

A Multimodal discourse analysis of Selected Visual Poems in the Book “Five Oceans in a Teaspoon”

Marwa Alaa' Al-Bazzaz

University of Baghdad

marwa.a@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq

Aws Nasri Al-Shijlawi

Al-Imam Al-Adham University College

awsnasri5@imamaladham.edu.iq

Abstract

The current study attempts a multimodal discourse analysis of selected visual poems in the book “Five Oceans in a Teaspoon” written by Dennis Bernstein and visualized by Warren Lehrer. This book is seen as a reflection of everyday struggles and how to survive in the face of diversity. It is a memoir representing the struggles, love, pain, and loss in the writer’s life journey. The present study aims to help the audience interpret visual poems and the hidden cognitive background in these poems. Also, the study seeks to show how multimodal discourse analysis represents everyday problems and struggles visually and linguistically. The adopted analysis of the selected poems is a multimodal discourse analysis following Forcville's (2016) approach to interpreting the visualized poems and the interpretation of the cognitive background that represents hidden ideologies. To sum up, using multimodal metaphors helps reinforce the understanding of psychological and social stereotypes in society.

Keywords: *visual poems, multimodality, discourse, typography, and cognitive metaphor theory.*

Introduction

Visual poetry is also known as pictorial poetry. It is seen as one of the modern trends of mixing language and art. In visual poetry, words behave as objects or things, or things as words, so there is a tangling relation between words and its visible forms or images that are inseparable, i.e. “what it means from what it looks” (Prohm, 2008). The importance of visual poetry lies in its ability to enable the readers to see the emergence of the language and visual elements. Moreover, visual poetry enhances our perception and interpretation of poems to new dimensions of meaning. To make it short, visual poetry can be defined as a literacy that enriches world by fostering creativity and artistic freedom.

The approach of multimodal discourse analysis considers text as only one mode of analysis among many others, i.e., (images, gestures, music, media, and others). Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996, 34) point out the realities of the “semiotic landscape” which are brought about by social and cultural factors. The idea is to intensify the blurring of the boundaries between textual (linguistic) mode due to the importance of other modes such as layout, image, document, design, and so on. This blurring of boundaries is a result of the realization that human predisposition towards multimodal meaning making, and multimodal semiotic development, requires attention to more than one semiotic, i.e., language in use (Vijay, Flowerdew, & Jones, 2008, p. 9)

Hence, the connection between visual poetry and multimodal discourse analysis is that *visual poetry*, as mentioned earlier, combines language and visual elements to create artistic compositions. The visual aspects of the poem, such as the arrangement of words, shapes, or images, play a crucial role in conveying meaning alongside the written language. This multimodal nature of visual poetry makes it an interesting subject for

multimodal discourse analysis. Therefore, *Multimodal discourse analysis* is used as an approach to study communication that contains multiple modes, such as language, images, gestures, and more. It aims to understand how different modes work together to construct meaning and influence interpretations. When multimodal is applied to visual poetry, it can help reveal how the combination of linguistic and visual elements contributes to the overall message and aesthetic impact of the poem. It allows researchers to explore the relationship between the verbal and visual components, analyzing how they interact, complement, or contradict each other to create specific meanings and evoke emotions. By employing multimodal discourse analysis to examine visual poetry, scholars and researchers can gain insights into the complex and nuanced ways in which language and visuals collaborate to form artistic expressions. This interdisciplinary approach enriches our understanding of both visual poetry as an art form and the broader field of multimodal communication and discourse analysis.

Cognitive Metaphor Theory and Multimodal Metaphor

Cognitive metaphor theory is a framework that suggests that the understanding of abstract concepts is often shaped by metaphorical mappings from more concrete domains. For example, we might use spatial metaphors like “up” and “down” to talk about concepts like happiness (“I’m feeling up today”) or control (“He’s at the top of his game”). Multimodal metaphor extends this idea by considering how different sensory modalities, such as visual, auditory, and tactile, can also contribute to metaphorical understanding. It suggests that human experience of the world through various senses can influence the metaphors one use and understand. For instance, a person might use visual metaphors like “bright idea” to convey insights or understanding.

