

# Multimodal Texts for Multi-purpose Advertising

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## Abstract

Discourse analysis of printed texts has traditionally focused on the written word, and has paid little, if any, attention to the role of accompanying images in constructing meaning. However, in increasing numbers of texts, particularly those used in advertising, aspects of visual design, including the use of colour, images, and typography combine with written language to create a semiotic whole. The ways in which texts are perceived by their readers are inevitably influenced by these visual elements: that, indeed, is the purpose of their inclusion. This paper takes one such multimodal text as an example and analyses the ways in which visual and verbal elements interact to influence its intended audiences.

**Keywords :** multimodal texts, advertising, discourse analysis

## Introduction

Advertising is no longer confined to advertisements, if indeed it has ever been. As advertising has become increasingly pervasive in modern capitalist societies, the extent to which advertisements can and do transcend genre boundaries has also become apparent. It is no longer possible to avoid television advertising simply by getting up to put on the kettle during a commercial break, as the once sharp distinction between programme and commercial has become ever more blurred, with ads by now having thoroughly infiltrated the programmes themselves. Popular television shows are sponsored by, or 'produced in association with', a particular product; Olympic medal winners are interviewed in front of a wall of 'official partner' logos; and product placement in movies and television dramas, although dating from the 1940s, has increased enormously in recent years (DeLorme & Reid, 1999). Neither is this genre slippage confined to the broadcast media, with the phenomena of *infotorials*, news articles publicising particular charities (Bennett & Gabriel, 1998), and *advertorials*, commercial messages written in the style of news articles (Erjavec, 2004), common in newspapers and magazines. Cook (2001) points out that there remain legal and social restrictions on the extent to which advertising can integrate itself into other forms of discourse, yet characterises its ongoing attempts to do so as 'a war of attrition... which

advertising will eventually win' (p. 224).

Not all advertising, of course, is produced with the goal of selling a product or service: alternative functions include recruitment, promotion of public health, and encouraging charity donations. Cook (2001) thus proposes that the defining feature of an advertisement as a discourse genre is that it seeks to change the behaviour of those who view it, whether that change be to buy a new product, stop smoking, or apply for a new job. While product and non-product advertising may share this underlying goal, other features set them apart as distinct sub-genres; the characteristic discourse features of a job advertisement, for example, will inevitably be quite distinct from those of a washing powder commercial. Yet even within these sub-genres, a degree of crossover may occur: it is entirely possible that a single advertisement may simultaneously target more than one audience and promote more than one behavioural change. Thus, according to Esposito (2011), 'any analysis of advertisements presents manifold challenges due to their ability to draw upon various genres usually at the same time, to convey their messages through a combination of language and imagery' (p. 213).

## 1. Multimodal text analysis

Hyland (2009) notes that in recent years the pre-eminence of written text in print communication has been increasingly eroded, and that across a wide range of genres, the use of visual images has become an integral part of text production. Van Leeuwen (2003) goes as far as to claim that all discourse is inherently multimodal, as even a text devoid of explicitly visual features will utilise a specific typeface or style of handwriting and be arranged in a particular way on the page. Furthermore, modern technology now allows anyone with even minimal computer literacy to produce high quality multimodal documents combining language, images and graphics in the comfort of their own home at very little cost. Given that the integration of verbal and visual modes requires the reader to 'perform different semiotic work, offering different entry points to the page' (Hyland, 2009, p. 60), it is therefore somewhat surprising that discourse analysts have focussed their attentions predominantly on text-based analysis, marginalising the role of images and graphics in constructing meaning. Perhaps the reasons are in part practical: as Cook (2001) notes, the logistical limitations of textbooks and journals may make it difficult to accurately reproduce multimodal texts. However, this failure to recognise that most discourse is, in fact, multimodal, serves to artificially prioritise certain modes at the expense of others; to achieve a 'fuller view of how humans communicate', a broader perspective on discourse is thus required (LeVine & Scollon, 2004).

In the world of advertising, capturing the reader's attention is at a premium, and as a result multimodal texts have long been the norm, with written-mode only texts now largely confined to the Classified Ads section of local newspapers. In the creation of a multimodal text, both images and words may be utilised in order to generate maximum impact. The particular ways in which these are combined will be determined largely by the motives of the author, with key points to

consider being at whom the text in question is aimed and for what purposes. Without an awareness of this, coming to an accurate understanding of how and why the text was constructed is difficult, if not impossible. The remainder of this paper looks at one example of how, through a blending of genre features, a single multimodal text can be used to achieve multiple goals. The text analysed is a job advertisement placed by the charitable organisation Anti-Slavery International in the November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010 edition of the *Guardian Weekly*, and is shown in Appendix One.

