

## A Social Semiotic Analysis of the Compositional Metafunction in the Posters Claiming the Stretch of English Use During the Algerian Political Crisis of 2019

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### ABSTRACT:

This treatise aims to investigate how semiotic elements were used and arranged in posters created during the 2019 Algerian political crisis, with a specific focus on promoting English instead of French. The study primarily examines the functions of written text, exploring how these elements were desired, structured, and connected to convey complete messages. To accomplish this goal, four posters created during the period of El-Hirak, which lasted from 2019 to 2021, were analyzed. The research approach involved using an exploratory qualitative design and employing Kress and Van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design model (2006) as both a research tool and an analytical framework. The findings revealed that certain resources were employed novel ways to convey fresh meanings. This study suggests that the insights gained would be valuable for specialists and the general public alike in understanding how political events can be utilized to convey more precise messages

**Keywords:** multimodal communication; semiotic resources; modes; metafunctions; kress model; design)

### 1. Introduction

Introducing English into Algerian schools and society has been a contentious issue among stakeholders for many years, as it has been primarily driven by political considerations rather than pedagogical or economic ones (Benrabah, 2005 and Benrabah, 2007b). The dominance of French in postcolonial Algeria, influenced by economic and political factors, has hindered the diffusion of the competing languages mainly English (Benrabah, 2013, (Benrabah, 2014, Marley, 2008), despite its significant importance for economic purposes. Consequently, English has consistently played a secondary role compared to French, despite the fact that Algerians advocate its primary status (Belmihoub, 2018a).

Recently, however, this assertion has become public. During the Algerian political crisis, which lasted from 2019 until 2021, protesters seized the opportunity presented by El Hirak, a movement calling for a new Algeria, to also advocate for a new linguistic landscape that aligns with the objectives of the demonstrations. In essence, while striving for a rupture with the colonizer, they simultaneously sought to break away from the language associated with him, French. Consequently, they advocated for an increased use of English. As a result, English was utilized for the first time in the history of Algerian media, being employed to deliver news on certain television channels and introduced into primary schools after it had been marginalised for a long time (Benrabah, 2007a and Mostari, 2009). This development marked the beginning of a new linguistic reality where, temporarily, English appears to be transitioning toward a more prominent role (Belmihoub, 2018a), overshadowing French, which, in turn, appears to be diminishing in importance, assuming a secondary position.

Signification, the process of creating meaning, requires combining signs to form a message if meanings are common or culturally shared (Danesi, 2004). However, when new meanings appear, new ways of representing them are needed (Kress & Hodge, 1979 and Leeuwen, V, 2005). Accordingly since overtly expressing the claim to stretch English use over French during a the political crisis manifested in EL-Hirak is a new reality (a new meaning), a new use of the already existing semiotic resources is highly probable. Indeed, not only this new use of the semiotic resources is achieved through combining the resources of different modes Leeuwen, V, 2015 Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, (2016) , which requires the adherence to the rules of the grammar of the visual design Kress, G., & Leeuwen, V. (2006)

Creating a new meaning by utilizing semiotic resources is not an easy task, considering the multilayered and multidimensional nature of the intended meaning (Halliday, 2004 and Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Achieving this requires simultaneous engagement with multiple modes of representation ( Kress, 1997, Kress, 1979? And Kress, 2000) and the realization of three metafunctions: the representational, interactive, and compositional (Kress, 2006). These metafunctions respectively correspond to the experiential, interpersonal, and textual aspects (Halliday, 1973, 1978, 1994, 2004, Eggins, 2004, Bloor and Bloor, 2010 and Thompson, 2014,). In this context, while the viewer or reader of the poster can immediately decipher the encoded meaning and the designer's attitude towards the competing languages (French and English), understanding how the message is organized into a coherent whole can only be fully grasped through careful analysis. Therefore, it is worthwhile to analyze the compositional metafunctions. To do so, a suitable methodology was set ahead. First, we worked out how the connotative meanings attributed to French and English within the posters. Then, we analyzed how the placement of the semiotic resources in the poster contributed to or subtracted from the textual metafunctions. Alternatively, we explored how framing, salience and information value which are the three dimensions of the textual metafunction are realized in the poster.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Compositional Dimension in The grammar of Visual Design