In essence, cognitive metaphor theory provides the foundation for understanding how one conceptual understanding relies on metaphors, while multimodal metaphor explores how sensory experiences across different modalities can further shape these metaphorical connections (Lakoff & Johanson, 1980).

Methodology

The approach in the current study is a qualitative analysis of selected visual poems from a multimodal perspective. The selected visual poems are analyzed according to Forceville's approach to multimodality. This approach regards the idea of using pictorial/multimodal metaphor to describe the cognitive environment within the selected data since Forceville's approach premised his work on the cognitive metaphor theory (CMT) and blending theory. According to Forceville (Forceville, 1996, p. 108) the term mode is important to be understood because there are multiple modes, such as image, spoken language, written language, braille texts, and others. Different types of modes can be connected in the analysis. About the current data, the two modes that will be analyzed are *visual and written language*. Here are the key elements of Forceville's metaphor theory:

1. *Pictorial/multimodal Metaphor*: this type of metaphor is seen as essential to Forceville's theory. It refers to the visual representation of a certain idea and how it is related to other modes.
2. *Target and Source*: the target is considered as the object or the concept being represented, whereas the source is the object or the concept from which the metaphor is derived.
3. *Resemblance and Mapping*: pictorial/multimodal metaphor relies on the idea of mapping between the target and the source. This mapping

produces metaphorical meaning by transferring properties from the source to the target.

4. *Cognitive metaphor theory (CMT) and blending theory*: Forceville's metaphor theory incorporates insights from cognitive linguistics and blending theory. CMT and Blending theory explain how certain visual elements are used to represent certain cognitive backgrounds and conceptual blends.

5. *Context and Interpretation*: As in linguistic metaphor, the understanding of visual metaphor depends on the interpretation of the context in which it is used, i.e., the cognitive background and sociocultural contexts play an essential role in the understanding of the hidden meaning behind the analyzed visual metaphor.

According to Forceville's framework, other tropes can be included within the analysis of multimodality in addition to pictorial/multimodal metaphor, such as metonymy, simile, and other figurative tools. Fortunately, multimodal scholars depend on three interrelated affordances/competencies in the interpretation and mapping of the message within the selected discourse. Firstly, it is sensory access to the modes used by the medium. Secondly, the awareness of the conventions and codes of the medium in which the discourse occurs (e.g., television, radio, printed articles). The third competence is the awareness of the genre since it plays an essential factor in steering the understanding and interpretation of the discourse (Forceville, *Visual and multimodal communication across cultures*, 2022).

Data Selection

Concerning data selection, a purposive sampling technique is chosen. This technique is the most beneficial in collecting the visual poems from the book "Five Oceans in a Tea Spoon" since the four poems

are selected regarding various themes presented by the writer to cover up the highly influential themes within the book. The analysis of the data is a qualitative approach to verify the psychological and social background knowledge that is presented visually and linguistically within the selected poems. Three levels of analysis are interconnected: multimodal (i.e., Linguistic and typography) and psychological and social levels.

Data Analysis

As mentioned previously, the analysis of the poems connects three levels: multimodal (i.e., Linguistic and typography) and psychological and social levels.

1. The first visual poem is analyzed known as “Dyslexia” as shown below in figure 1.

The poem reveals the interrelation between two modes (i.e., linguistic and typography). Concerning “Dyslexia”, Forceville’s model of analysis shows that the source is presented by (the alphabet) as a pictorial metaphor whereas the target is the disability to stay in line represented in the dancing letters. The mapping of the elements (i.e., source and target) resembles the visual mode of the poem that presents the letters dancing as a representation of what happens in the brain of a dyslexic person. In terms of modes, the linguistic mode is prominent in the poem, connecting to the typography of the text could conjure up mental images of someone being confused by letters. The typography and layout could contribute to the overall meaning. This mapping between different modes is related to the mental and social background as a representation of dyslexic identity.

