

## **Un-Defining “Comics”: Separating the cultural from the structural in “comics”** **By Neil Cohn**

Perhaps the most befuddling and widely debated point in comics scholarship lies at its very core, namely, the definition of “comics” itself. Most arguments on this issue focus on the roles of a few distinct features: images, text, sequentiality, and the ways in which they interact. However, there are many other aspects of this discussion that receive only passing notice, such as the industry that produces comics, the community that embraces them, the content which they represent, and the avenues in which they appear. The complex web of categorization that these issues create makes it no wonder that defining the very term “comics” becomes difficult and is persistently wrought with debate. This piece offers a dissection of the defining features that “comics” encompass, with aims to understand both what those features and the term “comics” really mean across both cultural and structural bounds.

### **Un-defining Comics**

The most prominent positions of debate in this issue focus on the “form” or “medium” of comics. Simply, comics consist of images and text, most often with the images in sequence. However, comics utilize these forms in a variety of different ways. In most, a sequence of images clearly exists to define a narrative, integrating text throughout, though this is not the only interplay between these elements. Single panel comics such as *The Family Circus* and *The Far Side* have been fully recognized as comics for decades. “Silent” comics such as Kid Koala’s *Nufonia Must Fall* contain no words at all, whereas works such as Dave Sim’s *Reads* volumes of *Cerebus* have been dominated by text, relegating the images to illustrative roles. On the contrary, illustrated children’s books lie outside the category of comics, though they feature a similar commingling of text, images, and narrative. The arguments, then, are not concerned as to whether or not these components exist in a given work, but rather what roles they play.

The most popularly accepted definition of “comics” was offered in Scott McCloud’s seminal *Understanding Comics*, where he formally proposes that comics are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). McCloud’s terming of comics attempts to give clarity and solidity to the inchoate “sequential art” offered in Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art*. To McCloud, the sequential nature of comics’ images defines their being, thus exiling single panel and text dominated works from the realm of comics. McCloud is conscious of these exclusions (20), though their separation is necessary for his analysis.

The other prominent position in this debate comes from historian R.C. Harvey (8-9), who insists that comics are the additive fusion of the text and image relationship to achieve a “narrative” end, with particular importance placed on the speech balloon. This “verbal-visual blending” makes comics a hybrid form of two separate media (Faust 195, 202). While this stance maintains the inclusion of single panel representations, it relegates the importance of the sequential aspect of images as ancillary to the blending. Unsurprisingly, this preference elevates word *and* image balances rather than those purely image based. Additionally, Harvey’s approach does not always stick strictly to the

non-judgmentally descriptive, as he seems to prescriptively view different uses of such components as “better” fulfillments of the category than others – leaving his definition of comics fuzzy at best. As will be seen, both McCloud and Harvey’s positions are fraught with inevitable problems, which, as one might expect, lead to their open-ended debating.

Resolving these concerns lies in formulating a complete understanding of that which actually constitutes the “form” of comics. As previously stated, both text and image are at play, though this simplicity only scratches the surface of this issue.

At first, we can recognize text as not just letters on paper (or a screen), but as verbal language transcribed to visual form. This applies to all manifestations of it, from speech balloons to sound effects to narrative accompaniment and footnotes. As language, we recognize that it stems from a person’s mind as the result of cognitive processes acquired and developed across years of social and communicative interactions. This component is familiar and easy to identify; the problematic element is the images.

Like the analysis of text, looking at the representation of images ignores much of the issue, though such probing has rarely been done. Bearing in mind McCloud’s focus on sequence, sequential images can also be considered a language – a purely *visual language* (VL) – following the same structural properties and mental processes as verbalized symbolic language, though in a separate modality of thought: a visual modality. Indeed, any time someone draws a picture without viewing the referent, its origin *must* be conceptual. And, like verbal or signed languages, the unique property that separates visual language from other forms of visual communication lies in its deliberate and systematic sequence – its syntax.

This type of identification is not wholly new. McCloud (67), Horrocks (37), and Eisner (8) have all discussed the “medium” of comics under this type of “language” terminology, no doubt drawn from the intuitive sense of their own fluency. However, none explicitly separate it from “comics” in this way (though Horrocks comes extremely close), nor do they explore the ramifications of that implication beyond what it means to “comics.”