## **2. Analysis and discussion**

### **2.1 Background information**

#### **2.1.1 The *Guardian Weekly***

The *Guardian Weekly* is part of the Guardian Media Group, a British media organisation. It is, as the name suggests, published weekly, and is an international newspaper aimed mainly at British expatriates. Much of the content is drawn from its sister publication, *The Guardian*, which is a daily broadsheet newspaper known for its left of centre political orientation.

#### **2.1.2 Anti-Slavery International**

Anti-Slavery International is a UK based charity which campaigns against slavery, human trafficking and bonded labour worldwide. According to its latest annual review, Anti-Slavery International had a total income of just over £2 million in 2010, of which almost a quarter was generated by individual donations.

### **2.2 Text analysis**

Before focusing in detail on the features of the text, it is useful to consider its likely target audience. Given that we are looking at a job advertisement, this may seem a fatuous question; however, there are reasons to suppose that the intended readership extends well beyond potential candidates for the position advertised. This position (Africa Programme Co-ordinator) involves responsibility for a major charity's operations across a whole continent, and likely offers opportunities to influence the organisation's work at both an operational and policy level. In employment terms, the field of human rights is a competitive one, and it seems improbable that Anti-Slavery International would be faced with a shortage of suitable candidates for this prestigious and influential position. The cost of a colour advertisement occupying a third of a page in a well-known international newspaper could probably not be justified were filling the vacancy the sole goal of this text: advertising online, or in specialist publications, would surely be more cost effective methods of recruitment. Features of the text itself support the idea that in fact it has a dual role, advertising not only the job vacancy to potential candidates, but also the organisation's cause and vision to a wider audience.

The text comprises five sections: Anti-Slavery International's logo and slogan in the top left, a

description of the organisation's goals and activities below this, details of the position advertised at the bottom, a photograph in the top right corner, and contact details in the bottom right. Each of these parts has a specific role to play.

### 2.2.1 Logo and slogan



Figure 1. Logo and slogan

The first of the two visual images is the Anti-Slavery International logo, a clenched, up-raised fist holding a key, accompanied on the right by the words *anti-slavery*, and below by the slogan *today's fight for tomorrow's freedom* (Figure 1). The raised fist is an image redolent with powerful associations: it is a gesture most familiar from its use by the Black Panthers in the USA, but one which has been adopted by a wide range of resistance movements, up to and including the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations of 2011 (Cushing, 2011), invoking feelings of strength in numbers and the power of communal action to overcome oppression. The addition of a key claims this general image for the more specific goal of the organisation; the key, of course, being a symbol of liberation from the metaphorical (or perhaps still, in some cases, literal) chains of slavery. Chains, moreover, are the image most readily associated with slavery: by instead choosing the fist and key the designers of the advertisement have chosen to construct the text as a discourse of liberation and empowerment, not of victimhood or oppression. This decision is further reflected in other elements of the advertisement.

### 2.2.2 Description of Anti-Slavery International's goals and activities

At least 12 million people worldwide are trapped in slavery today. As the world's oldest international human rights organisation, Anti-Slavery International is at the forefront of the fight to eradicate this abuse, working with partners in every continent.

Anti-Slavery International seeks to implement a multi-level approach to eradicating the causes and consequences of contemporary slavery. We work with partners to undertake measures including advocacy for policy and practice change, development of education projects for children vulnerable to slavery, unionisation and investigations to draw political and public attention to ongoing abuses of slavery across the globe.

Figure 2. Organisation description

The linguistic features of the first two paragraphs (reproduced in Figure 2) serve to reinforce and expand upon the themes suggested by the logo and slogan. Firstly, there is a clear effort to stress the fact that slavery is a twenty-first century problem, as in the public mind it may largely be perceived as an issue from the history books, rather than a present day concern. The language of the advertisement deliberately confronts this misperception: most obviously in the slogan *today's fight for tomorrow's freedom*, but also through the repetition of *today* and use of *contemporary* and *ongoing* in the subsequent text. At the same time, by pointing out that Anti-Slavery International is the world's oldest human rights organisation, the reader is invited to make the connection between slavery's past and present. While some may have little detailed knowledge of its current extent, few *Guardian Weekly* readers would be unaware of slavery's historical resonance. While slavery has been, and still is, practised in a variety of forms and locations, it is most clearly associated in the public mind with the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the US south. Somewhat ironically, it is therefore this historical reference which lends the issue immediacy, and as a result linking the organisation's current work with its historical origins increases the saliency of the message.

The second theme running through this section is the conceptualisation of Anti-Slavery International's work as a fight. This begins with the logo: even more fundamental than its suggestion of joint struggle, the clenched fist symbolises fighting, and is a gesture familiar to us all from childhood onwards. The word *fight* itself, present in the slogan, is repeated again in the first paragraph; moreover, *eradicate*, *abuse*, and *working with partners* all appear twice in the text – language chosen both to couch the organisation's work in terms of a confrontation, and to invite the reader to take sides.