The visual mode is used to emphasize the struggle of this identity and the sense of confusion of a dyslexic person.

Regarding the metaphorical interpretation of the context, the first line sets up a potential metaphor where the speaker compares themselves to something that answers to multiple names and is also perplexed by the alphabet. The metaphor here could be one of "identity" and "confusion." The speaker might be representing a person who is versatile and has various facets but is struggling to understand or communicate due to the complexities of language.

The metaphorical interpretation of the second line continues the metaphor by emphasizing the speaker's experience of "drowning in 26 sounds." Here, the pictorial metaphor could be about the overwhelming nature of communication or language. The nature of dyslexia is usually misunderstood leading to a sense of isolation and frustration for those who have it. The mention of "never being able to stay between lines" might extend the metaphor to feeling disjointed or outside of established boundaries. Regarding the multimodal aspects, the linguistic mode is still prominent, but the typographic mode also comes into play as we're dealing with the concept of "sounds.", the arrangement of the text, the use of fonts, colors, and spatial positioning are used to further emphasize the sense of drowning or confusion. The emotional and psychological impact of being misunderstood is a very critical aspect of the poem, offering a window into the internal psychological and social experience of someone with dyslexia.

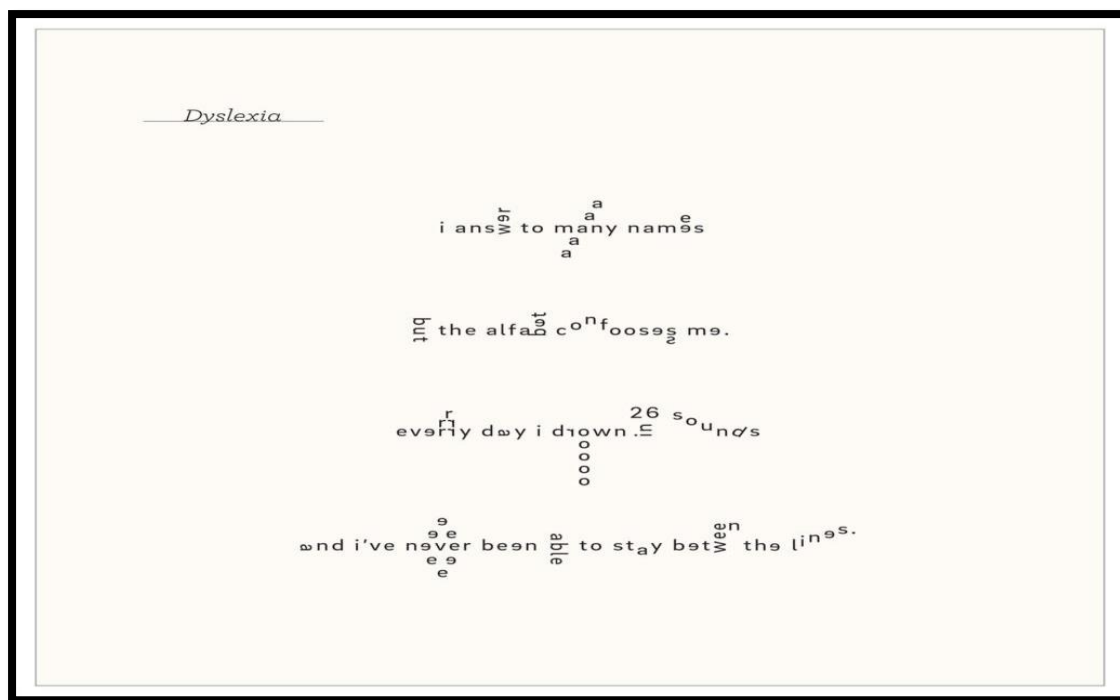


Figure 1: *The visual poem “Dyslexia” from the book “Five oceans in a Teaspoon” by Dennis Bernstein and Warren Lehrer.*

2. The second poem to be analyzed is “social studies” as shown in figure 2 below:

The analysis of the poem shows the use of multimodal metaphor in the poem, the pictorial metaphor is represented in the visual representation of “war” and “memory” in circular motion as something infinitive. The source is the memory and the target is memories. The mapping between source and target is a war that is seen as a reflection of memory that shapes different beliefs, attitudes, and struggles. The social and psychological background delves into the formation of identity and social awareness.