Making that distinction raises another important categorical clarification. The term “visual language” is meant *literally*, the same way that English, Japanese, and Arabic are recognizable languages, as opposed to other “visual languages” referring to communication, art, or design. These “visual languages” or “languages of art” imply a broader communicative or semiotic system, as in E.H. Gombrich’s *Art and Illustration* or Robert Horn’s *Visual Language*, without acknowledging the express grammatical and linguistic structures relevant to a natural language – at the forefront, the contribution of the human mind itself. Rather, these analyses impose “language” as a metaphor onto their systems of choice as a method of interpretation. Here, “visual language” appeals directly to the natural human semiotic capacity for image-making, deemed a “language” only when systematic features of sequence arise – that is, a grammar.

In this way, the term “visual language” becomes akin to the general term “sign language,” which connotes the linguistic modality in which various culturally specific forms manifest. Thus, the comics “medium” is not only rendered as a language, but it acknowledges that its linguistic structure differs throughout the world. This would explain why McCloud found variation in both the images (lexicon) (129-133) and sequential panel-to-panel relations (syntax) (75-80) between American, European, and

Japanese comics. Essentially, each of these regions employs *their own visual language*, yet are understandable cross-culturally because of the iconic content of the sign system.

The importance of this perspective is twofold. First, in claiming its form as a language, its investigation methodologically requires it to be treated as a language, in a linguistic and psychological framework. Granted, the visual language proposed herein may not overtly feature the same familiar structures found in aural language, exhibiting properties unique to the visual form. This should be expected, as sign language features properties unique to its modality as well. Secondly, the scholarly goal of such research demands the recognition of how such visual attributes interact with, and compare to, those that occur in other linguistic modalities, such as verbal language, which also occurs in comics as text. In this sense comics (and the human mind) *contain* these bimodal structures of visual and verbal (textual) language.



In light of this, McCloud's definition equates visual language and comics (as have subsequent assertions that "comics are a language"). Indeed, as Horrocks (31) pointed out in his critique of *Understanding Comics*, through his rhetoric McCloud *wants* comics to be visual language, perhaps because of the mired categorization of the two. Or, in a different light, McCloud is merely propounding his enthusiasm for both comics *and* visual language, though he can't quite pull them apart. Ultimately, the examples that violate his perspective, such as single panel comics, pose trouble because they are still identified as comics, which of course has been recognized (Beaty 68), even by McCloud himself (20).

