

CONTEXTUAL MEANING OF COLOUR IN SELECTED PROTEST POSTERS OF RUSSIA'S FEBRUARY 2022 ATTACK ON UKRAINE

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Abstract

War has the tendency to spark off different actions and reactions from those directly involved in the war and those not involved. Posters are some ways through which reactions are displayed against war actions; meanings are conveyed not only through words, but also through other semiotic resources like colour. The aim of the study is to reveal insights into the different layers of meaning colours add to other semiotic elements in selected posters of the February 2022 Russia versus Ukraine war. To achieve the aim of the study, the study adopts the qualitative method of enquiry into the meanings colour can add to semiotic elements in posters. Nineteen posters were purposively selected and downloaded from online, and analysed using insights from Social Semiotic theory. The objectives of the study are: to find out the different shades of meaning discernable in the colours used in the posters; to examine how anger is encoded in the protest posters of Russia versus Ukraine war. The study found that colour, a semiotic element has great meaning potentials; colour red prevalent in most of the posters symbolise Russia, and connote danger, anger, and warning; colour blue and yellow in some posters symbolise Ukraine, and connote resilience and peace. The study concludes that colour is very powerful in the conveyance of meaning, and context helps to add the right meaning to colours. It is recommended that poster creators should use semiotic elements that are relevant to meaning creation in whatever situation they try to portray.

Keywords: Russia versus Ukraine war, Protest posters, Colour meaning, Social semiotics, Colour red, Colour blue, Colour yellow.

1. Introduction and Background

Russia's attack on Ukraine on February 2022, sparked off different forms of protest both offline and online from people across the globe; in order to show support for Ukraine. Part of the target of goal sixteen, one of the sustainable development goals set up by the UN in 2015, is the eradication of all forms of violence. The UN sustainable development goals are adopted by the UN to make the world a peaceful and better place by 2030. Both Russia and Ukraine are members of the United Nations; and are bound by the goals to comply in the eradication of all forms of violence. Ugoala (2022, p. 28) point out that apart from words, people online use visuals to pass across messages; internet memes, colours and so on are some of such visuals.

From written reports, there is no immediate justifiable reason for Russia's attack on Ukraine. Some reports have it that Russia's attack on Ukraine is not unconnected with Ukraine's close affinity with NATO (Shehu, 2022; Kirby, 2022; Master, 2022), a move which provokes Russia.

Some others have it that Russia's war against Ukraine is a move to incorporate Ukraine within a greater Russia (Nye, 2022; Mearsheimer, 2022). Before the attack, Putin told the Russian people that he was conducting a "special military operation" to "denazify" Ukraine and prevent NATO from expanding to Russia's borders. Judging from this, it can be deduced from Putin's speech that two immediate reasons for the attack were to "denazify Ukraine", and to prevent NATO from expanding to Russia's border'. Putin, probably would have thought the war would have been a short one victorious war for Russia somewhat like the Soviet Union's takeover of Budapest in 1956 or Prague in 1968, but this is not the case, as the war has lasted over a year with Ukraine still on its feet. Olaf Scholz, the German chancellor, condemned the invasion as a "blatant violation of international law". Biden, the US president, described it as "an unprovoked and unjustified attack". Russia's attack on Ukraine has unquantifiable negative consequences for both countries as Wang et al. (2022) note. With the world's eyes fixed on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the global community has risen to show support for Ukrainians in words, images, posters and other semiotic resources.

Regards to Russia versus Ukraine war, Haque, Naeem, Wang et al. (2022) examine the human toll and humanitarian crisis of the Russia versus Ukraine war. They extracted and analysed data resulting from Russian military attacks on Ukrainians between 24 February and 4 August 2022. The data tracked direct deaths and injuries, damage to healthcare infrastructure and the impact on health, the destruction of residences, infrastructure, communication systems, and utility services – all of which disrupted the lives of Ukrainians. The study concludes that the 2022 Russia versus Ukraine War not only resulted in deaths and injuries but also impacted the lives and safety of Ukrainians through destruction of healthcare facilities and disrupted delivery of healthcare and supplies.