### 2.2.3 Details of the position advertised

#### **Africa Programme Co-ordinator**

£28,000 - £31,000

Leading our Africa Programme, you will be responsible for developing and implementing anti-slavery operations across Africa. You will have a strong background in human rights or development work, with experience of using international human rights standards and mechanisms, networking and working closely with non-governmental, governmental and other organisations within Africa. You will have excellent communications and project management skills.

As a member of Anti-Slavery International's Programmes and Advocacy Team, you will contribute to the strategic development of the organisation.

**Figure 3. Job details**

The third element of the advertisement (reproduced in Figure 3), that giving the details of the job itself, is perhaps the only part which is clearly aimed solely at those interested in working for Anti-Slavery International. The emotive language of the previous section is absent here; this paragraph is written in typical 'HR-speak', following the standard pattern of the genre in choosing

the directness of *you will* constructions four times. For example, the sentence 'You will have excellent communications and project management skills' immediately stands out as being typical of the genre. It is difficult to imagine it being used in any context but a job advertisement; even an internal company memo relating to the same position, for example, would more likely be phrased as 'We need someone with excellent communications and project management skills', or 'Excellent communications and project management skills are essential for this position'.

#### 2.2.4 The photograph



Figure 4. Photograph

The photograph in the top right corner of the advertisement (Figure 4) is in some ways its most interesting element. The first point to note is what it is not: somewhat surprisingly it does not depict someone working in conditions of slavery, bonded labour, or, in fact, doing any kind of work at all; rather, the photograph shows two girls of primary school age sitting at a desk in a classroom. While they are not exactly smiling for the camera, neither looks obviously unhappy or in any way distressed. Why, then, was this image selected, when, given the nature of the organisation's work, photographs depicting victims of slavery must surely have been available? Firstly, the visual and linguistic features of the text already discussed would seem to indicate that Anti-Slavery International is seeking to avoid presenting the people it helps as victims (note also the total absence of the word *slave* from the text); moreover, to include a picture of someone trapped in slavery may leave the organisation vulnerable to accusations of exploitation. This particular photograph was perhaps chosen for what it can suggest, not what it depicts.

Rather than being clearly framed by any kind of border, the edges of the photograph merge gradually into the surrounding black background. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p.

203), 'absence of framing stresses group identity', and the blurring of the photograph with the rest of the advertisement may thus be intended to integrate the image of the girls with the remainder of the text, rather than positioning them as distinct and separate from the world of the reader by use of a clear border. Furthermore, the gradual blending of the photograph's colours with the black background creates an image of darkness closing in on the girls in the picture. It is surely no accident that one of the most striking features of the photograph is the shafts of sunlight falling across the two children; the implicit suggestion being that without the (financial) assistance of the reader the encroaching darkness, representing the threat of slavery, will soon extinguish this light.

In addition to the way it has been framed, aspects of the photograph itself are crucial in establishing an imagined relationship between viewer and subject. Rather than a photograph of an entire class, it is significant that one focusing on only two children was chosen, personalising the connection between viewer and subject. This personal connection is strengthened by the fact that the children are looking at the camera. A picture, such as this one, in which the people represented look directly at the viewer, creates a 'visual form of direct address' in which the subject of the photograph demands something from the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, p. 117). What is demanded is context dependent: the direct gaze of a politician may be asking for your trust (and of course your vote), a sports star your admiration, a model your desire. In this case, it seems unlikely that the purpose of the girls' gaze is to say to the viewer 'Please apply for this position with Anti-Slavery International'. The demand made on the viewer by this particular gaze is a financial one, and the intended audience the general readership of the *Guardian Weekly*, not only the jobseekers among them. Furthermore, the angle of the photograph reinforces the impact of the implied demand: the picture was not taken head-on, but from a slightly oblique angle, and the children are thus turning their heads to look at the camera. Compared with a head-on shot, this creates the impression that they have made an active choice to look at you, the viewer, which in turn has the effect of making the demand harder to ignore.

### 2.2.5 Contact details

For an application pack, email [jobs@antislavery.org](mailto:jobs@antislavery.org)  
 send a SAE to Anti-Slavery International, Broomgrove  
 Road, London SW9 9TL, or go to  
[www.antislavery.org](http://www.antislavery.org)  
 Closing date: 10.00am, 29 November 2010.  
 Interview date: 9 December 2010.  
 Anti-Slavery International is a registered  
 Charity number 1049160.

**Figure 5. Contact details**

Finally, while the contact details (reproduced in Figure 5) in the bottom right of the text

appear at first sight to be directed purely at job applicants, even this may not in fact be the case. The website address printed here, [www.antislavery.org](http://www.antislavery.org), is the URL for the general homepage of the charity's website. As the job itself is advertised on a specific page of the site, it would have been perfectly possible to print the exact URL leading to the online advertisement; choosing not to do so further suggests that the advertisement was taken out for the dual purposes of filling the vacancy and publicising the organisation's cause.