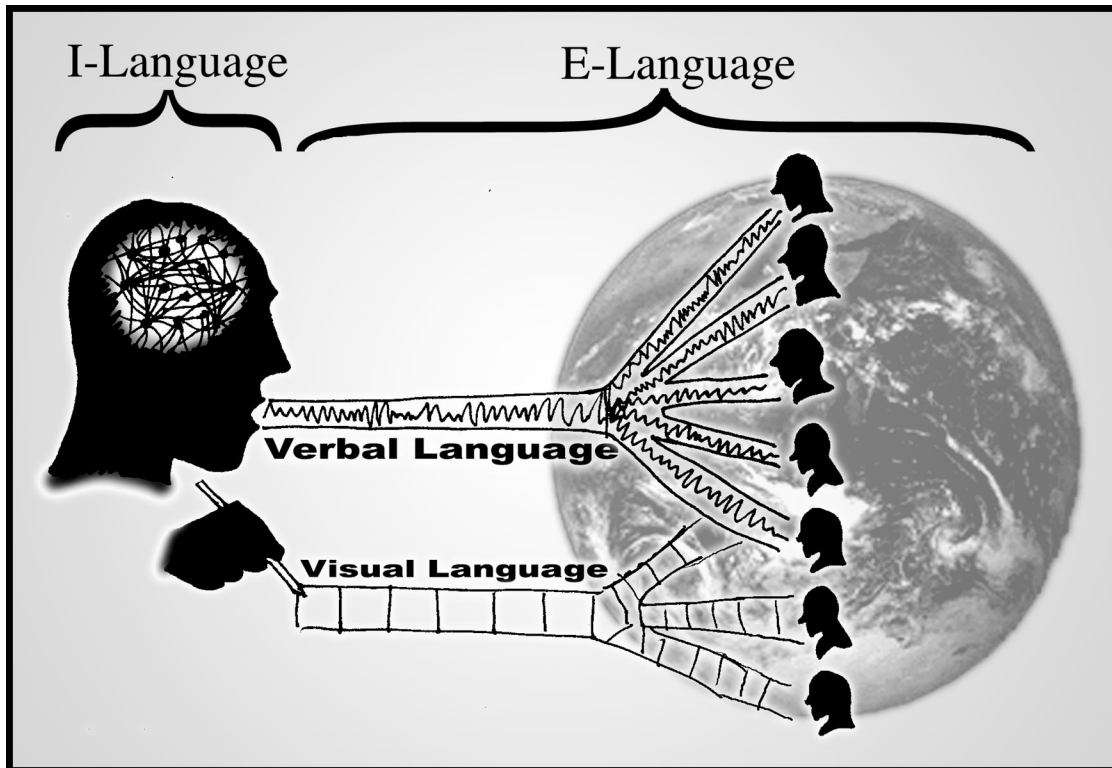
Additionally, while the bimodal language perspective may seem to lead back to Harvey's visual-verbal blending, it too has a hard time holding up as a definition of "comics." If one acknowledges these forms as linguistic in nature, their blending is a matter of (internal) semantic cohesion – not (external) art form. By accepting this multimodal faculty of the human mind, the manifestations of such language need not depend on the language itself for classification. Indeed, poetry and novels are not defined as being the language they are written in either – it is what is done with that language within them that is important for them as literary movements. Rather, outside of their presence within the literary movement of comics, the importance of this bimodal

language faculty is that, internally, they are *mental processes*. Externally, these workings are familiar, as the process of writing – be it writing in words, or writing in images.

Some have even tried to rewrite the definition of “language” to reflect this broader sense of multimodalism. Mario Saraceni states “the combination of verbal and visual components is a *true interaction which creates a type of ‘language’ that is more than the simple sum of the two codes*” (5). While admirable for searching to give a name to this process, it need not be “language” – just as it need not be “comics.” Rather, one can simply say that linguistic expression is multimodal, consisting of different types of languages, restricted to aural, manual, and visual. Yet, that holism need not be rewritten as “language” itself, and doing so misses the important qualities and features of each form unnecessarily. By recognizing that there is a broader notion of “language” in which aural and visual manifestations exist, the combination of those subsets does not equal the whole. Indeed, just as speech unites with gestures in systematic ways (McNeill and Duncan 142), the interactions between the visual and verbal do not create a qualitatively new and different form of language. Rather, they reflect a holistic semiosis that emerges out of the combination of these parts in the natural and common capacity for communicative multimodality.

### **Culture versus Structure**

In *Knowledge of Language*, renowned linguist Noam Chomsky addresses a similar type of distinction. Here, he makes the separation between the mental structures involved in language competence and language as it appears as a social artifact in the world. Chomsky explains that this latter conception, an “external” or “E-language,” exists independently of the properties of mind, as a “collection (or system) of actions or behaviors” (20). This is a noticeable departure from the conception of an “internal” or “I-language,” which, he writes, “is some element of the mind of the person who knows the language, acquired by the learner, and used by the speaker-hearer” (22).



Distinguishing language as a social artifact out in the world (E-language) from the knowledge of language represented in the mind (I-language) can lead to a clearer understanding of linguistic phenomena and the proper bounds for studying them. Chomsky describes this as the shift of focus “from behavior and the products of behavior to the system of knowledge that underlies the use and understanding of language” (24).

While the breakup of “comics” and “visual language” is not wholly congruous with the I-language/E-language distinction, the dichotomy does show how the manifestation of language in the world and the conception of language structures often become meshed together. Similarly, the investigation of visual language should follow the same bounds as previously stated: studying “products of behavior” (comics) to analyze the actual structures themselves.