The Compositional Dimension, which aligns with Halliday's textual metafunction, highlights the integration of the representational and interactive dimensions to establish a complete meaning( Hodge, & Kress, 1988).. In essence, it explores how these two dimensions are intricately intertwined to form a cohesive whole. The analysis of the compositional dimension focuses on aspects such as framing, salience, and information value (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006)

- **Framing:** Framing refers to the arrangement of different modes (verbal and non-verbal) within an image. It involves grouping or separating these modes based on their position within the image. Additionally, framing considers the relationship of meaning between the elements. If the elements are closely related, they contribute to the same information. However, the distance between elements within the image does not significantly impact their interrelation in terms of meaning. Even if they are distantly separated or appear to have separate meanings, they still share the same underlying idea.

- **Salience:** Salience refers to the examination of the significant elements within an image, including the background, foreground, colors, and size. It involves emphasizing certain constituents within the same image through the use of vivid or subdued colors, bold or capital letters in the text, and other visual techniques. This deliberate exaggeration or highlighting of elements aims to draw attention to specific aspects and create visual prominence.

- **Information Value:** Information value pertains to the positioning of different components within an image, such as left and right, top and bottom, center and margin. Regardless of their position, all elements convey the same message. In a specific image, the left side signifies "given" information or shared knowledge within a particular society. On the other hand, the right side represents new information that society should unveil. The information placed at the top of the image symbolizes the "ideal" information that is expected to exist in society and be true. Meanwhile, the information located at the bottom of the image represents "real" facts that already exist in society. The center is regarded as the pivotal information within the image, while the margin contains additional information. Together, these elements contribute to the complete meaning.

Although Kress and Van Leeuwen developed a theory that constitutes a full communicative system, yet it is not necessary to apply all the components of the theory on a given image in which the analysis needs to be adequate to the only semiotic modes provided in a certain image.

Despite the fact that Barthes was the first semiotician that studied the visual signs ,and thanks to him Kress and Van Leeuwen shifted their interest to such type of signs, but he did not speak in details about the main principles that should be applied to analyze the Visual Designs, and he did not provide an approach of analysis that goes in parallel with the visual images .Thus, Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) Grammar of Visual Design is the approach chosen for the analysis of the four posters

in the target research. Kress and Van Leeuwen's theory is combined with Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar since the posters contain linguistic signs.

## 2.2 The Compositional Metafunction: Related Studies

Kress and Van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design theory has been employed in various qualitative studies. For instance, Cilliers (2014) examined the portrayal and construction of masculinities in men's health through the analysis of visual texts from a magazine. The researcher demonstrated how the combination of visual signs conveys ideological meanings of masculinity across different cultures. Similarly, Lirola (2016) investigated political posters in Ireland during and after the Celtic Tiger, arguing that the fusion of linguistic and visual elements persuades individuals to vote for political parties that represent their interests.

In a broader study, Stoian (2015) analyzed advertisements for honeymoon packages, exploring all three dimensions of the model: representational, compositional, and interactive. The study revealed that the participants, represented as couples, are linked through vectors in a transactional reactional process within the representational dimension. In terms of the interactive dimension, the couples' gaze serves as an inviting gaze, inviting viewers to establish an intimate social connection. Regarding the compositional dimension, the researcher examined elements such as salience, framing, and information. The study concluded that visual analysis can be applied in various domains, including teaching materials.

