

## **1001 Images from Tahrir Square: A study of intertextuality and dialogicality in protest messages**

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The wave of pro-democracy protests which swept through the Arab world in 2011 has afforded a unique opportunity for researchers from a wide array of academic disciplines including linguistics. During the January 25 revolution in Egypt, the extensive media attention on Tahrir Square as the epicentre of anti-government protests has yielded a rich collection of images which capture what can only be described as an astounding volume of protest messages. These messages were often visually and linguistically innovative. In this paper, I take a quantitative approach at studying a key feature of the protest messages; namely intertextuality. To do this, I rely on an annotated visual corpus of over 1000 images where the messages were recorded and then statistically analysed to investigate the role of intertextuality as a tool for linguistic innovation. To cover the horizontal dimension of intertextuality, intertextual references were divided into three types: material, structural and constitutive. Statistical analysis reveals the relationship between these three types of intertextuality and elements such as code, theme and humour. Supplementary qualitative analysis reveals how the messages in the corpus were also related vertically, continuing an overarching dialogue between the anti-government protesters and Mubarak's regime. This dialogicality illustrates how the protest messages were informed by previous discourse and informed future discourse, which links closely to the principles of geosemiotics – that signs must be interpreted in the context of how, when and where they are displayed.

### **Introduction**

The name Tahrir Square has become almost synonymous with the 2011 Egyptian revolution. This is hardly surprising given the extensive media coverage that the revolution received, and the focus on the protests in Tahrir Square which had become the symbolic heart of the revolution. Hence, it only seems fitting that my data should draw on images which were captured in and around Tahrir Square between January 25<sup>th</sup> and February 11<sup>th</sup> 2011. On the one hand, the focus on Tahrir Square has made visual material documenting the protests readily available, and on the other, it has arguably influenced the very nature of the messages with protesters “showcasing” their messages to a wide audience.

This paper is based on a broader study of various aspects of the protest messages from Tahrir Square. The study involved statistically analysing approximately 1,500 messages which were extracted from a collection of over a thousand images taken by both amateur and professional photographers. However, I only focus on intertextuality and dialogicality in this paper. The two terms are explained below with examples from the corpus.

## Intertextuality

Broadly speaking, intertextuality involves the reproduction of a text or its structure in a different context for a range of purposes, e.g. irony, parody, humour, reverence, etc.. Following the distinctions found in the literature on intertextuality, the intertextual references encountered in the corpus were divided into three types: *material intertextuality*, *structural intertextuality* and *constitutive intertextuality*.

Of the three, *material intertextuality* is the easiest to detect. Here, “the establishment of an intertextual relation is dependent on the existence of concrete texts” (Duszak 2009:45) and involves the repetition of signs. This was the most frequently occurring type of intertextuality in the corpus. Examples of material intertextuality in the protest signs include clear quotes from public figures, citing popular sayings or proverbs and famous verses of poetry or prose. However, the most recurring examples of material intertextuality were in the form of Quranic verses or prophetic sayings, with material intertextuality correlating significantly with protest messages of an Islamic theme. This also explains the fact that the vast majority of material intertextuality in the corpus is in Standard Arabic.

It may perhaps also be useful to think of material intertextual references as possessing ‘degrees of concreteness’. References were sometimes so concrete that the protest sign would sport portions of a photocopied newspaper article. For example, on February 6<sup>th</sup>, an Egyptian newspaper, *Al Masry Al Youm*, published a one page spread with pictures of young people who had lost their lives in the protests under the heading *the Flowers that have Bloomed in the Gardens of Egypt*. In the following days, protesters in Tahrir square could be seen with signs referring to the newspaper article, ranging from the mere use of the headline, to actual photocopies of the article itself.

However, intertextuality is not always this clear; intertextual relations are often subtler and more difficult to detect. As Duszak (2009: 45) points out, “intertextual linking often depends first of all on the availability of non linguistic knowledge, especially cultural knowledge, for making bridging connections between texts, topics and strategies”. This knowledge is essential in detecting structural and constitutive intertextual links.

*Structural intertextuality* is another term that Duszak uses to refer to cases where a “kinship between texts is conceived of in terms of style, textual format, ideologies or writing conventions” (2009:45). Here, “our general ability to reason, conceptualize abstractions or establish analogies” is central to identifying the intertextual link. In this paper, I reserve the term structural intertextuality to refer to instances where the original message (though still detectable) is reworked in some way rather than reproduced without change. I distinguish between this and a similar type of intertextuality, *constitutive intertextuality*, which Fairclough (1992) refers to as interdiscursivity. The constitutive intertextuality of a text, Fairclough (1992:104) explains, “is the configuration of discourse conventions that go into its production”. It may be said that constitutive intertextuality occurs when a text adopts or borrows from the discourse conventions of a certain genre, style or register. I reserve this term for cases where the intertextual link cannot be traced to a particular message but rather to the conventions of a certain discourse field. In some cases, these links may have to do partly or entirely with the visual presentation of the message rather than with linguistic aspects of it.