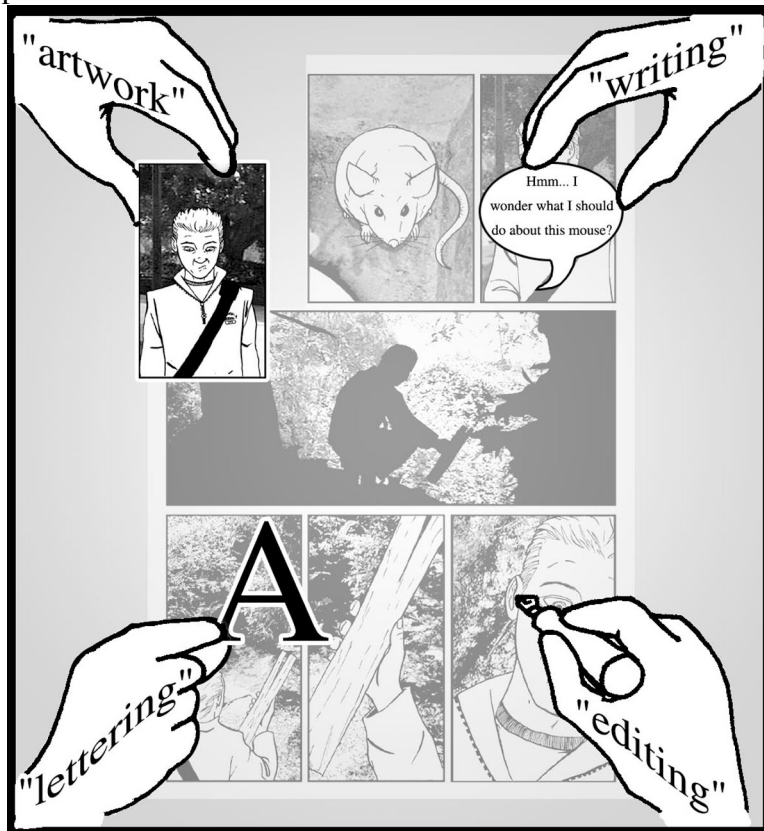
This sort of distinction is not new to the study of language. In his posthumous work *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, Ferdinand de Saussure made a similar separation in the form of his classic *parole* and *langue* breakup, which divided language usage in terms of an individual’s speech acts (*parole*) and language abstracted away from the actual speakers themselves (*langue*). However, in Chomsky’s terms, both *parole* and *langue* correspond to aspects of E-language (Jackendoff 29f).

Granted, in like fashion, one can propose a heuristic division between “E-comics” for the external societal implications and “I-comics” for the internal structure. However, maintaining unity of the term in this way undermines the necessity for separation, as does merely calling it “the language of comics.” Really, “E-comics” is *comics*, while “I-comics” refers to *visual language*. To use Saussure’s terms, comics are the *parole* of the visual *langue*. Essentially, these are two entirely different constructs that meet circumstantially because of roughly 100 years of historical precedence – though the capacity for visual language production has been evident throughout human history.

Indeed, comics scholars often seem to shift the historical timeline of “comics” lineage further and further back in time, clouded by the unity of the categorization. Often, this moving of the origin date of “comics” to fit historical examples is used as a justification to combat the somewhat degrading treatment that the form has received in much of modern society. Treating “comics” as a cultural artifact gives even more credence to Horrocks’ statement that this boundary shifting is akin to “the revisionist histories of other marginalized communities... which reclaim famous people from history and seek to assert them for a central role in the historical landscape” (34).

In actuality, the defining of this historical production as “comics” reveals nothing more than active employment of this visual and/or bimodal language faculty throughout human history, transcending cultural and geographic landscapes. These people had no conception of what a modern community might deem “comics”; they were only writing in the ways that came instinctively to them. It must be remembered that “comics” is an artifact bound to its socio-cultural context, and cannot be extended as a pan-temporal and cross-cultural universal – an assignment that *is* available to the structure of visual language.