In a more specific context, Dallyono and Sukyadi (2019) analyzed how multimodal resources in environmental protection posters raise awareness about the importance of protecting the environment. The researchers focused on the interactive dimension and demonstrated how the exploitation of transitivity and mood systems effectively conveys hidden messages. Similarly, Hu and Luo (2016) conducted a multimodal discourse study of double shopping carnival advertisements, revealing how different semiotic resources are combined to convey the advertisement's message, psychologically impact viewers, and persuade them to attend the carnival.

Plaza (2018) examined the use of colors in socio-political posters for persuasive purposes. The researcher highlighted how these posters, using two colors (red and blue) and featuring famous political figures, aimed to protest against politicians and advocate for artists' rights, particularly during a period of economic crisis. The results demonstrated the posters' effectiveness in influencing politicians to take action regarding artists' rights. This study serves as a foundation for understanding the persuasive function of colors in our own research.

## 3. Research Questions and Assumptions

Since our study is exploratory, answering the research questions must be governed by assumptions rather than hypothesis. Therefore, we set research questions followed by assumptions.

### 3.1 Research Questions

Since our study focuses on the social semiotic analysis of posters reflecting Algerians' desire to replace French with English, we must address four key questions derived from the literature we have reviewed:

1. What semiotic resources are employed in the posters created during Elhirak to convey Algerians' claim to replace French with English?
2. Are there any resources that are utilized in innovative ways to generate the new meanings?
3. How is this novel application of semiotic resources manifested textually, specifically in terms of textual metafunctions?

It is essential for our research to address these questions in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the semiotic strategies employed in the posters and the implications of these strategies on the discourse surrounding language preferences in Algeria.

### 3.2 Assumptions

1. To encode a specific meaning in the posters, the designer may use and combine a variety of semiotic resources, linguistic and visual.
2. The claim for stretch English use in Algeria over French is a new reality (meaning). Therefore, the use of already existing semiotic resources in a new way to express this meaning is potentially expected.
3. This new use of the semiotic resources must be well crafted to realize the textual metafunctions.

## 4. Research Methodology and Design

To carry on this research, we set forward some research questions, out of which the assumptions are also formulated.

### 4.1 The Research Approach and Method

Our primary objective in this study is to describe, interpret, and comprehend the choices and organization of semiotic resources made by the designer. This aligns with the purpose of qualitative and interpretivist approaches, as emphasized by Tracy (2013). To achieve this goal, we relied on a discourse analyses method through applying Kress & Leeuwen's (2006) model of the Grammar of Visual Design (GVD), which is better suited to our research aims. The analysis of the data demonstrates that GVD provides a more comprehensive and flexible framework that enables us to conduct a nuanced analysis of the specific utilization of semiotic resources.

### 4.2 The Sample

The research sample consists of four posters, which are displayed in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 on the next page. The selection of these posters through purposive sampling is justified by two factors. Firstly, our interest lies in examining how various semiotic resources across different modes can be employed in innovative ways and how they can be integrated and structured to form a coherent whole. The posters fulfill this criterion as they convey the novel message of advocating for English to be prioritized over French. Secondly, these posters are the only ones available online, ensuring their high visibility.



Figure1 : The Poster Claiming the Stretch of English Use Over French

#### 4.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The objective of this article is to investigate the semiotic resources utilized in each poster, focusing on the choices made and how pre-existing resources are employed to convey a novel meaning. To achieve this, we conduct a comprehensive analysis of the visual elements present in the posters, which advocate for an increased emphasis on English rather than French. Our specific interest lies in exploring the compositional metafunction, which is a branch of discourse study. By analyzing four representative posters in depth, we aim to identify the semiotic resources employed to represent the experience of promoting the use of English over French. We examine the meanings conveyed by these resources and demonstrate how they are skillfully integrated into the text to form a coherent message. More specifically, our analysis centers around the semiotic choices related to framing, salience, and information value within the posters.

