

---

## VISUAL IMAGES IN NEWSPAPER RESTAURANT REVIEWS FROM MULTIMODAL APPROACH TO DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

**Thu Le Hoai**

Vietnam National University Hanoi - International School, 79 Nguy Nhu Kon Tum, Nhan Chinh, Thanh Xuan,  
Hanoi, Vietnam

<https://doi.org/10.59009/ijllc.2023.0048>

---

### ABSTRACT

The images are, like language, rich in many potential meanings and are governed by clearly visual grammar structures that can be employed to decode these multiple meanings. The study adopted Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) text-based Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) approach to reading visual images with three meanings: compositional meaning, interactive meaning and representational meaning. Specifically, 30 images used in 5 restaurant review articles by 5 different food reviewers-reporters on The Telegraph newspaper are examined in terms of their representational meaning. The findings of the study support the visual grammar theory and highlight the value of images as semiotic resources in conveying multi-layered meanings. The analysis of the selected images shows various relations existed between the participants and the viewers on the visual level through employing different visual modes. In terms of representational meaning, images are analysed through three elements: participants, processes and circumstances. 90% of the images have objects as participants. The circumstances are mostly inside the restaurant with a warm and cozy, clean and tiny atmosphere and slick interior (87%). Most images convey conceptual representation through symbolic processes (87%). Representational meaning of visual mode contributes and parallels with ideational meaning of verbal modes.

**Keywords:** Visual Images, Representational Meaning, Newspaper Restaurant Reviews, Multimodal Discourse Analysis MDA

---

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Multimodal discourse analysis from the perspective of social semiotics is a common method used by eminent academics like Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). It is widely recognized that the groundwork for multimodal studies in the 1990s was laid by the works of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996). In order to do picture analysis in multimodal discourses, Kress and van Leeuwen developed the theory of visual grammar (VG), which is based on Halliday's conceptual framework of social semiotics and Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). Visual communication in texts including newspapers, periodicals, textbooks, and children's comics was discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen. In newspapers and magazines, to assist readers fully comprehend the issues and contents, a majority of visuals including photographs, illustrations, and caricatures are used.

Even though multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) has received a lot of attention, it is vital to examine how visual pictures contribute to the discourse's ability to make sense when two semiotic resources are combined. This article initially applies the MDA method of Kress and van Leeuwen to analyze visual signals in restaurant review discourse in online newspapers with

the aim of understanding the structure of meaning and role. In particular, the study clarifies the role of visual images in realizing representational meanings in five discourses – five restaurant reviews in The Telegraph newspaper. Like text, features including participants, processes, circumstances can be conflated into the visual message elements which characterize semantic properties and representational meaning.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Literature review

#### 2.1.1. *Visual Image Framework by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen*

As followers of the Hallidayan School, Kress & van Leeuwen see grammatical forms as resources for encoding interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction (1996, 2006). They adopt the theoretical notion of “*metafunction*” as posited in the work of Halliday (1978) and coin corresponding terminologies to describe three elements of a visual image: representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning.

The Visual Image Framework, introduced by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen in their 1996 book “*Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*”, is a theoretical framework that aims to provide a systematic way of analyzing visual communication and understanding how visual elements convey meaning in various contexts. The framework is rooted in the field of MDA, which explores how different modes of communication, such as visuals, language, and sound, work together to create meaning. Their VG is a “general grammar of contemporary visual design in “Western” cultures, an account of explicit and implicit knowledge and practices around a resource, consisting of the elements and rules underlying a culture-specific form of visual communication” (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:3).

The Visual Image Framework proposes a set of concepts and principles to analyze and interpret visual signals. It emphasizes that images are not merely passive representations of reality but are active participants in the communication process, shaping and conveying meanings just like written or spoken language. The framework helps uncover the ways in which visual elements, such as layout, composition, color, and perspective, contribute to the overall meaning of an image.

By applying the Visual Image Framework, analysts and researchers can delve into the intricate ways in which visual elements interact to create meaning, as well as how cultural, social, and historical contexts influence interpretation. This framework has been widely adopted in fields such as media studies, communication, design, and art history to provide a structured approach to analyzing and understanding visual communication beyond surface-level observations.

In their framework, Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that the visual systems of representational, interactive and compositional meanings occur and project their meanings simultaneously. They are in correspondence with Halliday’s ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions.

