Where to Draw the Line when the Lines are Blurred: A Computational and Functional Analysis of Cohesion in Comics

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Thanks in part to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) explication of cohesion in text, linguists have long established the relation between cohesive devices employed, text type and register (Brooks and Warren 1972; Louwerse, McCarthy, McNamara & Graesser 2004). In the past few decades, the genre of comics has become the focus of research from both semiotic (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; Barthes 1997; Groensteen 2007; Kukkonen 2011) and cognitive linguistic perspectives (Eisner 1996; Cohn 2013). However, very little research has been devoted to cohesion in the multimodal context of comics.

The present research addresses this deficit by examining text in English graphic novels and superhero comics. Upon separating spoken from written text found in and outside of speech bubbles, Coh-Metrix is used to establish the texts' cohesive and semantic attributes (e.g. lexical density, connectives, type-token ratio, syntactic complexity, etc.). The most common cohesive devices and functions have been collated to present a lexical repertoire emblematic of comics. Passages with low inter-sentential cohesion have undergone semantic and discourse analyses to determine the causes of breaks in cohesion. Further, semiotic analyses use the images with which the incohesive text appears in order to account for any cohesion deficiencies. These analyses facilitate identifying systematicity in cohesive breaks and may provide insight into whether the text or image is more pivotal in maintaining cohesion in comics. Finally, while it is assumed that images may fill cohesive gaps in either the spoken or written text, onomatopoeia, due to its iconic character, may also act as a cohesive tie in comics. The paper therefore also investigates the role onomatopoeia plays in maintaining cohesion amongst panels.

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