In our analysis, we do not only consider the semiotic choices but also delve into the semiotic practices. Specifically, we categorize framing as either grouped or detached (separate); salience as color, size, foregrounding, or backgrounding; and information value as top, left, or bottom. The ultimate goal of this systematic approach is to achieve a nuanced level of analysis that enables us to accurately identify the linguistic and visual choices. To facilitate this, we present a function/choice matrix in Figure 1, where these categories are visually represented.

Table 1

Using a Function-Choice Matrix to Identify Systemic Choice (Inspired by Halliday and Matheussin, 2004, p. 63)

		<i>The Choice of the Semiotic Resources</i>				
		Framing		Salience		Information Value
<i>The Compositional Metafunction</i>	<u>Color</u>	-				
	<u>Size</u>	+				
	<u>foregrounding</u>	-				
	<u>backgrounding</u>	+				

The analysis presented in figure 1 would be interpreted as follow: in this poster, (+) means that the designer relied on size and backgrounding in the first poster to create the compositional meaning features while (-) means that colour and foregrounding are not used.

The results related to the compositional metafunctions and the systems utilized by the designer, which were obtained through quantitative analysis of all the posters, are depicted in histograms. These figures juxtapose the use of resources in each poster, ensuring a more coherent and interpretable presentation of the findings. In addition, qualitative analysis is provided in each section, accompanied by commentaries on selected examples from the poster analysis. This approach enhances the credibility and understanding of the results.

### 3.4 Data Coding and Collection

The data are collected and coded in the table 2 so that its analysis would be more plausible :

Table2: The Data Collected and Coded

		Poster 1	Poster2	Poster3	Poster4	Total
<u>Framing</u>	<u>Grouped</u>	-	-	-	-	00
	<u>Separate</u>	+	+	+	+	04
<u>Salience</u>	<u>Color</u>	+	+	+	+	04
	<u>Size</u>	+	+	+	+	04
	<u>Fourgrounding</u>	+	-	-	-	01
	<u>Backgrounding</u>	+	-	-	-	01
<u>Information Value</u>	<u>Top</u>	-	+	-	-	01
	<u>Center</u>	+	+	+	-	03
	<u>Bottom</u>	+	+	-	-	02
	<u>Right</u>	-	-	-	+	01
	<u>Left</u>	-	-	-	-	00

## 5. Findings and Discussion:

Poster one:

Framing: Framing refers to the association of elements or participants within a poster to create a coherent composition. In the case of poster one, although the various elements are placed within separate frames, the space between them does not appear to be significant. It can be reasonably inferred that all these elements convey the same meaning. Therefore, the overarching theme of the poster revolves around a

central issue: the absence of English among other languages in a large country like Algeria. The producer establishes a connection between this absence and the vast desert, symbolizing how Algeria is "lost" without English, much like a boy lost in the middle of the desert.

**Saliency:** in order to identify the most salient "prominent" constituents of poster one, it is crucial to depict the exaggerated use of colours, size, background, and foreground. It seems that the desert as the background of the poster is the most prominent element since it takes the whole size within the poster with the bright colour of the sand that makes it more clear and noticeable. Also, the written text that constitutes the foreground of the poster also appears in an exaggerated way due to writing it in bold and in capital letters (WHAT LANGUAGES ARE SPOKEN IN.. ALGERIA? DERJA, FRENCH, BERBER, ARABIC, ENGLISH?). However, writing English in capital letters, but not in bold followed by a question mark is used by the producer as a hint to indicate that English is missed among the official spoken languages in Algeria.

