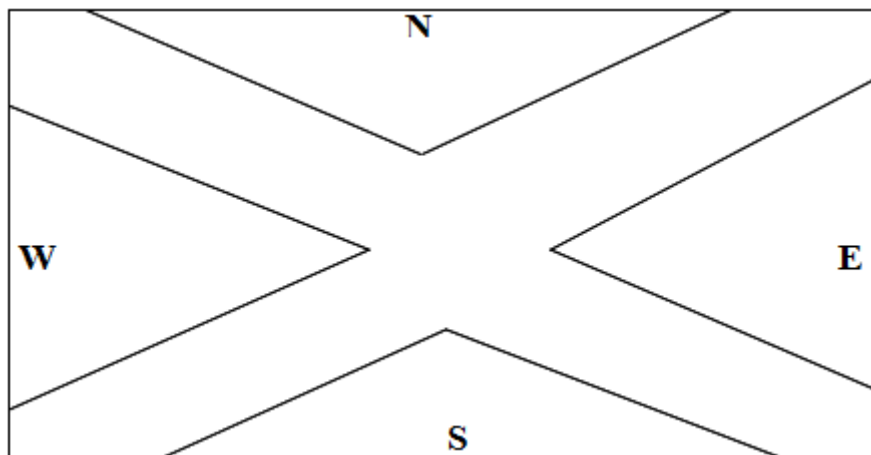
taking  
 their travelled  
 tales upon their shoulders;  
 not to pass thiS way again.

This visual poem was written in 1972 to reflect a process of love and shows the poet’s peculiar outlook on love: encounter, companion, and departure. In form, the poet uses irregular capital and small letters, irregular punctuation, special syntax and unique typography to create a vivid visual effect. The integration of the art of painting into the poem intensifies its inner implication, expresses and enriches its connotation, creates multiple visual and audio effects, and reflects multimodal meanings of the poem.

From the perspective of visual modality, its typography is unique. The whole poem is divided into four stanzas arranged into four units, including the upper one, the bottom one, the left one and the right unit respectively. Put it on a map, it would be four directions of North, South, West and East. Each stanza is arranged skillfully in the shape of a triangle. Varying length of each line in each stanza makes four units form the letter X, on the whole, it looks like a crossroad. It was intended to take the

shape of the intersection of four roads in the form of an X. But the roads were left as blanks between the surrounding words, which formed the interstices. It was a love poem about two who briefly meet but must continue separate and alone, both thinking of what the experience has meant to him or her. The word ‘news’ contained the initial letters of the four points of the compass and that these four letters were correctly set in place in the poem in capitals to highlight them.

The deliberate typography creates a spectacular effect on visibility and connotation, and brings a perfect combination of content and form. Through typography, the poet compares it to a crossroad of life, a crossroad of love and a crossroad for a traveler. If its typography were arranged in the conventional linear left-to-right sequence, it would lose the special meaning of its visual effects, lacking imaginary space. Based on my narration, a structure of the poem can be shown as follows:



Title of the poem attracts readers’ attention and is endowed with new meaning and special connotation. “N.E.W.S” is the initials of four directions of North, East, West and South. The capital letter “N” appears in the first line of the first stanza, right lying in the “North” of the map. Similarly the capital letter “S” appears in the last line of the bottom stanza, right lying in the “South”; the capital letter “W” appears first in the longest line of the left stanza, denoting “South”, while “E” appears last in the longest line of the right stanza, pointing to “East”. The arrangement of the four letters coincide with their corresponding directions, representing poet’s pursuit of ideal syntax. The combination of image and text creates unprecedented visual and meaning effects which can not be reached by text itself.

This poem uncapitalized all the letters except the four initials of “N.E.W.S” to highlight the direction and emphasize the uncertainty of traveling. At the same time, “N.E.W.S” can be used as a pun to denote both directions and news from lovers or travelers. Thus, the four capitalized letters are made more noticeable. Travelers become 'no status' people so they are smaller in the universe even than usual.

In “N.E.W.S. OF TRAVELLERS”, the poet adopts e.e. cummings’s method of using small “i”. Let’s trace it back to its original meaning. Cummings used the small “i” originally to refer to those people outside his social sphere rebelling against the middle-class style of living, and also those of humble position like his servant Sam. But later he began to subvert all the conventions of punctuation, capitalization, and syntax. The small “i” had further significance. Cummings had been small himself as a boy, and even when he attained his full height of five feet eight-and-a-half inches, he felt small alongside his father who was six feet two. By acknowledging his littleness with the lower-case “i”, he became different, in fact unique, therefore making himself outstanding. It was a symbolic procedure

that was to develop into a pattern of behavior and eventually to manifest itself in multiple ways, social, political and artistic (Kennedy, p.175-204).

Here the lower-case pronoun “i” implies that “i” may be you, may be poet himself, may be any small potato in the vast world, or may be any traveler or wanderer in life. Small “i” brings readers closer to the poem, putting them in the poem itself, causing readers’ emotional resonance. Compared with the boundless universe and endless life journey, “i” am small and insignificant.

By varying the length of each line, the poet effectively adjusts the poetic rhythm, certain key words setting up the rhythmic form. Alliteration “w” of “Wood” and “well”, “b” of “blazed”, “branches” and “burnt”, “l” of “light”, “lambent” and “lit” not only draws readers’ attention to those key words starting with the same letter, but also sets up another kind of rhythmic pattern counterpointing the syllabic rhythms. The syllabic rhythm in the top part of the poem is anapaestic, the left hand centre part is iambic, the right hand part is more anapaestic, the bottom part is mixed iambic/anapaestic.

The pace of the lines is controlled by the way the poet uses long and short words so that some lines are like a man walking and others like a dog running. The poet creates these speeds 'by ear' or almost instinctively according to the meaning of the poem. This is the acoustic modality. We can see that the left and right parts have a slow pacing effect by using long words and phrases, which indicates that after travelers or lovers meet each other, they have time to accompany each other and communicate with each other heart-by-heart, while the top and bottom lines move quite swiftly, and readers read or speak more quickly, which denotes that travelers or lovers meet and part swiftly in their journey of life or journey of love. In short, they come into the crossroads quickly, rest briefly and then depart reluctantly but quite quickly once they are loaded up. Thus the integration of visual modality and auditory modality manifests multimodal meaning of the poem.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The poet adopts peculiar typography to create a multiple layer of meanings of crossroads of life or journey, resulting in noticeable visual effects. Mixture of capitalized letters of “N.E.W.S.” and small letter “i” highlights the direction and theme, at the same time belittles travelers as 'no status' people in the universe. The combination of multimodalities of image, sound and text causes multiple layers of visual and acoustic meanings of this visual poem.

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