



Original Research Paper

State-people power relation as reflected in modern Iranian political cartoons; A visual social semiotic perspective

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at tracing the elements of state-people power relation discourse in contemporary Iranian political cartoons featured in Khatkhathi Satirical Magazine between March 2018 and March 2019. It addresses a gap in the research of Iranian caricature as a multimodal media and employs visual social semiotic framework (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) to analyze 6 cartoons representing the power relation in question. The interaction between image and text, as well as semiotic resources realizing the representational, interactive and compositional metafunctions of the visual mode are carefully examined to decode the messages communicated by the cartoons. The analysis tentatively suggests the following motifs inferred from the analyzed cartoons: dichotomy between the officials and regular people, abuse of power and the subordinates' trust by the dominant actor, corruption and hypocrisy underlining the state-people power relation.

INTRODUCTION

Caricature or political cartoon is a multimodal medium, using a combination of verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources to represent various issues and contribute to social and political discourse in a given society. Political cartoons can be attributed with four communicative functions of entertaining, reducing aggression, agenda setting, and framing (Medhurst & DeSousa, 1982). Caricature presents its viewers with a witty commentary on current political and socio-

economic processes, meaning to provoke an involuntary laugh.

At the same time, caricature serves a relief function, channeling the societal concerns through symbolic means: the indirect symbolic derogation of the governing body or any other social actor targeted by the cartoons provides the viewers with the sense of accomplished protest against the societal status quo without partaking in any political action other than contemplating a funny image. The agenda-setting function of the

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cartoons surfaces in their ability to identify public issues, bring them to public discussion and therefore assign them with a degree of significance. Finally, the framing function comes back to the political cartoons' ability to compress complex issues into succinct images, helping conceptualize them for the viewers. This capacity to visually translate political meaning across contexts has been explored through postcolonial translation theory, where cartoonists are seen not merely as critics, but as cultural translators adapting global themes for local resonance (Kodabux, 2024). Overall, these functions contribute to the caricatures' capacity for political communication. As Condren (2023) argues, satirical uses of political language reveal internal contradictions and disrupt conventional political rationales.

In case of Iranian political cartoons, their agenda as a genre has been claimed by the Iranian caricaturists and researchers of political cartooning alike: in modern Iran caricature is expected to defend freedom and fight injustice (Mehrvarzan, 2001). As Shooja'ei Tabatabaei (1991) notes, a caricaturist has a political and civil duty to showcase the issues that used to be concealed, and to oppose all kinds of oppressors. Heidari (2008) points out that caricature is an important watchdog of governmental corruption, educating the masses about the governmental body abusing the power entrusted to it and criticizing such power-abuse. These perspectives suggest a consensus on Iranian political cartoons' duty to represent and therefore challenge social power relations, especially those existing between the official governing entities and regular citizens. Similar dynamics appear in other authoritarian contexts where popular culture negotiates power from below (Chen, 2024).

However, Iranian research on domestic political cartooning lacks comprehensive studies on the representation of power relations in cartoons. From the technical perspective, this could be attributed to challenges posed by the multimodal nature of caricatures combining the textual and visual modes to produce messages

pertinent to the power relations discourse. The current paper aims to address this issue by applying Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual social semiotic approach (1996), to a sample of political cartoons from a contemporary Iranian satirical magazine *Khatkhati*. This approach will allow us to trace elements of power relations discourse in Iranian cartoons by analyzing the meaning making processes within the images realized through the semiotic resources of the visual mode.

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. What messages or motifs of state-people power relation discourse could be traced as represented in the contemporary Iranian political cartoons?
2. How do the semiotic resources realizing representational, interpersonal and compositional functions of the visual mode contribute to communicating these messages?