- The representational patterns (which align with the “ideational” metafunction) highlight the visual resources (people, places, and things) in the image as well as the interactions and conceptual relationships that are conveyed between them. This is the method of connecting represented participants meaningfully.

- The interactive patterns (which align with the “interpersonal” metafunction) highlight the tools that establish connections between the audience, the creators of visual texts, and the people they represent. It is the method of connecting interactive participants meaningfully.
- The compositional patterns (which align with the “textual” metafunction) show how interactional and representational patterns combine to form a coherent whole. It is the method of connecting the components in a text meaningfully.

### **2.1.2. Representational meaning**

According to Guijarro & Sanz (2008), the visual depictions of people, things, and environments have the representational meaning. Narrative representation and conceptual representation are the two structures that make up the internal relations of visual imagery. The presence of a vector is what separates the two processes' signals. Any semiotic mode must be able to capture elements of the human experience of the world. Stated differently, it must possess the ability to depict entities and their relationships in a realm outside the confines of the representational framework (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006:42). This dimension is grounded in the ideational metafunction of language, which addresses how objects are represented and how they relate to one another in the surrounding environment (Halliday 1978). The introduction of representational meaning through visual grammar aligns with Halliday's ideational metafunction and works well in visual mode. Three factors may help an image achieve its representational meaning: participants, processes, and circumstances.

#### **2.1.2.1. Participants**

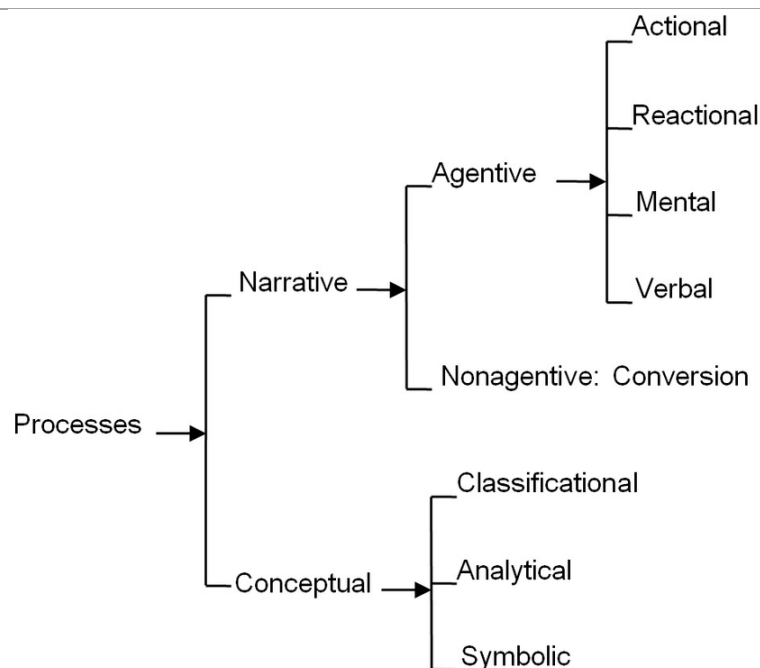
Elements and objects in visual works and designs are presented as "Participants," according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). The participants are separated into two groups: "interactive participants" are those who produce or create these domains or those who view these works of art (e.g., the creator of the comics and the viewers) and "represented participants" are people, things, objects, or places that are placed in visual domains (e.g., characters in comics) (p. 47-48).

#### **2.1.2.2. Circumstances**

Furthermore, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identified "Circumstances," or ancillary participants who are related to the primary participants but not through vectors, as another kind of players in representational processes (p. 72). In their 2006 framework, Kress and van Leeuwen defined situations as "participants which, although their deletion would, of course, entail a loss of information, could be left out without affecting the basic proposition realized by the narrative pattern" (p. 72).

#### **2.1.2.3. Processes**

In their discussion of representational structures in the visual transitivity system, or the visual resources for representing interactions and conceptual relations between people, places and things in visuals, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) recognise two major categories: conceptual and narrative representation.