Tampubolon (2022) examines the geopolitical aspect of Russian invasion on Ukraine, the research utilized both qualitative and quantitative data to find out how many types of impacts the invasion cause on the global scale. The study concludes that Russia's attack on Ukraine has far-reaching negative effects on the global economy.

Cifuentes-Faura (2022) reviews some of the early economic consequences Russia's attack on Ukraine is having. The study concludes that the attack is affecting the financial markets with falls in the stock markets, and producing rises in the price of raw materials. This study suggests that the conflict foregrounds the importance for countries to diversify their sources of supply and not rely heavily on a single source.

Ugoala (2022) examines the flaming devices in President Putin's speech before the February 2022 attack on Ukraine, and found that Putin's used derogatory words, phrases and clause when referring to Ukraine, USA, and Nato in his speech. Faming devices have the tendency to infuriate the target(s) of the speech, and elicit negative reactions.

These studies show the negative consequences which Russia's attack on Ukraine pose for humanity. The current study furthers knowledge on the Russia versus Ukraine war to unearth how anger is depicted in the protest posters posted by netizens to show dissent for Russia's move. People no longer rely on written texts alone, they absorb all they see including human and non-human element for meaning making. The current study provides answers to the

questions: what are the different shades of meaning discernable in the colours used in the posters? how is anger encoded in the protest posters of Russia versus Ukraine war?

2. Social Semiotics

Social Semiotics is a branch of semiotic theory. Semiotics is the "study of the rules underlying the sign system and helps us understand the use and implications of signs, and in particular, visual and verbal signs in communication" (Fan, 2006, p.123). Semiotics is concerned with studying the discrepancy between illusion and reality (Cobley, 2010, p.3). Berger (2010, p. 4) notes that semioticians focus on studying "how meanings are constructed and how reality is mirrored and reflected. Regarding semiotics, Kress (2010, p. 54) notes that the basic unit of semiotics is the sign; it is an amalgamation of form and meaning; meaning as dictated by the context surrounding the sign. That is, the social and cultural contexts within which signs operate are crucial to the meanings of the signs. Social semiotics deals with meanings in all its appearances, in all social events, and in all cultural locations (Kress, 2010, p.2). According to Wong (2019), Social Semiotics is "a theory used to account for meaning-making (or sign-making) in social environments and social interactions" (p. 134). Social Semiotic theory is concerned with all forms of meaning. Furthermore, Social Semiotics is "an attempt to describe and understand how people produce and communicate meaning in specific social setting" (Sharif & Kamali, 2017). Also, Social Semiotics is concerned with how communicators utilize semiotic resources in language or visual communications to recognize their interests (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.17). Lemke (1990, p 183) notes that social semiotics is a blend of numerous modern approaches to the study of meaning and social action. The goal of visual social semiotics "is to make visible the social dimensions of meaning-making by focusing on the agency of the sign-maker and the social context in which the sign is produced" (Wong, 2019, p.4-5).

Colour is a social semiotic resource that has much impact on meaning creation. Colour can be iconic, indexical, and symbolic. An **iconic** sign indicates similarity and resemblance. It refers to signs that "serve to convey ideas of the things they represent by imitating them" (Peirce, 1998b, p. 5) and stands "for something merely because it resembles it" (Peirce, 1998b, p. 226). In Furtherance, "icons share characteristics in common with their designatum" (Hoolbrook, 1987, p. 84). **Iconic** signs, and in the context of this study, are those directly denoting the colour of a thing or object. Colours can generate resemblance to objects and thus serve as iconic referents to them, and the link lies in the colour's connotation of the object. The colour red, for example, is an iconic representation of blood. Following the definition of icons, colours can be considered iconic signs when they have some resemblance to their object. **An index** is a sign directly related to its object. Peirce (1998b, p. 461) defines indices as representing "their objects independently of any resemblance to them, only by virtue of real connections with them"; this is similar to Dingena (1994) who avers that an indexical sign indicates or shows that the sign is related to the object meant, for example, through connotation or through association. Research also suggests that an indexical relationship occurs when there is a belief that a real sign-object relationship exists. Fiske (1990) depicts the indexical relationship by denoting smoke as an index of fire, and sneezing as an index of having a cold. Indexical signs bear a direct link to what the sign refers to (the referent).

