

COGS 160: The Cognition of Comics

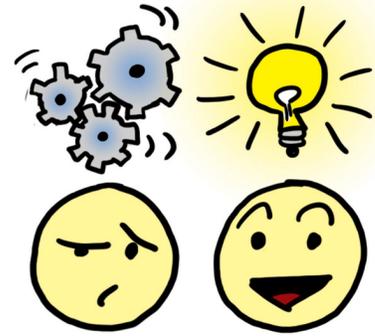
UC San Diego • Spring 2014

TuTh: 12:30 – 1:50 pm

Location: Solis 109

Instructor: Neil Cohn

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Research on how readers comprehend the visual language used in comics has grown tremendously over the past two decades. This class will discuss this growing field by examining processing and comprehension of the visual language used in comics. We will focus primarily on how the structure of this visual language is similar to the linguistic structures in spoken and signed languages, how sequences of images are understood by the mind and brain, how visual languages differ cross-culturally, and how sequences of images connect to other systems of human communication, such as language.

The class will focus on understanding the content of this research, but will also place a primary emphasis on understanding the logic and reasoning of the methodologies used in psycholinguistics research. This focus will extend to the primary project of the class: students' own research examining the structure of this visual language.

Recommended prerequisites: LIGN 118

Readings:

The Visual Language of Comics by Neil Cohn

Assorted readings on TED

Grading:

- *45% Research Project Paper* — on a topic of the student's choosing related to the structure of visual language, approved by Dr. Cohn (*Due 6/10/14*)
- *35% Writing assignments* – Weekly writing assignments as responses to the readings and/or progress reports. These are Pass/Fail. (*Due every Tuesday*)
- *15% In-class presentations* — students present their research project in the final weeks of class. Scheduling will be determined by Dr. Cohn.
- *5% In-class participation* – Students are encouraged to engage in the class discussions about our various class topics.

Class Project

The primary focus of this class is not merely to gain an understanding of what the research tells us about the cognition of visual language, but also to understand the logic and methods underlying how such research was undertaken. This research-driven focus culminates in the class project, where students will do their own research on the structure of this visual language. There are three potential types of projects that students can undertake:

Theory-driven research finds a phenomenon used in the structure of the visual language in comics and then rigorously examines how it works and what constraints operate upon it. Are there limitations to “close up panels” in storytelling? What kinds of symbols can float above people’s heads and still be meaningful? What are the constraints on conceptual metaphors in superhero comics? These types of questions can be explored in a theory-driven paper.

Corpus-driven research involves looking at the phenomena found in actual comics of the world. How do American and Japanese comics differ in the way they depict space? Have American comics changed in their narrative structure or the ways they treat multimodal word-image relationships over the past 50 years? Do page layouts differ between layouts of different comics? These sorts of questions can only be answered by carefully coding the properties of comic panels across a selection of comics.

Experimental research involves having people participate in an experiment where you then analyze their responses. What aspects of page layouts make people navigate through a page in different ways? Are there ways of constructing images that people find to be uncomfortable? These projects examine how people actually comprehend the visual language of comics.

Clearly, any research project that will be undertaken in this class needs to be accomplished within the 10+ weeks between the start of class and the final day of exams. So, I encourage you to *start thinking about this project right now!* All projects must be approved by Dr. Cohn, and all students meet with Dr. Cohn and discuss possible topics and research plans by Week 4 *at the latest*. Students should have a workable project started by **Week 4** at the *latest*. Starting earlier is **highly recommended**.

Note #1: Corpus-driven and experimental research can be undertaken by a “research team” where students cooperatively assist each other in gathering data. *This approach is highly encouraged*. However, each student will be responsible for writing and presenting their own unique subset of that larger dataset. More details about how this works will be discussed in class.

Note #2: A good theoretical paper is hard to do, so this approach is not advised except for exceptionally well-thought-through projects. Because theoretical papers do not require gathering data, they will also be graded at a higher standard than projects of other types.

Finally, this research project has the potential to contribute to the broader research literature on the cognition of comics. As will be evident throughout the class, research on the structure and cognition of comics is still in its infancy, and few papers have adequately begun addressing the important issues of this field with any rigor and seriousness. Thus, *any exceptional research done for class projects will be encouraged to be refined and submitted for publication in scientific journals*.

PROJECT PAPER grading rubric

20% - Proper formatting and copyediting

- Use of the provided templates (see TED)
- All references are cited in the text
- Reference section is properly put together
- Paper has been copyedited (no typos, grammatical mistakes)

30% - Introduction section

- Theoretical ideas are laid out clearly
- Proper references are made to previous work
- Includes thorough background research of previous work
- Explains the significance of the current study

10% - Methods section

- Adequate description of the methods involved (see each template for specification)

10% - Results section

- Adequate description of the main findings

30% - Discussion section

- Re-summary of goals of the study
- Summary in plain language of findings from the study
- Connection of results to previous work
- Discussion of significance of the findings
- Suggestions for future research

IN CLASS PRESENTATION grading rubric

Presentations in the final classes will allow you to show your work to your classmates, and provide you a chance to get feedback on your project as you move into the final stages of writing it up. These are BRIEF presentations (5 minutes!) followed by very short questions. You are allowed 4 presentation slides (PowerPoint, Keynote) *maximum*.