I. **FIGURE 1: PROCESS TYPES IN VISUAL IMAGES (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN 2006)**

#### 2.1.2.3.1. Narrative representation

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) claimed that narrative representation is about the dynamic processes included in events and activities that are unfolding when people are involved in doing something to or for one another. It involves a variety of processes that vary in terms of the kind of vector they use (such as the verb in the language) and the number of participants they entail. Vector, as the distinctive feature of narrative processes, is usually realized by elements appearing in pictures that form “an oblique line, often a quite strong, diagonal line” (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006:59). According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), narrative representation can be realized through the four processes: action process, reactional process, speech process and mental process (material process, behavioral process, verbal process and mental process in verbal mode respectively).

##### 2.1.2.3.1.1. Action process

The “Actor”, the depicted individual who serves as the “Vector” and the action that the “Goal” receives are all involved in the action process (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:59). Vector is shown in this process as an act, or an act performed by the actor and accepted by the goal, the actor's receptor. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006):63, an action process may be described using one of two distinct structures: a “transactional structure” when the objective is present, or a “non-transactional structure” when the actor is the only entity involved in the process. Additionally, an “Event” is a depiction of an action process in which the Goal is the only item present and there is no Actor; it does not identify the cause or initiator of the event (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:64).

#### 2.1.2.3.1.2. *Reactional process*

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006:67), Vector is shown as a “eyeline or a direction of a glance by a represented participant” in the second procedure, known as the “Reactional process”. The portrayed actors in this process are often introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) as “Reacter”, or the person who looks, and “Phenomenon”, or the one who receives the gaze. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the reactional process, like the action process, may be in a non-transactional form with only the Reacter present or a transactional structure with the Phenomenon present.

#### 2.1.2.3.1.3. *Speech process*

A unique vector is used in speech processes and may be seen in comic strips, textbook quotations, automated bank tellers, and other media. “The thought balloons” and “the dialogue balloons” oblique protrusions that link speakers' or thinkers' drawings to their speech or thought (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:68). The audience, who is drawn in by the material, and the one who takes on the role of “Speaker” in the speaking process are both involved in this process.

#### 2.1.2.3.1.4. *Mental process*

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the image appears in form of a “thought bubble” connected to the viewer in the mental process. While, in a speech process, the content of a “dialogue bubble” is connected to the viewer (p.68). Participants in these two processes are the viewer who is connected by the content and the person who becomes “Senser” in terms of the mental process (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:68).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) claim that the picture manifests as a mental activity related to the spectator, like a “thought bubble”. While the spectator is linked to the content of a “dialogue bubble” throughout a speaking process (p. 68). Participants in these two processes include the person who becomes a “Senser” in terms of the mental process and the spectator who is linked by the content (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:68).

#### 2.1.2.3.2. *Conceptual representation*

“Representing participants in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, structure, or meaning” is the non-narrative process of conceptual representation (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:79). According to Kress and van Leeuwen, generalization processes are what define conceptual representation. The three basic processes of the kind of idea representation in picture enterprises—classificational, analytical, and symbolic—are then generalized by the two scholars.

##### 2.1.2.3.2.1. *Classificational process*

Classificational processes establish a kind of relationship between participants, or a taxonomy: a minimum of one group of participants will assume the position of Subordinates in relation to a minimum of one other participant, known as the Superordinate (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:79). This structure is covert taxonomy since viewers may determine the superordinate based just on the verbal information provided in the surrounding text or by seeing comparable traits visually shared by subordinates. When participants are the same size and face the same direction in relation to the horizontal and vertical axes, this structure links them by an equal distance. In explicit taxonomies, a single person might have superior status over some other participants while simultaneously having subordinate status toward others. Participants of this kind may be referred to as “interordinates”. Stated differently, level is an additional feature of overt taxonomies in which players share some degree of similarity.

#### *2.1.2.3.2.2. Analytical process*

Participants are linked via analytical procedures using a part-whole framework. One Carrier (the total) and any number of Possessive Attributes (the parts) are the two players in these operations, respectively. In essence, a methodical procedure that links individuals using a part-whole framework. Participants in this situation may be divided into two categories: carriers, who function as the whole, and possessors, who function as the pieces (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006).

#### *2.1.2.3.2.3. Symbolic process*

A symbolic process centers on the meaning or identity of the participant. When two people are involved in this arrangement, the Symbolic Attribute symbolizes the meaning or identity itself, while the Carrier fulfills its identity or accomplishes its meaning in the process. We refer to this kind of structure as Symbolic Attributive. The Carrier is the single member of this structure if there is just one. We call this kind of activity Symbolic Suggestive (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). Symbols replace vectors as the mechanism of carrying out that function; entities are intimately associated with the symbolic characteristics that comprise them (Kress & van Leeuwen 2020).