While this aspect of language production may have come naturally to those in the past, in all likelihood the status quo process for creation in the modern comics industry has only masked the linguistic realization further. As it stands, the standard practice of creation in the current industry uses a Frankenstein-like method of mass production, where different individuals contribute various skills to construct an eventual product. Oftentimes, before getting to any sort of visual state, this assembly proceeds in multiple levels of “translation” originating from a textual script – potentially written by any number of people.



This method belies the intimate relationship between thought and language and the personal cognitive steps in between that constitute what could be called a communicative (visual) “speech act.” True language performance emerges from the mind of an individual into some sensorial form to enter a communicative relationship with a reader/listener/speech community. Language is at once a cognitively personal and socially shared act between individuals and their audience. Indeed, the truly fluent producers of visual language have been distinguished from the industry line approach, dubbed “writer-artists,” as if they are the exceptions to the standard of piecemeal production methods.

### **Art versus Language**

Wrapped up in the mire of comics categorization is the issue of “art.” While the term in Western culture has come to refer to many things, generally “art” is an expression applied to the nature and creation of some object or action. This might be a response to some evocative aesthetic, a commentary about the creator’s vision or methods, or any number of things. However, what it does not refer to is the avenue of expression itself. “Art” has become applied to painting, sculpture, dancing, drawing, and a myriad of other activities. However, these actions and their resulting products are not necessarily “art” by inherent definition. The result of the act of sculpture isn’t art, it’s the creation of a statue, just as the result of painting (the action) is to produce a painting (the object). Likewise, not all statues and things painted are considered “art” by definition, only the ones that meet certain individual and cultural qualifications to be included in that category.

Like the divide between “comics” and the “comics medium,” “art” can be understood as a social term applied *interpretively* to varying actions and objects. Notice also that the same sort of problems arise from the social connotations evoked in the term “sequential art” as they do in “comics medium.” As a term, it also merges cultural aspects into an intended structural term. Furthermore, the “comic medium” cannot be defined as “art” any more than we can define English as *being* literature. Visual language can be used to write any variety of topics, artistic or not, just as textual language is employed to write an uncountable array of expressions. Language itself is not considered art – only the interpretable product of its process.

However, because visual creation often becomes subsumed into the label of “art,” it conflates the social connotations with the natural human capacities for image-making. Indeed, the conceptions of Art and Language (capitalized for the remainder of this section to heighten their role as social percepts) often lie in direct opposition to each other, with consequences on the consideration of both visual language and “comics.”

For instance, Art is assumed to be a skill learned from instruction, whereas Language is known to be a naturally acquired aspect of maturation. Humans have a basic biological inheritance to language – it’s just a question of learning the grammar. Visual language is no different: *everyone* has the capacity to make pictures; it’s just a matter of acquiring the grammar of putting them in sequence coherently, both for the ability to read and to produce them. Indeed, not everyone is able to do this, and children from varying cultures have shown remarkable variance in their capacity to create sequential visual narratives. In one of his investigations of cross-cultural child “art,” Brent Wilson (498) found that nearly all of the studies’ Japanese 6-year-olds could draw coherent sequential

narratives, whereas only half of 12-year-olds in some other countries can. It is interesting to note that Japan, in comparison with most cultures, has a robust culture of “comics” readership, where most children produce their own stories from young ages. Japanese children are actively engaging in the process of learning the visual grammar, while those of other cultures have a poverty of stimulus, which is unavailable from other forms of visual communication, like television (Wilson and Wilson 26).

In comics, production often combines two languages being written at once, a visual one and an aural/textual one. Despite this very personal production, at the same time language is also socially shared, whereas Art is almost wholly associated with an individual’s style, expression, and message. The social aspect of VL is evident throughout comic culture, where a group of people share this common visual language and gather around its usage (which may or may not be considered Art). While Language works off of conventionalized signs and the perpetuation of common structure across social use, the primary thrust of Art in contemporary Western society has been individuality and innovation. For Art, being like everyone else is a detriment, while in Language it is a necessity.