**Information Value:** to understand more the real meaning of poster one, it is important to analyze the information position within it whether right, left, top, or bottom. Indeed, the poster comprises both the verbal information and the visual information. The verbal information is positioned partly to the left and partly to the right i.e the raised question "WHAT LANGUAGES ARE SPOKEN IN..ALGERIA" takes the left part which indicates the "given" information, while the answer of the question "DERJA, FRENCH, BERBER, ARABIC, ENGLISH?" is on the right part. This denotes the "new" information. In other words, the question "what are the official spoken languages in Algeria" refers to the already existing idea" which is the given known knowledge. However, the answer represents the new information via stating all the spoken languages in Algeria highlighting the gap of English in Algeria, and this is itself a new information that the viewer should know. In addition, the poster's producer divided the given information between the left and the right "DERJA, FRENCH, BERBER, ARABIC" as the known spoken languages in Algeria, yet the producer put them in the right as if they are new and as a reminder in order to shift the attention of the viewer that Algeria is missed another crucial language, which is English. The desert as a visual mode can be seen from the bottom and from the center of the poster: from the bottom, the desert together with the flag as another visual mode indicates that the events occur in Algeria, and the tackled issue is purely Algerian; besides, the boy who takes the position in the center, in the middle of the desert, seems lost and seems that he has walked for a long distance, which is indicated by the footsteps behind him. Accordingly, the interrelations of the verbal modes and the visual modes within this poster denote that the issue of inserting English as an official language is an Algerian desire stems from a social belonging, in which Algeria without English is lost.

**Poster 2:**

**Framing:** In the second poster, none of the elements are grouped together, neither in terms of physical frames nor in terms of their intended meaning. The text in the top image is divided into two separate banners, and the same separation can be



observed in the bottom image where events are marked by black squares. As for the intended message, the designer successfully employs unconventional approaches to communicate the idea of discontinuing the use of French. By associating smoking with a harmful habit that is detrimental to both individuals and the environment, the poster effectively portrays the toxicity and danger of the French language. Furthermore, the use of a prison symbolically amplifies the severity of this language, likening it to a crime even more cruel than murder

**Saliency:** While most elements in this poster are visually striking, such as the dark black and white written texts and the visually compelling modes, the physical appearance of the prisoners stands out. Among them, the response from the prisoner wearing glasses holds particular prominence. It is written in bold, capitalized letters, drawing attention to it, unlike the question posed by the other man, which is presented in a lighter shade of black and white. This deliberate design choice by the creator serves as a cue, directing the viewer's attention to the central theme that the producer intends to reveal and emphasize.

**Information Value:** The meaning of the poster can be deciphered by analyzing the positioning of its elements. The top, bottom, center, and margin of the poster hold significance in conveying the intended message. The placement of the banners at the top suggests that society should prohibit smoking. In contrast, the bottom image portrays the grim reality of being not just a smoker but specifically a French smoker, which is depicted as a grave offense and symbolically represents the call to stop speaking French.

The center of the poster represents its core message. It includes the divided images from the top and bottom, as well as the depiction of prisoners sitting together and the strong man posing the question, "I killed a man and you?" The images where the prisoners sit far apart represent the margins. Since the banners "NO Smoking," "Don't Speak French," and the response from the man wearing glasses, "I'M A FRENCH SMOKER," occupy the central position of the poster, the main intended meaning becomes evident. It conveys that French is a toxic and harmful language, likening it to a shocking and horrific crime surpassing even murder. This is emphasized further by the strong man's evident disgust towards the other prisoner and his decision to sit away from him, underscoring the severity associated with speaking French.

Poster 3:

**Framing:** Regarding the framing of poster three, the elements are arranged in proximity to each other. However, in terms of meaning, they maintain a sense of separation. Nonetheless, the visual elements, primarily conveyed through colors, establish associations that appear relevant to the underlying topic.

**Saliency:** The most striking element in this poster is the phrase "ALGERIA IN English." It stands out due to its bold and capitalized typography, as well as the unique presentation of the word "IN" with a cracked effect. Additionally, each word is colored using the main colors of the Algerian flag, establishing a connection to the country's history and culture. Moreover, the use of a contrasting light color behind the text signifies the designer's intention to highlight the topic of making Algeria

accessible in the English language. This desire is emphasized by enclosing the light color within a dark black background, drawing further attention to the message.

