

Colour Symbolism and Size: A Semiotic – Stylistic Critique of Visual Language in Mqapheli Mngadi’s Editorial Cartoons

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Abstract

The seems to be less research that has been done on the significance of visual language in South African cartoons so far. As an attempt to bridge this gap, the aim of this research article is to investigate the literary significance of colour and size as visual language features in Mqapheli Mngadi’s South African editorial cartoons. The study is done literary through ‘semiotic – stylistics’ to interpret the ‘visuo – textually’ examined data. The reader response theory is also adopted to aid the analysis. The findings of the study demonstrate that colour and size are used as one of the narrative techniques in Mqapheli Mngadi’s selected cartoons. These features play a significant stylistic role in assisting the cartoonist to express his ideas. While colour is used figuratively or symbolically to present hidden ideas, size is used to depict the socio – political and socio – economic power relations.

Key words: Colour symbolism, size, visual language, editorial cartoons, semiotic-stylistics, reader response theory

Introduction

There have only been a few South African languages cartoonists so far. Nanda Sooben was the only African cartoonist during the apartheid era and Mqapheli Mngadi, whose cartoons this study focuses on, is currently the only consistent African cartoonist in post-apartheid South Africa. Mngadi’s cartoons have been published daily in the isiZulu newspaper, *Isolezwe*, from 2002 to date and were also published in *Eco Witness* newspaper from 2006 to 2016. Mngadi also has six cartoon books to his name, namely *Zuma’s Road to Victory* ‘*Inzima Le Ndlela*’ (2010), *Life in*

South Africa 'Impilo Emzansi' (2011), Ukuboshwa KukaTata: Kanjani, Kephi, Nini & Isazathu? (2013), Ngithembe Bani Themba Lami? (2013), Cabanga mAfrika, Cabanga (2016), and What Tambo Did for Us (2017). As a recognised and acclaimed cartoonist in South Africa, his work deserves to be given more attention.

Cartoonists rely on both written and visual language to communication and express their ideas. Visual language can be regarded as graphical communication, and colour and size are two examples of this type of communication. So far, there seems to be no study that analyses the artistic significance of the two aspects in Mngadi's cartoons, even though there are existing studies already by Dlamini (2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c) and Mtumane & Dlamini (2020, 2023). This study is thus an attempt to cover this relatively presumed scholarly gap by critically appraising how colour and size, as visual language features, contribute to the quality of the cartoonist's cartoons. In general, Mngadi's contribution to the development of the cartoon genre, in the South African indigenous languages, has not been given the attention it deserves in academic discourse. The problem statement and significance of this research article lies on this premise.

There are some research works on visual language in cartoons that have been done on cartoons composed by non-African languages cartoonists. For instance, Ahmad et al. (2017) discuss the power of the visual language of editorial cartoons as a medium for socio-political criticism in Indonesia. They make special reference to symbols and metaphors as predominant mechanisms in the cartoons in criticising some of the socio-political issues in Indonesia. Visual metaphors and symbols are regarded as visual language forms. Wekesa (2012) provides a visual analysis of cartoons on the 2007/2008 post-election violence in Kenya. The scholar applies the Visual Argumentation Approach (VAT), a theory which advocates that visuals or images can argue or persuade, just like other verbal mechanisms. Caricature, portraiture, and analogy are identified as the tools utilised to argue and persuade in the analysed cartoons. These tools are visual language forms.

Kahn & Qiang (2015) investigate visual language in Malaysian cartoons and focus on aspects such as lines, shapes, texture, and space. Huber et al. (2007), on the other hand, identify colour, lines, brightness, and background and regard them as 'formal features'. The study on visual language has also been approached from the broader para-linguistic perspective. For example, Bhattacharyya and Mukherjee-Das (2016) identify visual communication to be constituted by

body language, gestures, facial expression, setting or background, actions and colours. These studies are regarded as essential as they will be useful in guiding the analysis in this study.

This study is conducted or done qualitatively. Since the selected cartoons are considered as the primary source for data collection, the ‘systematic visuo – textual analysis’, as proposed by Brown & Collins (2021), is adopted as the main research technique. As alluded to above, the study of visual language in this discourse is intended illuminate the artistic significance of this aspect. While the artistic part is grounded on stylistics, the visual part and its meaning, is grounded on semiotics. It is for this reason that this study is done through the lenses of what is coined as ‘semiotic - stylistics’. The reader response theory is adopted as an additional theory to account for the possible relative interpretations of data.