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Data collection***

The author collects 30 images from 5 online articles in The Telegraph, involving restaurant reviews from 5 food reviewer-reporters. These samples are mainly chosen from the newspaper from 2020 to 2023. They are applied as specific examples in our discussion so as to explore the representation meaning of visual images and the relationship between visual images and verbal text with images and explain how visual images and verbal text combine with each other to expose meanings.

The representational function is expressed by the meaning structure of the image and is divided into two types: narrative meaning and conceptual meaning. The narrative meaning of an image is expressed through experiential processes with specific objects and contexts. The three elements: process – participants – circumstances of the image signal are represented by shapes, vectors, and connections.

#### ***3.2. Multimodal discourse analysis***

This study uses discourse analysis to analyze how images are arranged and created meaning for newspaper restaurant review discourse. Besides, the descriptive method is also used to describe the features of image grammar in these discourses. Statistical methods are also used to analyze the corpus to demonstrate the arguments in this study. 30 samples were collected from five online newspaper restaurant reviews from 2020 to 2023 by five different food expert authors.

### **4. FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 About participants**

Objects or elements existing in visual images will be called “participants” which compose of people, place and things of various kinds represented in and by images. Actually, Kress and van Leeuwen distinguishes two types of participants, one is interactive participants and the



other is represented participants. It is revealed from the analysis of images in five restaurant reviews that 90% of the images have objects particularly food and dishes (27/30 images) as participants. They are represented participants because they “constitute the subject matter of the communication; that is, the people, places and things (including abstract ‘things’) represented in and by the speech or writing or image, the participants about whom or which we are speaking or writing or producing images” (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006:48). Only 10% of the images have interactive participant who are people in the act of communication, “who speak and listen or write and read, make images or view them” (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006:48).

#### **4.2. About circumstances**

The circumstances are mostly inside the restaurant, on a dining table with a warm and cozy, clean and tiny atmosphere and slick interior (22/30 photos). Four photos are taken in the kitchen or bar counter so readers can see the chefs' working process and create delicious dishes and beautiful drinks. Four photos were taken outside the restaurant to help readers have an overview of the restaurant's location and space.

#### **4.3. About processes**

According to the research, the major players in both the narrative and conceptual processes have been portrayed through 30 photographs. Nonetheless, there are more intellectual processes than narrative ones in these panels. To illustrate the thesis in these panels, the participants are shown in 25 symbolic processes, yet they only complete three actional, one mental, and one reactional processes. Put otherwise, the portrayal of these panels involves just five distinct narrative procedures. As a result, these panels are often conceptual rather than narrative, which aids in conveying more meaning via the dynamic character portrayals. From now on, the characters shown strive to accentuate and bolster the primary goal of these panels, which is to convey a message to the viewers in the form of a meal.

##### **4.3.1. Symbolic process**

It is easy to understand why symbolic process is the main characters of restaurant reviews instead of the classificational process which deals with taxonomies, and the analytical one which is preferable for maps and economic domains to be stated analytically. The symbolic process conceptually describes the symbolic icons of the food such as the dish, the table, the chef. Symbolic Attributes are realized by the exaggerated size, sharp focus on the dish, and intense colors and tone. The expression can be seen from the frames below.



*Photo 1: A salad dish (Source: The Telegraph)*

This is an example of a visually appealing salad to illustrate the symbolic processes in a food dish. Salad is presented on a plate with careful attention to visual composition. The salad is a mix of vibrant green lettuce leaves, red cherry tomatoes, thinly sliced purple onions, golden grilled chicken strips, and a sprinkle of toasted almonds. The ingredients are arranged in a way that creates a sense of balance and harmony. The presence of vibrant green lettuce leaves and ripe red cherry tomatoes conveys a sense of freshness and health. The use of vibrant colors, such as green lettuce, red tomatoes, and purple onions, adds visual appeal to the salad. These colors may represent nature, vitality, and a variety of flavors. They can also evoke a sense of excitement and anticipation, enticing the viewer to indulge in the dish. The combination of ingredients, such as lettuce, tomatoes, onions, grilled chicken, and toasted almonds, represents a diverse range of flavors and textures. This implies that the salad offers a satisfying and well-rounded culinary experience, combining elements of freshness, tenderness, crispiness, and nuttiness.