**Information Value:** The positioning of the written text in the center of the poster indicates its significance as the main focal point. The choice of colors and the accompanying use of light further highlight the importance of this text. By placing it in the center, the producer aims to direct the viewer's attention and encourage contemplation. The viewer is prompted to imagine the potential implications and benefits of having Algeria represented in the English language, emphasizing the importance of this aspiration for the country.

By conducting an analysis of the four posters using Kress and Van Leeuwen's *Grammar of Visual Design* (2006), we have obtained significant findings that merit further discussion. In the subsequent sections, we discuss the compositional dimension of the *Grammar of Visual Design* to demonstrate how it is utilized to convey the Algerians' willingness to expand the use of English. In this regard, from a *Grammar of Visual Design* point of view, the compositional dimension serves as a means to unite the representational and interactive dimensions in conveying a message through exploiting the semiotic resources of framing, salience, and information value.

This study shows that the framings and meanings of the four posters are distinct from one another. However, in poster three, the elements are juxtaposed within the frame but remain separate in terms of meaning. Despite their disconnection, however, all of them effectively convey the message of advocating for the prominence of English in Algeria by emphasizing the negative aspects of French. This is evident in poster one and two; in poster one, the designer connects the aspiration for English to be recognized as an official language with the desert, symbolizing difficulty. According to Yakin, & Totu, (2014), from a Peircian modal point of view, the footsteps which are an indexical sign refer to the journey the boy who is a representation of the Algerian people would go through to reach the end. This end is not specified through the visual signs but rather through the linguistic one through what is called anchorage by Barthes (Hammouri, 2020 and Sathvika, & Rajasekarn, 2022). to signify that Algeria is incomplete without English. In poster two, the association of smoking with French vividly portrays French as a toxic and detrimental language, much like smoking.

Examining the primary semiotic resources in each poster appears crucial to underscore the central theme of the posters. In nearly all the posters, the written texts stand out as the most prominent semiotic resources, effectively conveying the explicit message of replacing French with English. However, in poster one and two, unconventional use of semiotic resources such as the desert, prisoners, and the prison draws attention and contributes to the creation of new meanings. These elements symbolize French as a criminal act, suggesting that its users should be punished.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) highlighted the significance of semiotic resource placement in conveying messages effectively. These resources can be positioned on the left, right, top, or bottom within the visual composition. However, placing them in the center signifies the central theme of the posters. This principle

has been applied to all four posters analyzed. For instance, in poster three, the semiotic resource "Algeria in English" is positioned in the center to emphasize the potential consequences of Algeria adopting English as its language.

Lirola's (2016) research revealed that the combination of linguistic and visual modes has a positive impact on voters' decision-making in relation to their representatives in parliament. Similarly, in our study, the interplay between verbal and visual modes in the posters has effectively conveyed the message of replacing French with English and has exerted influence. The government's intention to introduce English in primary schools and the value placed on writing doctoral theses in English at Algerian universities is evident. Furthermore, our research highlights the use of certain semiotic resources such as the desert, smoking, and the prison to create new meanings that have not been previously associated with them, namely, replacing a harmful language with a peaceful one.

#### 6. Conclusion:

The examination of the four posters have illustrated how the combination of verbal and non-verbal modes effectively conveys the underlying message of replacing French with English in Algeria. These posters employed distinct modes to create new meanings, highlighting the perceived negative aspects of French and the perceived purity of English. Subsequent researchers have the opportunity to explore the topic of replacing French with English from alternative perspectives, such as the sociolinguistic angle. In Algeria, social semiotics is an emerging field that can be utilized to investigate various issues. Building upon our study, future research can employ experimental qualitative methods to further delve into the subject matter. Our study serves as a foundational groundwork for these future endeavors.

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## 7. Appendices:

### 8: Bibliographical references (at the end of the article):

Book: Author (s), book title, publisher, edition number, publisher, place of publication: year of publication, page (s).

Article: Author (s), title, journal name, volume, number, year, page.

Proceedings: Author (s), title of paper, title of conference, date of session, university, country.

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