Research methodology

In general, textual analysis entails a systematic study that is concerned with describing the content of the text. It focuses on making sense of the text by considering its ideological and cultural assumptions (Arya, 2020: 174). According to Brown & Collin (2021: 1275), qualitative research has evolved to integrate and intertwine different materials such as pictures alongside interviews, for instance. They propose the concept of ‘systematic visuo – textual analysis’ as a framework that accounts for the link between visual and textual material in the analysis of data. This framework seems to be relevant to this study since cartoons consist of both visual and written language. Mngadi’s cartoons are the primary source of the systematic collection, organisation, and interpretation of data in this study. Information is extracted and interpreted from both the visual and written parts of the cartoons.

Theoretical framework

This section is dedicated to the discussion of semiotics – stylistics and the reader response theory as the study’s theoretical framework.

Semiotic – stylistics

While stylistics account for the study of style (Wales, 2011: 399), semiotics accounts for the science of signs (Cuddon, 2013: 64). Stylistics devotes itself to the analysis and manipulation of language for different artistic reasons, and semiotics, on the other hand, focuses on signs or

symbols and their meaning. Visual language is an element of semiotics. It consists of visual components that have embedded meaning on them. It is proposed in this study that Mngadi uses these components in an artistic manner. The concept of 'semiotic – stylistics' is thus used to imply the idea that signs (colour and size) are investigated according to their stylistic significance.

Reader-response theory

About the reader-response theory, Auger (2010: 255) argues that this approach complements structuralism and post-structuralism, which contend that the meaning of a text is undecidable and as a result, responsibility is given to the reader to fill in the identified gaps. It is a response to new criticism and practical criticism's views that it is only the text that matters (Buchanan, 2010: 400). These views disregard the significance of the reader in the text. In a basic and general sense, the reader-response theory can be explained as a criticism that pays attention to the readers' process of comprehending and interpreting the text (Drabble & Stringer, 2007: 588). It prioritises the role of the reader instead of paying attention solely to the author's intention or the structure of the text (Abrams & Harpham, 2009: 299). The reader-response theory is thus concerned with the mental processes of readers and how they interpret the text.

The reader-response theory is proposed in this paper because the interpretation of cartoons might be relative. How the researcher analyses the cartoons might be considered subjective and different to how another person may interpret them. It is believed, however, that all the given interpretations are properly justified. There is a link between visual language and individual interpretation, as alluded to by Abdullah et al. (2018: 2) below:

The visual language of cartoons in general and political cartoons, in particular, provides the spectator with an opportunity to interpret it from different perspectives as it communicates meanings succinctly and with a quick impact. Visual language also involves raising sympathy or indignation towards the represented issue in certain cartoon images. It does so through a world of signs people live in along with the world of reality that enables us to know the 'real' world through those signs. Thus, this world is a represented one via signifying things and applying meaning to those things.

Data analysis

The analysed data is divided into two aspects, which are considered as themes. The first theme will analyse colour and the second one will consider size.

Colour

When perceived from a literary perspective, colour is one of visual language techniques cartoonists use for stylistic effects. In general, colour symbolism can be singled out and appreciated for its artistic significance whether it is employed consciously or not. Colour has a communicative function that might sometimes be linked to culture (Kress, 2002: 346). It has the capacity to evoke ideas and feelings from the reader/audience (Kartashkova & Belyaeva, 2022; Dhayef & Hussein, 2021).

The first example of colour symbolism and its significance in Mngadi's cartoons is examined from the cartoon below:



Figure 1

(Mngadi, 2017)

Figure 1 depicts a man who is trying to ask for directions, and this is highlighted by the statement, “Uxolo sisi, ngicela ukubuza!” (Excuse me sister, can I ask!). He is asking as he seems to be lost. Instead of getting assistance, the women he is attempting to ask are fleeing. The use of the exclamation mark after the statement above suggests that this man is shouting; he is shouting

because he wants the fleeing women to hear him since they are running. The fact that these women are running is suggesting that they are terrified. They are not willing to take chances even though they are uncertain if this man is genuinely asking for assistance or not.