A **symbol** is a sign that has no logical relationship with its object. Peirce (1998b, p. 461) defines symbols as representing "[t]heir objects, independently alike of any resemblance or any real

connection, because dispositions or factitious habits of their interpreters insure their being so understood". Fiske (1990) specifies that in a symbolic relationship, the sign-object relationship is based on convention, agreement or rule. The meaning of a symbolic sign is based on common ground unwritten agreement between the sender and receiver. Words as verbal signs are one of the most obvious types of symbolic signs because they are generally understood through mutual agreement or are culturally learnt (Fiske, 1990). Although colours are commonly referred to as symbols, they only become symbols when a link between the sign and its object is established. For instance, the colour black in many cultures is synonymous with death and mourning. In some other context, the colour black can symbolise danger, also in some places white colour instead of black is used for mourning. The choice of a colour to symbolize something is culture dependent, that is, a culture chooses what colour to use for a particular situation. Context therefore plays a crucial role in the provision of meaning when it comes to colours. Also, the colour red, can indicate mourning, health or life in different contexts. According to Harrison (2003, p. 48), the meaning of sign depends on its society. The meaning of a colour changes when the background changes, the sign's signified changes with context to the inter relationship of the sign. Colours also carry socio-economic meaning. The actual meaning, in any particular situation, depends on the context in which the colour is being used. Colors can evoke intense emotional reactions in audiences and can also express meanings and concepts through association.

3. Methodology

The study is descriptive and qualitative. So many posters regarding Russia versus Ukraine war were found online. Nineteen posters were purposively chosen in line with the research objectives of the study. In other words, the protest posters must contain both linguistic elements, and images. The posters chosen were posted within three months of the commencement of the Russia versus Ukraine war in February 2022. In the analysis, posters that are similar are grouped and discussed under similar headings.

Social semiotics takes into account other sources of meaning since meanings are not purely made with verbal language but with a combination of multiple modes of communication such as pictures and colors simultaneously. The analysis investigates the connotation between signs and their meanings. Semiotic theory focuses on meanings evoked by all types of signs and explains the underlying mechanism to how colour communicates. The insights from Social semiotic theory guided the analysis. The posters are grouped according to the kind of semiotic resources they are comprised of. In the analysis, posters with similar images are put under the same sub-heads and analysed. The posters are discussed under three headings: icon, index and symbol.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

4.1. Iconic posters: Posters that are iconic display what we already know and have some idea of. Posters 1, 2, 3, and 4 below are iconic posters.



Poster 1



Poster 2



Poster 3



Poster 4

Iconic images provide ideas of what the readers already know; this is similar to common ground knowledge shared between the author and the reader, in this case, the author is the poster creator. Poster1 is the caricatured image of Putin. Putin's image is well known being a prominent public figure. The author based the variables in the poster with the knowledge that the human image in the poster is already well known, and so uses colour to show his/her anger of the war going on between Russia and Ukraine. Posters 1, 2, and 3, each has blood stained hand; poster 2 also has 'KILLER STOP PUTIN' written in red, ostensibly to draw attention to the bloodshed in Ukraine caused by Putin. The blood stained hand against Putin's face in posters 1 and 2, the blood stained hands in poster 3 depict anger, bloodshed and danger. Poster 3 addresses Putin directly to STOP PUTIN YOUR HANDS ON UKRAINE! The caricatured image of Putin in poster 1 is a way through which the author displayed displeasure of the war launched by Russia. All the semiotic elements in poster 4 are in red, possibly as a warning to Putin to 'Hands off Ukraine Now'. Red has ironic use, can be used for good or for bad. The knowledge helps the audience to sieve meaning that in this context it is for war. Russia is not mentioned; the image of Putin stands for the country. Blood as a

signifier refers to the sign “red” and “blood”, which in turn could generate a host of signified including injury, murder, violence, danger, Darrodi, (2012). This opinion of Darrodi, means that the meaning of a signifier is context, and cultural based.