This can factor greatly into learning, as the cultural emphasis on “realistic” depictions posed by Art could actually hold back the creation of a more systematic and shared use of a visual vocabulary. If the culture emphasizes drawing the human body “realistically” it could provide a cultural “block” to broad scale shared signs, because every learner would be hitting the “reset button” when figuring out how to draw. Learners no longer become concerned with finding out the regularized way in which the language group depicts something, but with accuracy of depicting “reality.” In many ways, a higher demand gets placed on the learner in this system as well, because they must rely on a large degree of specialized knowledge and individual innovation rather than on acquiring a pre-established system of signs. On the other hand some people do not aim towards “realistic” representation at all, and attempt to develop their own unique style. By stressing individuality and innovation, the same blockade against the creation of a set of conventionalized signs emerges. Again, if the producer develops their own ways of drawing, they forego joining the sign system of the group.

However, these drives towards individuality and innovation sponsored by Art may not be the natural inclination for learning. In his “Six Steps” of “artistic development,” Scott McCloud described the first step taken in learning to draw comics is that of *imitation* (173). After this though, McCloud enters into an Art-driven learning process, whereby individual innovation and personal growth are heralded above imitation. In contrast, Nelson and Pemberton (39) have shown experimentally that children who can see and imitate *sequentially*-produced graphic representations develop a far more rapid expertise in drawing ability.

Imitation allows learners to acquire the language of their social group. For example, many American children want to learn “how to draw like manga,” since they are reading Japanese comics in increasing numbers. The reasons for this growing readership are no doubt fairly complex, though consistent styles across manga might be one factor (other motivations might include less structural things, like diversified storylines or genres). In any case, with children’s interest in “drawing like manga” we see the natural Language desire for systematic signs winning out over the cultural Art desire for individuality.



The linguistic tendency to learn through copying could also be one of the driving forces behind “clone artists,” who emulate the style of whatever is popular (the other major force being the marketing tool of copying whoever is “number one”). Legitimately, people could be learning visual language imitatively, though the Art conception in turn frowns upon it because it goes against individuality.

Thus, not only has the identification of a visual modality of language been masked by the notion of “comics,” it has for all intense purposes been diametrically opposed by the cultural categorization of Art. Even if people were to follow their intuitive sensibilities that this form is actually a language (as McCloud, Eisner, and Horrocks all have), the entailments of the conception of Art still restrain it from being treated as such.

### **Redefining Comics**

By dissecting these factors, we can see that this leaves “comics” with no possibility or need to be defined by structure at all. Furthermore, this partitioning of terminology resolves the problematic issues that other structural definitions encounter. Truly, single panel comics, text dominated comics, and text absent comics *are all comics*; their categorical inclusion has only loose association to their structural makeup.

Likewise, illustrated children’s books are not comics quite simply because their definition finds no adherence with the non-structural conception of comics. Both genres occupy realms of *cultural* categorization, be it of readership, publishing, or content, though they share common elements of structure – text, images, and narrative. This is why categorizing Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean’s *The Day I Swapped my Dad for Two Goldfish* creates difficulty. Though it is presented in the social category of a children’s book, the authors are members of the social culture of comics, and the structure within it (VL) is most commonly associated with comics. In this light, categorically, comics can only be understood as sociological, literary, and cultural artifacts, independent from the internal structures comprising them.

Perhaps what has confused this issue the most is that comics have provided virtually the *only* avenue for visual language use in the last century, entangling it with their cultural associations. Note the term usually employed when discussing this form: “comics medium.” Here “comics” is an adjective, while “medium” as a noun provides little clarity outside of its relation to the preceding modifier. “Comics” in its adjectival form provides the associative cultural description for an otherwise undefined “medium.” Inherent in this term is the separation of the two concepts, though for the most part, neither has expressly been defined without the other.

More wordplay can clarify this further by attaching an adjective to the two terms. For instance, the phrase “Crime comics” sounds fine, while “Crime comics medium” sounds preposterous (or even worse, “Crime visual language”!). This dissonance arises because one cannot attach a genre term to a structure (this would be akin to “Crime English” versus “Crime novels”). It can modify a social/literary object, but it can’t modify a medium, much less a language.

Conceivably the best description of the relationship between visual language and comics is “symbiotic.” Comics (the cultural artifact) have provided VL with a vessel to travel in throughout the last century, thereby associating itself to the features of VL. By

recognizing the two apart from each other, they can develop and blossom as distinct entities.