There is a generalisation in South Africa that all men who drive Volkswagen (VW) Polo cars should be ignored and feared. This cartoon is designed based on this general assumption or stereotype that the men who drive these cars in South Africa are associated with bad conduct. These men are generally regarded as womanisers who party excessively. In other words, they are relatively regarded as immoral men who do not treat women well. It is for this reason that the four women are depicted running away in the cartoon above. The statement, “*Sithwele kanzima*” (We are troubled/We are burdened), demonstrate the level of frustration women have reached about these men. The fact that one of them was even willing to leave her heel shoe behind to flee, demonstrates how terrified women are of Polo drivers. This shows that women do not think twice when it comes to avoiding polo drivers. They see danger that they need to instantly run away from.

The colour ‘red’ is associated with different meanings and connotations and, one of the general ones is the idea ‘danger’. The colouring of the polo car to be red plays a significant role in painting the image of ‘danger’ in Figure 1, given the context given above about the general perceptions and stereotypes about the Polo drivers. Red in this context is thus a symbol of danger. This instance is a demonstration of the stylistic significance of colouring. The colouring of these women’s dresses is also worthy of note. While yellow is associated with well-being (joy, happiness), pink is associated with warmth and hope. White, on the other hand, is associated with purity. The use of these colours in figure 1 is significant. The colours symbolise that these women are in a state of happiness in their lives, they are hopeful, at peace, and pure. They are fleeing because they do not want any of that to be tempered with. The colouring of red is used in addition to written words to aid the narration of the main idea in the cartoon above. Cartoonists use few written words and rely on visual language to assist them convey their ideas.

Another example of the artistic significance of colouring is examined from figure 2 below:

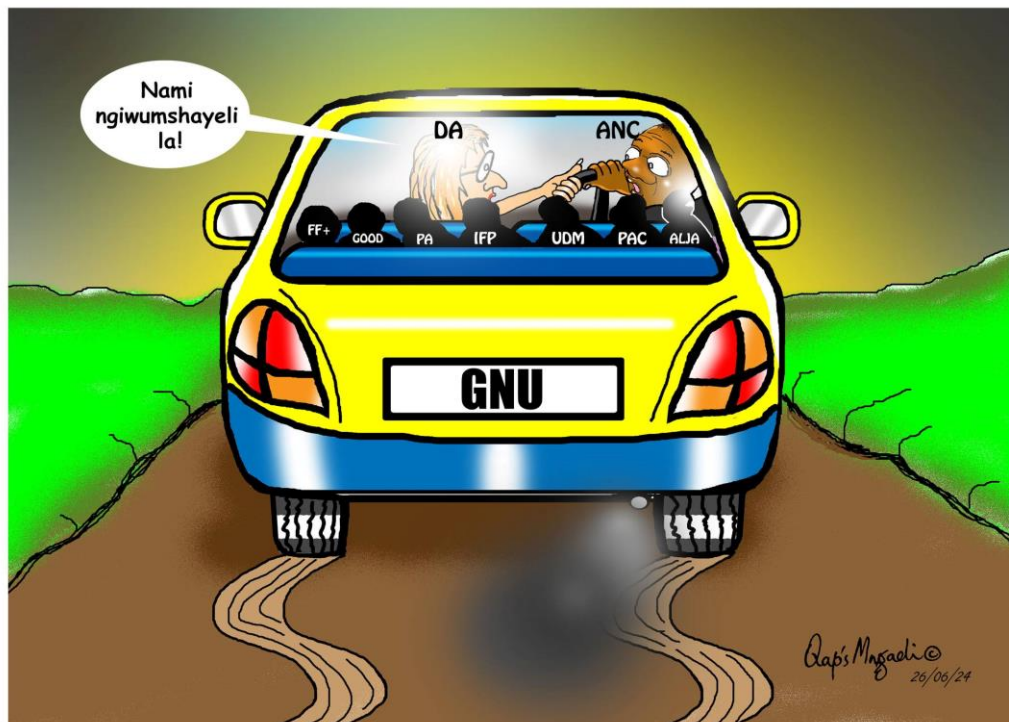


Figure 2

(Mngadi, 2024)