*Photo 2: A new vegan restaurant (Source: The Telegraph)*

Symbolic process is represented by the participant aims or symbolizes. There are two kinds of participants, namely, the carrier represents the participant whose meaning or identity is established in the relation, and the symbolic attribute is the participant who represents the meaning or identity itself. As can be seen from this photo, a small plant grown in a pot is placed next to a piece of paper with the word Genesis rolled into a spiral in a vase. The symbolic

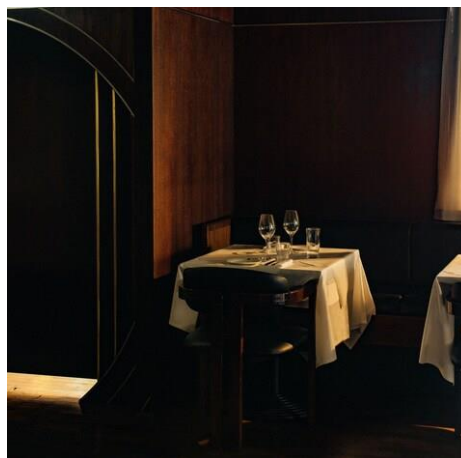


meaning of this image is that Genesis restaurant is like a tree growing every day, growing green and full of vitality. The intense color and sharp focus on the objects on the table make this image impressive and leaves a strong message to the viewers.



*Photo 3: Beef and broccoli at the Mash Inn (Source: The Telegraph)*

Steak and broccoli represent a balance of flavors, textures, and nutritional elements. The rich, savory steak contrasts with the crisp, green broccoli, symbolizing the harmony between different aspects of life or the need for balance in one's choices and actions. Steak is often associated with strength and vitality due to its high protein content and perception as a hearty, substantial food. Pairing it with broccoli, a nutritious vegetable, can symbolize a well-rounded and healthy lifestyle or the pursuit of physical and mental well-being. The complementary flavors and elements of the dish can represent the idea that different individuals can come together and complement each other to create a harmonious bond. Moreover, the way the dish is presented makes diners think of a fertile land with lush green trees and a winding stream. The harmony between human and nature, animals and plants makes the earth a place worth living.



*Photo 4: A matinee lunch (Source: The Telegraph)*

This photo makes a sharp contrast of colors. A table is placed in the corner of a restaurant. On the white tablecloth is a tableware set including plates, spoons and glasses. Everything is neatly and neatly arranged. The light shining on the table creates a cozy feeling. The color contrast between the dark color of the restaurant space and the light color of the tablecloth and tableware creates a luxurious feeling. The image shows how elements within an image are arranged and organized to create visual meaning. In the context of food dishes, composition plays a crucial role in conveying specific messages or eliciting certain responses from viewers. The arrangement of ingredients, colors, textures, and other visual elements can evoke associations, cultural references, or aesthetic appeal. The goal of composition is to engage the viewer's gaze and shape their interpretation and emotional response to the image. This arrangement may imply that the dish is not only delicious but also visually pleasing, emphasizing the importance of presentation and overall dining experience.

#### 4.3.2. Actional process



*Photo 5: Mash's head chef Jon Parry (l) and chef Dom Ahearne (r) at work (Source: The Telegraph)*

The surrounding scenery shows that this is a conversation between two chefs taking place in a small kitchen with many kitchen utensils, through which you can see the busy working atmosphere. One chef is talking to the other chef while holding a knife, seemingly preparing to cut meat, looking at the other chef's actions. The remaining chef is pouring a liquid (cooking oil or vinegar) into the meat, and seems very focused on his work. There are two participants in this process, they are both actors, and the goal is the meat. The two people stood in equal positions, in front of a cooking table in the kitchen, with equal prominence. There is one vector from the chef's eyes, which leads the viewer to see that he is looking at the other chef, and one vector created by the chef's arm connecting him with the cooking oil and the slice of meat; hence, making the slice of meat goal. This is one of the rare restaurant review photos that does not capture the food or diners but instead chooses the chef to illustrate.