The paper first reviews the theoretical framework behind the chosen method, arguing for the visual social semiotic analysis being applicable to images produced in Iran. After a brief literature review, the paper introduces the methodology employed in the study, and transitions to a comprehensive interpretative analysis of sampled political cartoons. The paper is concluded by a discussion of findings and suggestion for further research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. The Visual Social Semiotics and Multimodality

Visual social semiotics relies on the seminal work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen titled "The Grammar of Visual Design" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). This monograph was largely inspired by Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar and socio-semiotic theory of language, linking the text and the semantic system of language to the socio-cultural context, and arguing for language to be reflective of social structures (Halliday, 1978). Following Halliday's

conceptualization of language as a system characterized by three metafunctions - *ideational*, *interpersonal*, and *textual* (1978), Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) hypothesized that each semiotic mode, whether verbal or non-verbal, would be realized through interaction of similar metafunctions. This assumption resulted in a conceptualization of three metafunctions of visual mode, corresponding to those of language in Halliday's understanding: *representational*, *interpersonal* and *compositional*. Each of these metafunctions is reflected through the use of various semiotic resources and by examining them one could make inferences about the messages embedded in the image.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) distinguish between two types of actors involved in the process of reading an image: interacting participants (real people producing and viewing the image) and represented participants or RPs (characters portrayed within the image) (p. 114). With that noted, the first, *representational*, metafunction is responsible for the visual denotation: it is a function of representing objects, RPs and their interactions. The second, *interpersonal*, metafunction involves the interaction of all participants of the image-viewing process. Finally, the third, *compositional*, metafunction connects the general layout of the image (composition) to the process of meaning making, helping the viewer connect the semiotic resources of the two first metafunctions into a meaningful whole to form an assumption of the image's visual connotation.

The flexibility of social semiotic framework and its ability to account for a variety of verbal and non-verbal communication modes allowed for the introduction of the multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). According to Van Leeuwen (2005), discourses are "socially constructed knowledges of some aspects of reality" (p. 94), always plural as there are multiple ways of knowing and also representing an object of knowledge (p. 94). Recurrent pronouncements and expressions documented in different semiotic modes (verbal and non-verbal) serve as evidence for the existence of a certain discourse and "it is

on the basis of such statements repeated or paraphrased in different texts and dispersed among these texts in different ways, that we can reconstruct the knowledge that they represent" (Van Leeuwen, 2005: p. 95). This understanding of discourses and means of their reconstruction is instrumental for this paper aiming to trace elements of power relations discourse in Iranian cartoons.

As visual social semiotics had been originally conceptualized within the Western visual culture, it is important to justify its applicability to Iranian political cartoons. First, the Western art-genre of caricature was successfully assimilated in Iran soon after its introduction to the country around the time of the Constitutional Revolution, and Iranian caricature's development in the 20th century was tightly related to Western art (Sakher, 1998). In the 1990s Iranian artists' involvement with the international caricature festivals resulted in prolific use of international symbolic language in Iranian cartooning (Lent, 2001). We can assume that this trend has been only strengthened by rapid development of Internet platforms and social media in the past two decades. The only serious reservation regarding applying visual social semiotics to Iranian cartoons is connected to the arabo-graphic tradition, directing the viewer's gaze from right to left, instead of customary Western reading of texts and images from left to right. However, a similar issue was pointed out by Leeuwen and Jewitt (2004) with regards to Japanese visual system and it appeared to be surmountable through amending the methodology to account for the direction of Japanese writing. Thus, with minor adjustment of the methodology, the Iranian cartoons could be subjugated to the visual social semiotic analysis.