In figure 2 above, the cartoonist uses visual analogy to express his thoughts. By its basic function, analogy compares two things to emphasise a point. In this instance, the Government of the National Unity (GNU) is compared to a car that is on its way. Inside the car there are different South African political parties namely, the Democratic Alliance (DA), African National Congress (ANC), Vryheidsfront Plus (FF+), GOOD, Patriotic Alliance (PA), Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), United Democratic Front (UDM), Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, and Al Jama – Ah (ALJA). These are the parties that form the Government of National Unity of South African, which was forged after the 2024 national elections.

The ANC is the leading party of this newly forged national government. It is for this reason that its leader and President of the country, Cyril Ramaphosa, is seated on the driving seat in figure 2 above. The DA, on the other hand, represented by Helen Zille, is depicted to be seated on the passenger seat. Even though the car is supposed to be heading to success as a destiny in the cartoon, it is uncertain if it will arrive because of the quarrel between the ANC and the DA. The statement, 'Nami Ngiwumshayeli la!' (I am also a driver here!), is an indication of the battle for power and

leadership between the two parties with majority seats in parliament. As it appears through the depiction, there seems to be a possibility that the car might even crash. It is not possible for two drivers to drive a single car. The cartoonist is trying to paint the idea that the government of national unity will not succeed if there is no order or common ground established by the different political parties, particularly the ANC and the DA.

Even though the Government of National Unity was opposed by some, it was well received by many people. Those who advocated for this government, saw it as an opportunity for South African political parties to work together for the benefit of South Africans. Prior to the elections, there were many concerns raised by South Africans, such as unemployment, service delivery, water and electricity issues, etc. It was believed that the newly forged government could collaborate to alleviate some of these socio-economic issues.

As indicated above, most people were hopeful and optimistic about the Government of National of Unity, given how they were unhappy prior to the election. The colouring of the vehicle, which is used as an analogy in figure 2, plays an important role in these conceptions. The yellow colour is generally a representation of the summer season. This is usually one of the seasons that is anticipated with excitement. It is associated with relaxation and fun; hence most people go on holiday during this season. In South Africa, the merry and festive season is during this season. The blue colour, on the other hand, can be associated with noble virtues such as wisdom, truth, freedom, reliability, etc. (Fallon, 2014: 26). By using yellow and blue, as a colour for the Government of National Unity, an idea that this new government was embraced with excitement. Even though there seems to be conflict between some parties, there is a general perception that this government will restore hope and serve the citizens of South Africa with integrity. It was seen as an opportunity to create a government that is reliable and devoted to serving the basic needs of South Africans. The use of colouring plays an important role in painting these ideas.

It is important to also note that not all cartoons have colours. Some can be in black and white, and this also has some artistic significance attributed to it. Figure 3 below is considered as an example to demonstrate this:

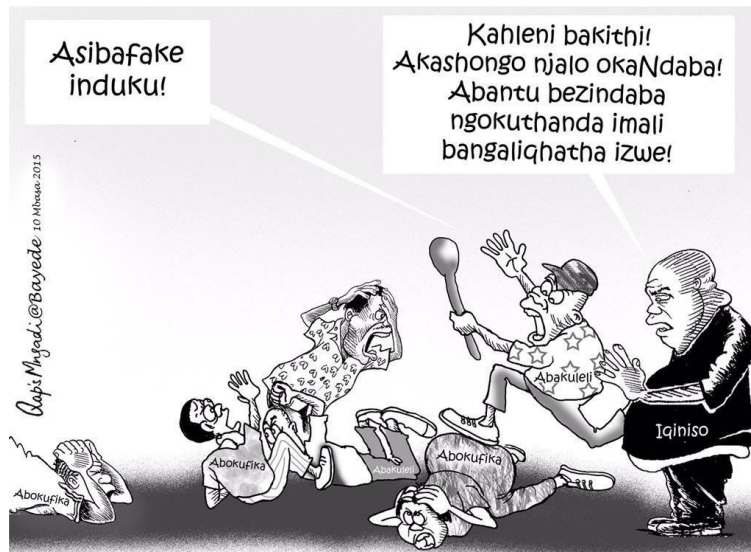


Figure 3

(Mngadi, 2015)