Concerning the multimodal interpretation of the context, it suggests that wars have their roots in collective and individual memories. From a multimodal perspective (i.e., the interconnection between linguistic mode and typographic mode) the poem, raises questions about how historical events and narratives are constructed, remembered, and passed down

through generations. Memory, as a form of discourse, plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of past conflicts, which can influence the onset of new conflicts.

The analysis of the visual poem indicates that wars have lasting impacts on memory, shaping how future generations remember and interpret historical events. It points to the enduring influence of war experiences on collective consciousness and cultural memory. The repetition of "wars" in the first line reinforces the idea that conflicts are perpetuated or reignited through memory-driven processes. This line highlights the role of historical grievances, unresolved issues, and narratives of victimhood or aggression in influencing present-day geopolitical tensions. From a critical discourse analysis perspective, it invites examination of how memories of past conflicts are manipulated to justify or escalate new wars (Bernstein & Lehrer, 2019)

Overall, this visual poem prompts the psychological reflection on the interconnectedness of memory, conflict, and war. They draw attention to the complex ways in which memory and historical narratives can shape perceptions, attitudes, and actions on both personal and societal levels. By analyzing these modes through a multimodal discourse lens, gaining insights into how memory and history contribute to the reproduction or challenge of power structures and ideologies that underpin conflicts and war