By making these separations, a terminological and scholarly notion of “comics” and their constituent structure can propel study of both sides with an enlightened perspective. Scholarship thus falls into two independent groupings that align with the external versus internal distinctions. Comics scholarship can embrace its place within the interdisciplinary fields of literary, sociologic, and cultural investigation. Separately, the investigation of visual language opens a new field of inquiry within anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and the cognitive sciences. To make an analogy, the study of comics is like investigating the way the human body acts and moves, while the study of visual language takes x-rays of it to understand how it works. No doubt, there will come a point where the structural investigations of “visual linguistics” can then give way into literary and social investigation, just as the knowledge of grammatical parts and language groups informs rhetoricians and literary scholars, though it doesn’t drive their fields.

Furthermore, perception and production of visual language is no longer constrained by the restrictions of terming it “comics.” It merely becomes the writing of *a type of language*, perhaps accompanying verbal/textual language, and perhaps not. Expanding the usage of this bimodal system broadens the potential for communication and expression beyond the cultural expectations associated with comics and into a print culture of naturalistic multimodality. Indeed, simply the realization of its being can help lead to exciting and revolutionary potentials for the future of human language, and the study of it.

When we acknowledge the linguistic status of visual language, its *use as a language* beyond the constraints of “comics” and “art” can then follow. Since language places no restrictions on how it is utilized, such treatment could give rise to a boom of diverse content, any of which can be determined as “art” or not, uninfluenced by the associations immediately drawn up by “comics.” And, most importantly, such a designation would not make or break the inherent identity of the medium itself.

Additionally, the freedom this does not run just one way, as knowing these differences can also allow comics to exert its own identity. Indeed, that is part of what makes defining comics such an arduous task: they create an identity for so many that create, read, study, and enjoy them. Not only does it constitute an industry, but it defines a community surrounding and accepting the varied works emerging from within that industry. Truly, like many other communities, comics has a rich history replete with its share of overcoming hardships and welcoming diversity to unify around a shared language – visual language.

## **Works Cited**

Beatty, Bart. “The Search for Comics Exceptionalism.” *The Comics Journal* 211 April. 1999: 67-72.

Chomsky, Noam. *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use*. New York: Praeger, 1986.

Eisner, Will. *Comics & Sequential Art*. Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985.

Faust, Wolfgang Max. "Comics and How to Read Them." *Journal of Popular Culture*. Vol. 5.1 (1971): 153-162.

Gombrich, E.H. *Art and Illustration: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. New York: Bollingen Foundation/ Pantheon Books, 1961.

Harvey, Robert C. *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994.

Horn, Robert. *Visual Language: Global Communications for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Bainbridge Island: MacroVU, Inc., 1998.

Horrocks, Dylan. "Inventing Comics: Scott McCloud Defines the Form in *Understanding Comics*." *The Comics Journal* 234 June. 2001: 29-39.

Jackendoff, Ray. *Foundations of Language: Brain, Meaning, Grammar, Evolution*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Collins Inc, 1993.

McNeill, David, and Susan D. Duncan. "Growth Points in Thinking-for-Speaking." *Language and Gesture*. Ed. David McNeill. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 141-161.

Nelson, Keith E. and Elizabeth F. Pemberton. "Using Interactive Graphic Challenges to Foster Young Children's Drawing Ability." *Visual Arts Research* Vol. 13.2 (1987): 29-41

Saraceni, Mario. "Language Beyond Language: Comics as verbo-visual texts." Diss. U of Nottingham, 2000.

de Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Roy Harris. 1915. Chicago: Open Court Classics, 1972.

Wilson, Brent, and Marjorie Wilson. "Pictorial Composition and Narrative Structure: Themes and the Creation of Meaning in the Drawings of Egyptian and Japanese Children." *Visual Arts Research* Vol. 13.2 (1987): 10-21

Wilson, Brent. "The Artistic Tower of Babel: Inextricable Links Between Culture and Graphic Development." *Discerning Art: Concepts and Issues*. Eds. George W. Hardiman and Theodore Zernich. Champaign: Stipes Publishing Company, 1988. 488-506.