### 2.2.6 Macro features of the text

Van Leeuwen (2004) compares the blending of image and text in multimodal discourse to that of instruments in an orchestra, noting that it is in combination that the verbal and visual become a single communicative act. Neither image nor text is experienced in isolation from the other (Cook, 2001; Goddard, 1998), and while a consideration of individual components is a necessary element of multimodal discourse analysis, it must, therefore, be complemented by a perspective on the text as a semantic and stylistic whole.

In creating a multimodal text, three principles of spatial composition apply: the information value ascribed to each element through their relative positioning, the degree of salience of the elements, and the ways in which they are or are not divided from one another (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In particular, the role the first of these principles plays in the overall composition of the Anti-Slavery International advertisement serves to further highlight its wider role beyond that of recruitment.

The perceived information value of a particular element is influenced by both its vertical and horizontal positioning, with upper/lower positioning representing 'Ideal/Real', and left/right positioning 'Given/New' information respectively (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In the Anti-Slavery International advertisement, the two young girls studying in primary school clearly represent the Ideal, as does the organisation's goal of 'eradicating the causes and consequences of contemporary slavery'. Thus, both are found in the upper section of the text, with the lower occupied by information belonging to the sphere of the Real. What this positioning seems to be telling us is that it is through the real world actions of readers in response to the information in the lower section, whether that be applying for the post described or offering financial support via the website address listed, that the idealised scenario of the upper section can be realised.

Less obvious is how this text fits into Kress and van Leeuwen's Given/New framework of analysis: at first glance there appears no clear division between new and given information here. Yet by considering the meaning of this terminology in more detail, its relevance to the text becomes apparent. Kress and van Leeuwen define the Given as 'commonsensical, self-evident' and the New as 'problematic, contestable, the information at issue' (2006, p. 181). That slavery anywhere in the world is unacceptable could certainly, in modern Britain, be described as a shared assumption too obvious to need spelling out (Cook, 2001); equally, it is commonsensical that there are charities out there which need staff. What is at issue here is the personal connection of these Givens to the



individual reader, and it is thus the elements of the text which make this connection that are placed on the right, and thereby positioned as New. As noted in section 2.2.4, the photograph brings the issue of slavery from the realm of the abstract to that of the personal: the direct gaze of two individuals more powerful and immediate than anything that facts and figures could achieve. The contact details below the photograph, though on the surface merely functional, also provide a personal, and thus New link: what is 'problematic, contestable, [and]... at issue' here is how **you**, the individual reader, can make your contribution to the fight against slavery. To reinforce the role of the Given/New dimension, it can be seen that reversing the left/right elements of the advertisement, as has been done in Appendix Two, creates a distinctly different type of text.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a detailed consideration of the visual and linguistic features of the advertisement is instructive in revealing both the subliminal goal of the text, and the way in which Anti-Slavery International chooses to construct its public image. While the logo, photograph, and first two paragraphs may be of interest to potential job applicants, it seems probable that the main reason for their inclusion is to attract the interest, and hopefully financial support, of a wider readership. This text, therefore, is aimed at two groups of readers and is seeking to effect two distinct and separate behavioural changes. Yet this is something which would not have been as clear from an analysis of its textual features in isolation: in a multimodal text 'all the signs present combine to determine its communicative intent' (van Leeuwen, 2004, p. 8) and as such it is only through an integrated analysis of both images and text that the multi-layered communicative function of this advertisement can be uncovered.

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Appendix One



 **anti-slavery**

**today's fight for tomorrow's freedom**

At least 12 million people worldwide are trapped in slavery today. As the world's oldest international human rights organisation, Anti-Slavery International is at the forefront of the fight to eradicate this abuse, working with partners in every continent.

Anti-Slavery International seeks to implement a multi-level approach to eradicating the causes and consequences of contemporary slavery. We work with partners to undertake measures including advocacy for policy and practice change, development of education projects for children vulnerable to slavery, unionisation and investigations to draw political and public attention to ongoing abuses of slavery across the globe.

**Africa Programme Co-ordinator**

**£28,000 – £31,000**

Leading our Africa Programme, you will be responsible for developing and implementing anti-slavery operations across Africa. You will have a strong background in human rights or development work, with experience of using international human rights standards and mechanisms, networking and working closely with non-governmental, governmental and other organisations within Africa. You will have excellent communications and project management skills.


As a member of Anti-Slavery International's Programmes and Advocacy Team, you will contribute to the strategic development of the organisation.

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**Closing date: 10.00am, 29 November 2010.**  
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Appendix Two



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