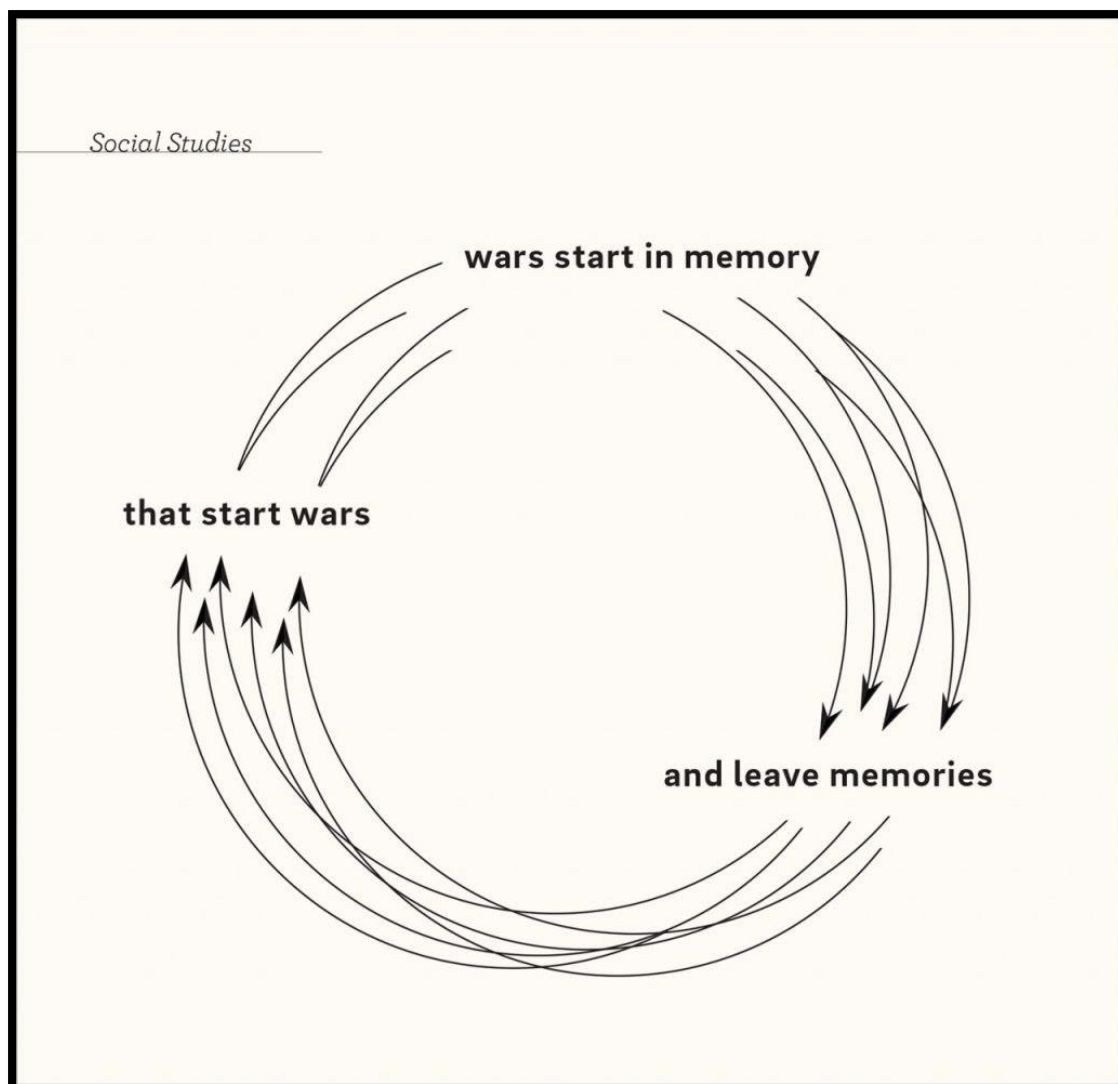


Figure 2: *The visual poem “social studies” from the book “Five oceans in a Teaspoon” by Dennis Bernstein and Warren Lehrer.*

3. The third poem to be analyzed is “police brutality” as shown in figure 3.

Firstly, the analysis starts with the identification of the multimodal metaphor, representing the connection between linguistic mode and visual mode (i.e., typography). It denotes the arresting attitude in the form of a squad and the arrested person is represented in the linguistic mode “arrest” written in small font size to indicate the subordinate and aggressive situation the arrested person is in. The source in this poem is a

“squad of cops” while the target is “cardiac arrest”. The mapping between the two is to show the mental background of the brutal actions of police against people.

Overall, this visual poem plays a significant role in addressing the fragment issues of police actions and their impact on individuals' well-being. It highlights the potential consequences of excessive force and prompts critical discussions about police practices, human rights, and social implications. Through multimodal discourse analysis, the text's layout and typography explore the power dynamics at play in law enforcement encounters and the importance of examining the language used to describe and discuss such situations in shaping public perceptions intensify the poem's emotional impact.