35% - Introduction section

- Adequate and **brief** introduction of theoretical ideas and background literature that lead to this study

15% - Methods section

- Clear and precise description of methods used to gather data/study the issue

20% - Results section

- Clear and precise description of what was found

30% - Discussion section

- Description of how the results support/deny the hypothesis, what that means for previous research, and what future directions to go

Weekly writing assignments

Each week, students will submit “progress reports” to make sure students are indeed making progress on their projects. All writing assignments will be graded pass/fail and are due within the first 10 minutes of class (submission via email is acceptable). All reports should be **typed**. Writing assignments turned in late will be commented on, but not graded. For writing assignments that involve “drafts” of your paper project, use the appropriate “templates” available on TED. *All papers **must use these templates!***

Week 2 – Areas of interest

- should identify areas of visual language research that you find to be interesting so far, including an explanation for *why* you find it interesting

Week 3 – Areas of interest

- should identify area(s) of visual language research that you find to be interesting so far, and that might be worth studying for your project, including an explanation for *why* you find it interesting (and why other people might find it interesting)

Week 4 – Topic proposal

- Should pose an issue or topic of interest, but does not need to have full details on how it will be studied yet.

Week 5 – Progress report

- Should include description of how the topic will be studied
- Should include a list of references related to other research that might be relevant

Week 6 – Progress report

- Should describe (hopefully) how this work is already underway
- Should include a list of comics being analyzed (if applicable)

Week 7 – Methods Draft

- Should write up your “methods section” of your project: What are your stimuli or materials? Who are taking your experiment? How are you going about showing evidence for your theory? Even if all of this information has not been finished, write it up in a way that can easily be changed for your final draft

Week 8 – Progress report

- Should include a status of the research project: How many books have been studied? What sort of analyses have been done yet? Interesting observations yet?

Week 9 – Introduction Draft

- Should provide a rough draft of the introduction for your paper project

Week 10 – Results Draft

- Should provide a rough draft of the results section for your paper project

SYLLABUS

For people running experiments, opportunities to gather data may be available through the UCSD Comic Book Club and a Comic Book class on campus. Please try to have experimental materials ready by around Week 6 to be able to use these opportunities.

Note: All days marked in red are subject to change, and will be determined by topics of student interest.

Week	Date	Day	Topic	Assignments
1	4/1	Tu	Visual language and class introduction	
	4/3	Th	Methods in linguistics research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn, Building a better “comic theory” 	
2	4/8	Tu	Visual Language Theory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VLOC – Chapter 1 	Areas of interest
	4/10	Th	VLT – Visual Lexicon <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VLOC – Chapter 2-3 	
3	4/15	Tu	VLT – Narrative Grammar and <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VLOC – Chapter 4 	Areas of interest
	4/17	Th	VLT– Navigational Structure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VLOC – Chapter 5 • Optional for cross-cultural: VLOC – Chapter 7-8 	
4	4/22	Tu	Attentional structure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn, Taylor-Weiner, and Grossman • Nisbett and Masuda. Culture and point of view 	Topic Proposal Due
	4/24	Th	Cognition of path actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn & Maher. The Notion of the Motion • Gross et al. Children’s Understanding of action lines 	<i>Meetings with Dr. Cohn</i>
5	4/29	Tu	Cognition of thought bubbles (and thoughts!) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn — Beyond word balloons and thought bubbles. • Forceville — Balloonics • Wellman, et al — Thought-bubbles help children with autism learn theory of mind 	Progress Report #1
	5/1	Th	Multimodal interactions (visual, bodily, verbal) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn — Structure and meaning in multiple modalities 	
6	5/6	Tu	Class Experiments! <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No readings, but complete the social science research certification (https://www.citiprogram.org) and turn in the completed pdf with your Progress Report 	Progress Report #2
	5/8	Th	Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Blending Theory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forceville — Visual representations of the idealized cognitive model of anger in the Asterix album <i>La Zizanie</i>. • Forceville — Creative Visual Duality in comics 	

			balloons <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lakoff – The contemporary theory of metaphor 	
7	5/13	Tu	<i>The relationship of language(s) and thought</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wilkins – Alternative representations of space • Nuñez and Sweetser – With the future behind them. 	Methods Draft
	5/15	Th	<i>Narrative categories, grammar, and semantics</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VLOC – Chapter 6 	
8	5/20	Tu	<i>Constituent structure in grammar</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn et al, – The grammar of visual narratives • Gernsbacher 1985 	Progress Report #3
	5/22	Th	<i>Domain generality and the neurocognition of grammar across domains (language, visual language, music)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patel 2002 	
9	5/27	Tu	<i>Expertise and fluency in visual narrative understanding</i> Nakazawa 2005	Introduction draft
	5/29	Th	In class presentations	
10	6/3	Tu	In class presentations	Results draft
	6/5	Th	In class presentations / class wrap up	
	6/10	Tu	<i>Final Project Paper due</i>	