Figure 3 above depicts a scenario where foreigners are being physically assaulted by South Africans. The foreigners are labelled as 'Abakofika' (Immigrants) and the South Africans as 'Abakuleli' (Locals). The cartoon depicts xenophobic attacks that took place in South Africa after the late King Goodwill Zwelithini kaBhekuzza, of the Zulu nation, was misinterpreted to have said that foreigners should leave the country. The man, on the right, labelled as 'Iqiniso' (truth), addresses this by stating that the King did not say those words but was misinterpreted by news reporters. The cartoon shows the errors of news reporters. They are challenged to recognise the damage they cause because of misinterpreting information. In this instance, their error triggered xenophobic attacks. Ndaba is one of Zwelithini's clan names, hence he is referred to by it in the cartoon. Thus, the first Ndaba (*okaNdaba*) is used to refer to him and the second one (*abantu bezindaba*) to news reporters.

When cartoons are in black and white, shading plays an important role. It is used to draw the reader/audience's attention to something significant that should be observed and not ignored in the cartoon. In figure 3 above, the character labelled 'iqiniso' is shaded in black as compared to other characters. This is done with the intention of drawing readers' attention to the character. As indicated above, the late King Zwelithini was misinterpreted by reporters. The truth is that he did not say what he was accused of. Shading is done to emphasise this truth. The cartoonist uses

shading to draw readers to this fact. This is the main idea he is trying to communicate. Another instance that demonstrates how colouring can be used to stylistically aid the presentation of ideas is demonstrated above.

Size

Size techniques are one of the common features in cartoons. Just like colouring, this feature can also be used for stylistic effects. For instance, it may be used to denote power dynamics. The big size can be used to signify power or superiority. The small size, on the other hand, can be used to signify weakness, powerlessness or inferiority. Figure 3 below serves as the first example to highlight this:



Figure 4

(Mngadi, 2013)

The cartoon above depicts two former Presidents of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma. Jacob Zuma represents the government (*uhulumeni*), while the character labelled '*abantu*' represents the people of South Africa. This cartoon is satiric in nature. Thabo Mbeki, who is sitting down holding a beetroot, is mocked for the suggestion he and the then Health Minister

oncemade about the prevention of HIV & AIDS. This was during Thabo Mbeki's presidency. HIV & AIDS was at its highest peak; a lot of people were getting infected and severely ill. As an attempt to remedy this, Mbeki and the then Minister of Health suggested that people must eat vegetables such as beetroot to recover (News 24, 2007). It is for this reason he is depicted sitting down and holding the gigantic beetroot in the cartoon while Zuma (government) is addressing people. The public did not respond positively to the suggestion. The statement, "*Nali iphilisi elilodwa, shunguza niphile. Hhay'indaba yesigaxa sika-beetroot*" (Here is one pill, suck and live. Not this discourse about gigantic beetroot), by Jacob Zuma (*hulumeni*), is condemning the vegetables suggestion through his speech. This statement also demonstrates how the government, under Zuma's reign, provided medication as a remedy to help people survive HIV and AIDS instead of the initial suggestion by Mbeki and his colleague.

The use of size is demonstrated through Jacob Zuma (*hulumeni*) and the character representing South African citizens in figure 4. Zuma is depicted to be big, and the citizens (*abantu*) are depicted small. The suggestion presented here is that the government is reigning over the people. That is why the government is drawn to be bigger than the character representing the citizens. In any nation, including democratic nations, citizens are led by the government, and they are expected to abide by the laws. It is for this reason that the government is expected to meet the citizens' basic needs, and this includes access to free basic medication for chronic diseases like HIV & AIDS. The cartoonist stylistically uses size to demonstrate the superiority of the government over people in the above cartoon.