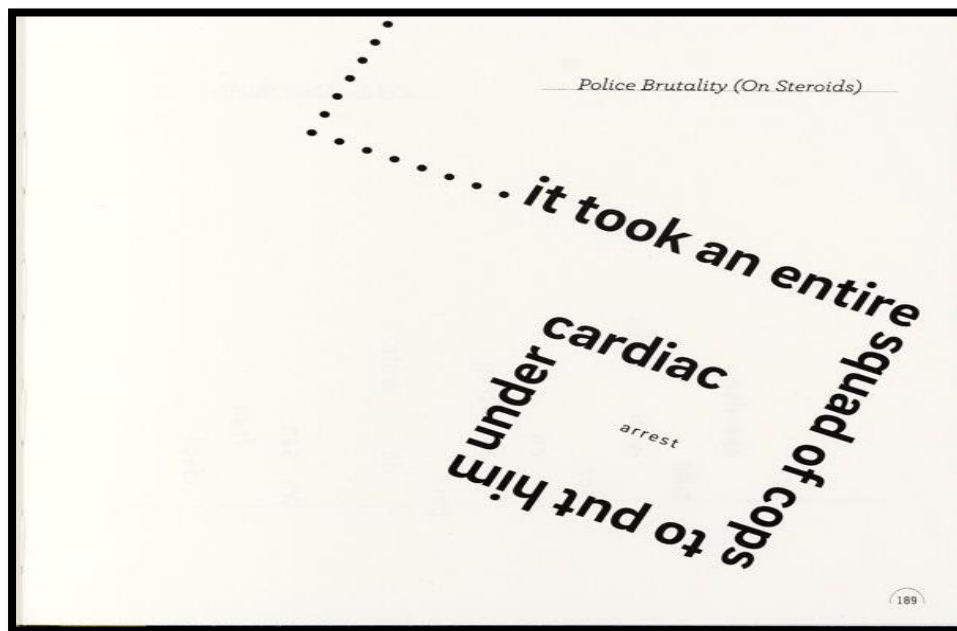


Figure 3: The visual poem “police brutality” from the book “Five oceans in a Teaspoon” by Dennis Bernstein and Warren Lehrer.

4. The fourth poem to be analyzed is “Ten Smiles” as shown in figure 4.

From a multimodal perspective, the poem “a man with ten smiles is never happy” communicates a nuanced exploration of human emotions, presenting a character who may seem cheerful on the surface but struggles with finding true contentment within themselves. The multimodal analysis represents the use of “ten smiles” as a source and the target is “never happy”. The mapping between the source and target play a crucial role in how the poem is perceived. The layout, typography, and visual elements might vary for each smile, reflecting the different story behind each smile.

This visual poem can be interpreted by considering various modes of communication, such as language, visual imagery, and emotional expression. The poem’s title suggests that the man has ten different smiles, indicating that he may outwardly show a range of emotions or personas. However, the central idea is that despite these smiles, he is never truly happy.

In the linguistic mode, the words "ten smiles" serve as a metaphor, representing the man’s ability to put on various facades or masks in front of others. This could imply that he is adept at hiding his true feelings or emotions, leading to a sense of inauthenticity. The visual imagery plays a vital role in understanding the poem’s message. The reader can visualize the man wearing different smiles, perhaps through a series of illustrations or mental images. This imagery adds depth to the concept of a person concealing their true emotions behind a veneer of cheerfulness. Regarding emotional expression, the poem seems to explore the theme of inner conflict and the disconnection between one’s public face and private emotions. It highlights the idea that displaying multiple smiles does not equate to genuine happiness, raising questions about authenticity and emotional well-being.

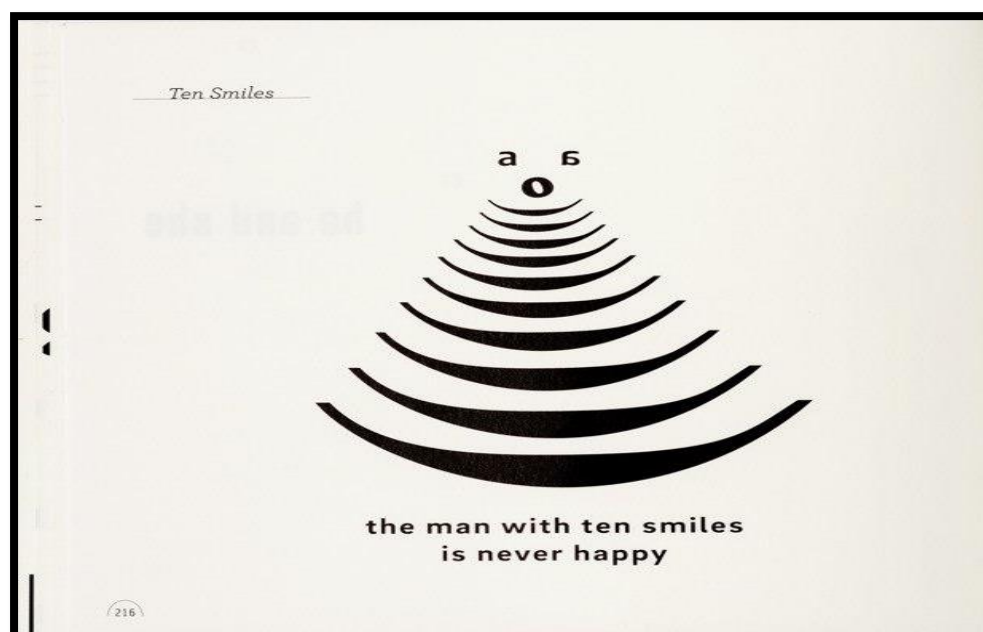


Figure 4: *The visual poem “Ten Smiles” from the book “Five oceans in a Teaspoon” by Dennis Bernstein and Warren Lehrer.*