These two latter types of intertextuality do have something in common however, and this is that they both correlate significantly with humour. In structural intertextuality, the message assumes the linguistic structure of a past message, but certain elements of the message are reworked in what

effectively becomes a parody of the original message, and in so doing produces a comic effect. Although there were half as many examples of structural intertextuality in the corpus as there were of material intertextuality, structural intertextuality was still abundant. Examples included reworked references to traditional sayings, verses of poetry, and lines from popular movies, TV series or songs.

An example of this was the repeated presence of a verse of poetry in the protest messages. The verse comes from a poem by the Tunisian poet, Abu Al Qassim Al Shabi, which had grown very popular immediately following the Tunisian revolution. The verse in question translates into *If the people one day will to live, then destiny must respond*. In the first days of the Egyptian revolution the verse could be occasionally seen, reproduced in its original form – an example of material intertextuality. However, as the protests progressed, a reworked version of the verse began to appear, *If the people one day will to live, then the **cows** must respond*, where the Arabic words for destiny and cows rhyme. Another example of structural intertextuality was in the reworking of traditional sayings. One saying, *honour the dead by burying them*, was reworked into *honour the **regime** by burying it*. Again the integrity of the original structure is maintained and this contributes to the comic effect.

The underlying principle for constitutive intertextuality is the same except that there is no concrete ‘original’ message which could be identified, but rather an intertextual crossing into another discourse field, again for satirical purposes. This was the least common type of intertextuality in the corpus. It included messages which had the linguistic structure of documents such as a birth certificate or a pink slip, or genres such as a language lesson or a mobile service message. Visual presentation was sometimes essential to this type of intertextuality, where a different discourse field was invoked by physical characteristics of the sign. For instance, there were several protest signs fashioned after automobile license plates with the word “leave” in Arabic inscribed on them. Other examples included an expiration bar code, a warning message on a cigarette pack, and several messages with a technological theme (e.g. a Facebook friend request).

It is worth noting that there was no significant difference between the codes correlating with these two latter types of intertextuality; that is to say that structural and constitutive intertextuality occurred both in Standard Arabic and Egyptian Arabic (and sometimes even in English). It may be said that structural and constitutive intertextuality afford a greater opportunity for innovation and creativity, allowing the writer to produce original or ‘witty’ messages. Material intertextuality on the other hand may be regarded as “lazy” intertextuality, where another text is simply reproduced in a different context.

A related concept is that of re-contextualisation; according to Duszak (2009) intertextuality and re-contextualisation are two sides of the same coin. She explains that while on the one hand, “no text is ‘the same’ on its subsequent actualizations”, on the other hand, “texts may be, more or less purposefully, adjusted to suit various situations, users, genres or ideologies” (Duszak 2009:49). This can be seen to apply to all three types of intertextuality discussed above. It also applies to the repetition of some dominant slogans in the protest signs. One of these was the Arabic slogan *the people want to bring down the regime*. This was a slogan which was chanted in the Tunisian revolution and became very popular with the Egyptian protesters from the first day of the revolution. It then appeared on many of their protest signs, including two of the largest banners in Tahrir Square. The Tunisian slogan, in its subsequent reproduction in the Egyptian revolution, had effectively been recontextualised and ‘adopted’ by the Egyptian revolution. This particular slogan was so prevalent that even later recontextualisations in protests across the Arab world and in Occupy movements around the world

would sometimes link the slogan with a direct reference to the Egyptian revolution, obscuring its Tunisian origin.

Another relevant concept here is that of indexicality. In a narrow sense, indexicality may be defined as the manner in which the sign system of language points to other signs, objects or semiotic systems in the world around language (Scollon and Scollon 2003). The material intertextual references from the Tunisian revolution were indexes of that revolution and its recent success. Similarly, recontextualised slogans from the Egyptian revolution were often used explicitly to index the Egyptian revolution. More broadly, indexicality refers not only to the 'pointing' function of language, but entails (and invokes) the association of a linguistic form or structure with a socially or culturally accepted set of ideas or values (cf. Agha 2007; Dyer 2007). In this broader sense, it may be said that each of the examples of constitutive intertextuality in the corpus are indexical of a certain discourse field by virtue of how the message is presented.