4.1.2 Satiric posters

Satire posters use humour, exaggeration to mock and condemn people’s irrationalities, and shortcomings. See examples:



The posters above look comical, but are serious depictions of the desires of the creators. The creator of poster 5, deployed different colours to pass across the message that president Putin deserves to be put in jail (PUTIN JAIL) for launching war against Ukraine. The creator also played on Putin’s name. The so many colours on the face of the human element, and at the background makes him (Putin) look like a clown. Clowns are known to say silly things, so in poster 5, Putin represented by the clownish human image says ‘I SHOULD BE PUTIN JAIL’. In other words Putin should be put in jail for invading Ukraine. Similar to poster 5, poster 6 is a declarative statement ‘PUT.IN.BIN’; Putin’s action makes him useless, and qualifies him to be put in bin. Poster 7, seems to depict that Putin sucks blood as signified by the red colour of the human image. In this poster, the name of Putin is altered as ‘POO-TIN’, a mimickery of the name Putin.

4.2 Indexical Posters: Indexical posters make meaning through association. Under here, we have metaphoric posters, Burlesque posters and Malapropic posters. Examples are below:

4.2.1 Metaphoric posters:



Posters that are metaphoric conjure vivid images in the mind of the reader. The essence of metaphor is the transferring of meaning from one person to another, or from one object to another. The reader is expected to decode the hidden messages and meaning that are encoded in the posters through the use of the different semiotic elements the poster creator has used. The poster creators recreate the gloomy scenario of Adolf Hitler, whose policies then were against the Semitics, and led to the death of more than six million Jews, making him to be labelled as one of the most ill-famed person in history. In posters 8 and 9, the red colour conjures horrid image of death. In posters 8 and 10, the re-coined name of Putin recreate the genocide caused by Adolf Hitler. Adolf Hitler is one of the most mentioned leaders in history when it comes to war. Hitler was the main planner of the second world war, after his rise to power as the leader of the Nazi party in the 1920s. On 22nd June of the year 1941, Adolf Hitler attacked Russia in an operation tagged Operation Barbarossa; on 24th February 2022, Putin starts war on Ukraine. As a result of the tension on the Ukraine border, few weeks before the war, many protesters compared Putin to Adolf Hitler, as can be seen on posters 8, 9, and 10. Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the United States' House of Representatives criticized Putin for the invasion of Ukraine, comparing Putin to Adolf Hitler.

4.2.2 Burlesque posters



Poster 11

Poster 12

Poster 13

Burlesque posters mock its subject, through irony and obviously outrageous imagery. In poster 11, Vladimir, the first name of Putin is written in red font as Bloodimir, suggesting bloodshed; in other words, the war Putin launched in Ukraine is causing so much bloodshed. In poster 12 also, Vladimir Putin is written as 'Bloodimir Putin'; the first syllable is written in red font also like poster 11, probably suggesting bloodshed caused by the war in Ukraine. Poster 13 combines red and black to seemingly address Putin. The second person pronoun 'You' in poster 13 seems to address Putin directly, that he will reap what he sows. This is further illustrated in the distorted face of Putin, suggesting that Putin has sown war, he will reap a distorted face as a result of the war he launched against Ukraine. YOU REAP is in colour black, while WHAT YOU SOW is in red.

4.2.3 Malapropism

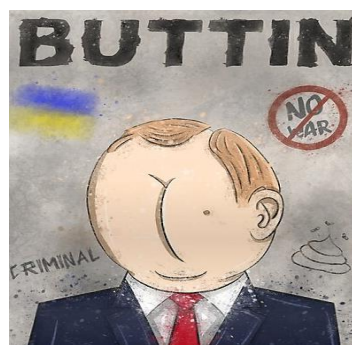
Malapropism occurs when an incorrect word is used in place of a word that has a similar sound. The use or misapplication of the word typically results in a statement that is both irrational and hilarious. The posters below are examples of the use of malapropism in posters:



Poster 14



Poster 15



Poster 16

Posters 14, 15, and 16 exemplify how wrong words are used in place of the right words. The wrong words used in the posters have similar sounds to the right words. In poster 14, the poster creator used 'Puck Futin' instead of 'Fuck Putin'. Likewise, in poster 15, instead of Putin, the creator used 'POO-TIN SUCKS', POO-TIN has a similar sound with Putin, the focus of the poster. Also, in poster 16, we see another creation of the name of Putin; the poster creator used BUTTIN and complements it with the picture of a human butt (buttocks) as the face of Putin. This is a derogatory reference to President Putin, all to show anger for Putin for launching war against Ukraine.