Conclusion

The analysis of the multimodal metaphors used in the selected poems shows the interconnection between linguistic, typographic, and visual arts. In various poems, the performed analysis visualizes that the conceptual representation of different psychological and social backgrounds hidden within the visual poems is more effective than the linguistic mode. Effective multimodal metaphor requires that envisaged the source and the target. Each of the analyzed poems emphasizes the mapping between source and target using various modes, such as *multimodal metaphor, layout, size of the font, and typography* to highlight the psychological, social, and emotional impact that reinforces the themes of the poems. Multimodal metaphors within visual poems reinforce the strong connection between the cognitive metaphor theory and multimodality since they enhance the psychological, social, and emotional dimensions hidden within the selected poems. Therefore,

multimodal metaphor is seen as an excellent instrument to discuss and interpret dimensions and hidden ideologies within poems.

References

- Bernstein, D., & Lehrer, W. (2019). *Five Oceans in a Tea Spoon*. Paper Crown Press.
- Forceville, C. (1996). *Pictorial metaphor in advertising*. London: Routledge.
- Forceville, Charles (2008). "Metaphor in pictures and multimodal representations." In: Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (462-482). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Forceville, C. (2022). Visual and multimodal communication across cultures. In I. Kecskes (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Pragmatics* (pp. 527-551). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.
- Lakoff, G., & Johanson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago.
- Prohm, A. (2008). Visual Poetry : Artists' Writing in a Para-literary Age. *Kirjallisuudentutkimuksen aikakauslehti AVAIN* , 77-87.

Vijay, B., Flowerdew, J., & Jones, R. H. (Eds.). (2008). *Advances in Discourse Studies*. New York: Routledge.

مروة علاء البزاز

جامعة بغداد

marwa.a@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq

أوس نصري الشجلابي

كلية الامام الأعظم الجامعة

awsnasri5@imamaladham.edu.iq

تحليل الخطاب متعدد الوسائط للقوائد المرئية المختارة في كتاب "خمسة محيطات في ملعقة شاي"

المستخلص

تسعى الدراسة الحالية إلى إجراء تحليل للخطاب متعدد الوسائط على عدد من القوائد البصرية المختارة من كتاب "خمسة محيطات في ملعقة شاي" الذي كتبه دينيس بيرنشتاين وصممه بصرياً وارين ليرر. يُنظر إلى هذا الكتاب على أنه انعكاس للصراعات اليومية وكيفية النجاة في مواجهة التنوع. فهو بمثابة مذكرات تمثل الصراعات، الحب، الألم، والفقدان في رحلة حياة الكاتب. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى مساعدة الجمهور على تفسير القوائد البصرية والخلفية المعرفية المخفية في هذه القوائد. كما تسعى الدراسة إلى إظهار كيفية تمثيل تحليل الخطاب متعدد الوسائط للمشاكل والصراعات اليومية بصرياً ولغوياً. التحليل المعتمد للقوائد المختارة هو تحليل للخطاب متعدد الوسائط وفقاً لمنهج فوركفيل (٢٠١٦) لتفسير القوائد البصرية وتفسير الخلفية المعرفية التي تمثل الأيديولوجيات المخفية. باختصار، فإن استخدام الاستعارات متعددة الوسائط يساعد في تعزيز فهم الأنماط النفسية والاجتماعية في المجتمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية : القوائد البصرية، التعددية الوسائطية، الخطاب، الطباعة، ونظرية الاستعارة
المعرفية.