The role is size in cartoons is also examined from the cartoon below:

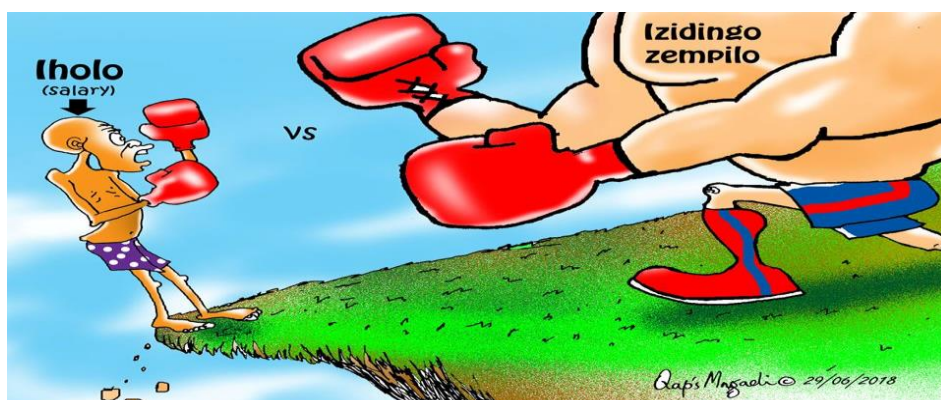


Figure 5

(Mngadi, 2018)

This is another instance of Mngadi's use of analogy to communicate an idea. In this case, he is using a boxing match to try and compare life needs (*izidingo zempilo*) with people's salaries (*iholo*). The main idea conveyed by this cartoon is that people are failing to keep up with life's demands because of the insufficient salaries they are receiving. A careful analysis of the cartoon demonstrates that the character labelled '*iholo*' (salary) stands no chance in the battle. His opponent seems to be superior to him. He is on the verge of falling off the cliff and there is no way out for him. This depiction is artistically used to demonstrate the seriousness of the predicament. People's salaries are just too low to help them survive.

Mngadi uses size to demonstrate how superior life needs are, and how inferior people's salaries are. This is another instance that demonstrates how visual language, through size, can be used to depict power dynamics. The character labelled as 'life needs' is exaggerated to be big on the upper body to indicate how powerful he is. The character labelled '*iholo*', on the other hand, is drawn to be skinny to indicate how powerless and inferior he is. A clear distinction between superiority and inferiority is made by the analogy and size in the cartoon above.

The last example is examined from the cartoon below:



Figure 6

(Mngadi, 2011)

Figure 6 is another instance of how size is used to depict inequalities and power dynamics. The cartoon depicts an exaggerated character labelled as ‘*amakhansela*’ (counselors), ‘*hulumeni*’ (government), and ‘*izikhulu*’ (dignitaries). This exaggerated character is a personified representation of counselors, government, and dignitaries. He is portrayed holding a cake while turning his back against lower class people (*abantu abasezingeni eliphansi*). The idea presented here is that people in higher political or government positions live lavish lives while lower class citizens suffer. The cake in the cartoon is used metaphorically to represent wealth. The exaggerated character is seen walking away with the cake (wealth); he is leaving crumbs for lower class people. Crumbs in this instance represent impoverishment. This character is also depicted farting at people. Farting is generally associated with bad manners when done in front of people. It is sometimes regarded as a sign of disrespect. That is the case even in Figure 6. The idea that counselors, the government, and dignitaries disrespect and belittle local people under their leadership, is signified by the fart.

Size is also successfully used to depict power dynamics in Figure 6. Exaggeration, through the personified character, is used to indicate that counselors, the government, and dignitaries hold high positions of prominent status as compared to local citizens. Their positions are associated with power, and this is depicted by the big size used. The local citizens, on the other hand, are drawn to be smaller to indicate their lower rank. Figure 6 is similar to Figure 4 discussed earlier. Size is used to highlight socio-political power and dynamics.

Conclusion

Colour and size, as visual language aspects, are used to stylistically aid the narration of ideas in the cartoons. Colour is used as a figurative and symbolic tool. It carries hidden meaning that can be understood by considering the context of the cartoons. The stylistic significance of the use of size cannot be ignored as well. Size is artistically used to aid the presentation of ideas the cartoonist intends to convey. These ideas were determined to be centered on power relations. While the big size of personified characters was used to indicate strength, power, and superiority, the smaller one was used to indicate weakness, subordination, powerlessness, and inferiority.

There is still a gap when it comes to the investigation of visual language in context to cartoons designed by South African indigenous languages cartoonists. It is hoped that this article will inspire more scholarly works of this nature.

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