4.3 Symbolic Posters

Symbolic posters do not have any connection to the person or a thing depicted; but common ground helps in deciphering the meaning in such posters. A colour is a symbol when the link between the sign and object is arbitrary. This means that the symbolism of colours is understood only through common ground that exists among members of a community, region or country. The posters under here can be grouped into Synecdoche posters:

4.3.1 Synecdoche posters



Poster 17



Poster 18



Poster 19

In synecdoche posters, part of something is used to represent the whole, or vice versa. To be able to get the meaning of synecdoche posters, the semiotic elements used in the posters must be familiar things the reader knows already. Ukraine is not mentioned in posters 17, 18, and 19; but the yellow and blue colours symbolize Ukraine. The reader knows that blue and yellow is the colour of the flag of Ukraine, and thus symbolizes Ukraine. The large human head in poster 17 symbolises Putin. In the context of the war between the two countries, the meaning of the semiotic elements in the poster expands for the reader. In this poster, Putin, the president of Russia is satirized as biting more than he could chew. The head of Putin is given an intimidating size and look, larger than life. Despite the larger than life image, Putin is still unable to swallow Ukraine. Swallowing Ukraine will choke him as depicted on the words

ERSTICK DRAN!!! Erstick Dran' is a German term translated to English 'choke on it' or 'suffocate on it'. The red splashes of red colour in poster 18 like in others, symbolise bloodshed caused by Putin. The link between the sign and the meaning is pragmatic, because both the poster creators and the readers are aware of the context in which the posters are created, this helps decoding and encoding of the meaning of the posters.

5. Findings and Discussion

The analysis shows that colour red plays a prominent role in the meaning of most of the posters. Anger is portrayed in some of the posters through the caricature of Putin, and through the use of colours. Also, the colour red depicts different layers of meaning; for instance, the connotation or meaning of colour red in the posters differs. In posters 1, 3, 11, 12, 15, the colour red connotes anger from the poster creators against the war launched by Putin against Ukraine. In poster 2, 4, and 8, we see a different connotation of the colour red. Red in these posters connote warning to Putin to stop the war against Ukraine. Then, in poster 7 and 13 the colour red throws up a different connotation—danger and warning together. The colour red, which connotes blood in most cultures symbolise life; but in these posters, blood has a negative meaning—danger, anger, warning, and bloodshed. The colour red is given different interpretations in the same context—context of war. The context gives the colours the right connotation for the reader. As the colour red connotes, anger, danger, warning in the context of Russia and Ukraine war, the colour red in Indian-Hindu cultural traditions connote heat, energy, marriage, passion, and fertility. Conversely, while red connotes warning, anger, and danger in the posters, the blue and yellow of poster 17 connote resilient Ukraine; Putin could not swallow Ukraine. The blue and yellow coloured balloons connote peace in poster 18, also in poster 19, blue and yellow symbolise peace (poster 19), the human figure in poster 19 holds Putin and asks him to Get out of Ukraine. In other words, Putin's war in Ukraine is destabilising the peace of Ukraine. If say, the colour blue and pink instead of blue and yellow were used in the posters, the reader will find it difficult to conjure up in mind the appropriate object (Ukraine) meant by the poster creators.

6. Conclusion

In closing, apart from words, colours in posters do communicate ideas too. Poster creators use semiotic resources such as colour and object positioning to communicate with the viewers. When troubled situation arise like war, posters are some peaceful ways to express desire for the war to end. In creating iconic posters, creators use familiar semiotic resources to communicate with the audience or viewers. This includes colours, images, words and so on. Posters connotatively communicate with the audience through familiar things. In this case, the likely meaning can be arrived at mostly through transportation, that is, transfer of meaning from one semiotic element to another. Like words, non-linguistic elements in posters do have symbolism. There is usually a common ground between the poster creators and the audience. The poster creators design posters to symbolize what the reader can easily link up with. The colour used in any poster should be that which can easily conjure up the appropriate object of symbol for the reader. This therefore means that familiar objects, scenes are to be used in poster designs for both the creator and the reader to be on the same page in meaning encoding and decoding. This study recommends that poster creators should use semiotic elements that are relevant to meaning creation in whatever situation they try to portray.

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