### **Dialogicality**

In order to understand the relationship between dialogicality and intertextuality it must first be explained that there are two dimensions of intertextuality, a vertical and a horizontal (Fairclough 1992:103). The vertical dimension refers to "intertextual relations between a text and other texts which constitute its more or less immediate or distant contexts: texts it is historically linked with in various time-scales and along various parameters, including texts which are more or less contemporary with it" (*ibid.*). The three types of intertextuality discussed above encompass this dimension. On the other hand, the horizontal dimension refers to "intertextual relations of a 'dialogical' sort ... between a text and those which precede and follow it in the chain of texts" (*ibid.*). This latter dimension is referred to here as dialogicality – a process in which a text is in continual dialogue with other texts; it is informed by previous texts and informs future texts (cf. Bakhtin 1991).

Several horizontal relations could be traced in the corpus by examining some of the themes which score a high frequency. For instance, many protest messages referred to Mubarak's alleged fortune of \$70 billion. This was in response to an article published in *The Guardian* on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 2011 (and subsequently translated and cited by local media) estimating Mubarak's family fortune at this figure. Moreover, numerous messages mockingly responded to rumours promoted by State television that the protestors in Tahrir Square were being given free meals from the KFC fast food chain. Similarly, many satirised the claim of the then newly appointed Vice President, Omar Suleiman, that the protestors harboured foreign 'agendas'. Several messages are in response to something that Mubarak had said in one of his speeches. On the opposite end, Mubarak's speeches often contained phrases such as *they say...* or *there are some who call for...* and this could be clearly traced to the protestors' demands. When Mubarak stressed in his final presidential address that he would not leave the country, it was in response to the multitude of signs (and chants) demanding that he "leaves". It is useful to regard the messages from Tahrir Square and the social interaction surrounding them as a semiotic aggregate with intersecting discourses and interactions mutually influencing each other in a kind of "interdiscursive dialogicality" (cf. Scollon and Scollon 2003). The revolutionary discourses from Tahrir Square and beyond were responding to this semiotic aggregate, and in so doing partaking in an overarching dialogue between the protestors, the government and the media.

It is also useful here to bring in insights from the field of geosemiotics, defined by Scollon and Scollon (2003:2) as "the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses in the

material world”, centring around the idea that discourses are ‘situated’ (both in place and time). Geosemiotics has three broad aspects which are all of relevance to the discussion of intertextuality in this study. The first aspect is visual semiotics (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996), which covers all the ways in which visual material such as signs, images, text graphics, etc. “are produced as meaningful wholes for visual interpretation” (Scollon and Scollon 2003:8) – this is of particular relevance to constitutive intertextuality where messages derive their meaning partly or wholly from their physical presentation. The second aspect is the interaction order, which “consists of the current, ongoing, ratified (but also contested and denied) set of social relationships we take up and try to maintain with the other people who are in our presence” (Scollon and Scollon 2003:16). This aspect allows us to incorporate meaningful interactions beyond the messages which contribute to the semiotic aggregate centring around Tahrir Square. For instance, it allows us to include verbal interactions, particularly protest chants – many of which are mirrored in the written signs. Finally, the third aspect is place semiotics which has to do with the physical placement of signs in the material world. As Scollon and Scollon explain “the central thesis of geosemiotics is that exactly *where* on earth an action takes place is an important part of its meaning” (2003:19). The protest messages from Tahrir square can only be fully understood in the context of where and when they were situated. The meaning of these messages is geographically situated: in Tahrir square, the epicentre of anti-government protests; and in Egypt, hence the plethora of intertextual references to Egyptian culture and heritage. It is also temporally situated: Messages at different points in the revolution are thematically different, responding to perceived and anticipated events and forming an ongoing dialogue between the sign-writers and the world without.

## Conclusion

In a sense, intertextuality and dialogicality are inextricably linked. As Kristeva (1986:39) once remarked, intertextuality implies “the insertion of history (society) into text and of this text into history” – a remark that Fairclough (1992: 102) elucidates thus:

By ‘the insertion of history into a text’, she means that the text absorbs and is built out of texts from the past (texts being the major artefacts that constitute history). By ‘the insertion of the text into history’, she means that the text responds to, reaccentuates, and reworks past texts, and in so doing helps to make history and contributes to wider processes of change, as well as anticipating and trying to shape subsequent texts.

This study has demonstrated how history was inserted into the text of protestors in Tahrir Square through the three types of intertextuality discussed above, with each actualisation of past discourses (or of discourse fields) doubling as a recontextualisation which serves a communicative end. The study has also demonstrated how the protest messages were inserted into history, with an ongoing dialogue between texts which ‘respond’ to discourses about the revolution. It is this reworking, reaccentuation and re-contextualisation which underpins intertextuality in its various forms, and it is this mutual interaction between text and history which constitutes the dialogicality of present texts with past and future discourse.

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