*Photo 6: A dish (Source: The Telegraph)*

In action processes, the Actor is the participant from which the vector emanates, or which itself, in whole or in part, forms the vector (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006). Action processes could be transactional processes and non-transactional processes. Transactional processes have both goal and actor, while non-transactional processes have no goal. Photo 6 is an example of action process in which the Actor is unknown. In this figure, we can see a hand slowly pouring sauce onto the food placed on the plate. The viewer cannot see the person who pours the sauce, the customer, the waiter or the chef. Only the sauce (Vector) and the dish (Goal) emerge in this image.

#### **4.3.3. Reactional process**



*Photo 7: Maresco Restaurant (Source: The Telegraph)*

In reactional process, “the vector is formed by an eyeline, by the direction of the glance of one or more of the represented participants” (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:67). The reactor and the phenomena are its two constituent parts. Those that engage in gazing activity are known as reactors. Either an animal or a person may be found there. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), a phenomenon is “the participant at whom or which the reactor is looking.” You can see the expression in the shot above. Though there are three chefs in the picture, only two of

them are interacting with each other and seem to be coming to a consensus while the third chef is really cooking. The vector that shows the whole procedure is a response is the eyeline separating the two guys. The transactional action structure is the Phenomenon, and the two chefs are the Reacter. The people's grins and eye lines revealed their reactional processes. The picture was shot at the bar counter of a high-end eatery with elegant interior design and furnishings, demonstrating the restaurant's sophistication.

#### 4.3.4. *Mental process*



*Photo 8: Diners at restaurant (Source: The Telegraph)*

This is a photo of two diners dining at the restaurant. They put their arms around each other's shoulders and looked straight into the camera lens. The two people's faces exuded a happy and comfortable mood, expressed through their bright eyes and bright smiles on their faces. Both of them stand in one line and look towards the viewers with big smiles. No vector links these two participants up. So their relations can be interpreted as accompaniment. They have direct gazes at the viewer and appear to address the viewer with a visual “you” inviting the viewer to establish an imaginary relationship with them.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of MDA provides an important advance in the study of discourse associated with visual signals. The visual image analysis framework proposed by the two authors demonstrates superior ability in analyzing the meaning and role of visual signals in a variety of genres, especially journalism. Applying the image analysis framework of the MDA analysis method to the analysis of photo signals of electronic newspaper discourse shows the important role of images as a meaning-making resource. Visual images are specific evidence, adding information to the content, increasing the reliability and persuasion of news on electronic newspapers. Images contain a large amount of information that words do not mention, increasing communication efficiency between discourse and readers. Not only that, images are also a means of transmitting hidden meanings that in many cases journalists do not express explicitly. This clearly demonstrates that it is impossible to fully read news discourse without visual cues.

The paper conducted a multimodal discourse analysis of 30 photos used in five restaurant reviews from The Telegraph newspaper. By analyzing the use of vectors and their direction in



the visual image, Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that we can uncover underlying processes and meanings encoded within the image. Various kinds of visuals organise and represent their meanings representationally (ideationally). The representational meaning in the visual mode displayed both conceptual and narrative representation. The analysis of the representational meaning shows that there is a predominance of conceptual representation, more specifically symbolic process. Out of 30 images analyzed, 25 are symbolic and only 5 are of the other types. The careful attention to visual composition suggests that the food is thoughtfully arranged on the plate. The placement of ingredients in a balanced manner creates a sense of harmony and aesthetic appeal.

Through analyzing 30 photos, the research results show the importance of non-linguistic elements in creating meaning for the discourse. These elements are designed to have a strong impact on the reception and feelings of viewers, thereby "inviting" them to read the articles and visit the restaurants.

## REFERENCES

- Guijarro, J., & Sanz, M. (2008). Compositional, interpersonal and representational meanings in a children's narrative: A multimodal discourse analysis. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40, 1601-1619. (Online) Retrieved 22 May 2009, from [www.esvier.com/locate/pragmatics](http://www.esvier.com/locate/pragmatics)
- Halliday, M. A. (1978). *Language as a social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. Baltimore: Edward Arnold. Retrieved from [Language as social semiotic The social interpretation of language and meaning \( PDFDrive \).pdf](#)
- Kress, G. & T. van Leeuwen. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, G. and T. van Leeuwen (2000). *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. London: Arnold.
- Kress, G., & Leeuwen, T. V. (2006). *Reading Images: the grammar of visual design*. Abingdon: Routledge. Retrieved from [Kress, von Leeuwen 2006 Reading Images The Grammar of Visual Design.pdf](#)
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2020). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Routledge.