2. Power, Social Power Relations, and Governance

This study adopts Weber's classical definition of power through domination (1947), which could also be referred to as *control power* (Dowding, 1996), and follows Luskie's (2009) explanation of *power relations* as "societal arrangements of privilege and the ability to prevail or set of

conditions prevailing in the organizing and institutionalized contexts” (p. 783). When it comes to *control power*, the social power relations are assumed to be asymmetrical (Dunbar, 2009). *Power* in this understanding almost always implies some form of domination or governance. The latter is defined by Mark Bevir (2006) as “a pattern of rule or as the activity of ruling” (p. 365). The paper treats governance, accordingly, as a combination of managerial activities the state engages in to rule the country. Such managerial efforts often include symbolic media strategies that lack systemic depth due to infrastructural and institutional constraints (Khodabin et al., 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Visual social semiotic approach to caricature analysis has found a wide recognition among international researchers striving to analyze discourses of power relations and governance represented by the political cartoons through the prism of the cartoons’ multimodality. Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) analytical framework has already been applied to cartoons produced in different non-Western societies. Tehseem and Bokhari (2015) analyzed 12 cartoons from two Pakistani newspapers through the prism of MDA, deconstructing the representation of political leaders. F. Oamen and M. O. Fajuyigbe (2016) studied visual representation of power in Nigerian cartoons featured in online newspapers between years 2010 and 2015: they employed a combination of critical discourse analysis and visual social semiotics to examine portrayal of political leaders and state-people power relations in the cartoons. The study has demonstrated the ways in which caricaturists use visual communication to shape the public perception of power relations and political domination in Nigerian society (Oamen & Fajuyigbe, 2016, p. 139). Later Oamen (2019) conducted an MDA of 10 Nigerian newspaper cartoons, scrutinizing the semiotic resources deployed in representation of women, and the asymmetrical power relations related to gender in Nigerian society. Al-Ghezzy (2017) conducted a visual social semiotic analysis

of 6 Iraqi editorial cartoons addressing governance-related issues: the study concentrated on the cartoons’ potential to frame public feelings towards such issues as financial and administrative corruption, abuse of power, governmental promises.

While the historical development of Iranian political cartooning has been extensively documented in works of Sakher (1998), Heidari (2008) and Farjami (2017) the communicative properties of Iranian political cartoons remain significantly under-examined. Göpfert (2024) suggests that cartooning in Iran functions not merely as a form of visual commentary, but as a perceptive and ethically charged practice that navigates social dissonance through humor and visual incongruity, however his analysis remains conceptual and does not engage with specific images. The contribution of the visual mode of Iranian political cartoons to discourses rarely interests even domestic researchers, the study by Pour-Ebrahim (2016) being an exception: the researcher used CDA to analyze visual metaphors in 6 Iranian editorial cartoons on America’s aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East. As for the field of semiotics, only one study by Zandi and Sojoodi (2013) attempted for a semiotic study of 3 cartoons, concentrating primarily on the aesthetic properties of images. The visual mode of political cartoons and its contribution toward the political discourses, especially those of the social power relations remains under-researched, just as the most recent political cartooning after year 2017. The current study aims to address lacunae in research on contemporary Iranian caricatures by applying visual social semiotic to political cartoons produced between years 2018 and 2019.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

The present article focuses on the qualitative stage of a mixed methods study, accounting for interpretative analysis of political cartoons addressing the discourse of social power relations. At a preliminary quantitative stage, elements of

content analysis were used to establish recurrence of the *officials – regular citizens* power relation as represented in political cartoons published in *Khatkhati* satirical magazine (Issues 83-94, March 2018 - March 2019). At a consequent stage, a limited non-representative sample of 6 cartoons was subjected to the interpretative semiotic analysis, using the visual social semiotic approach outlined by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996).

2. Sample Selection

Khatkhati, a humorous periodical featuring works of domestic Iranian caricaturists, was chosen for its monthly digest of political cartoons covering a variety of social and political topics, March 2018 – March 2019 being the last year of the magazine's

activity. 588 political cartoons printed in Issues 83-94 of *Khatkhati* were reviewed through the prism of quantitative content analysis with an aim to identify images representing the relationship between the state officials and Iranian citizens. Each cartoon was logged into a database and assigned with two variables: *target* (an entity criticized by the image) and *affected group* (social actors portrayed as the aggrieved party). 237 images explicitly featured either both targeted and affected entities or one of them. The cross-tabulation of the two variables would indicate social power relations within Iranian society as represented by the cartoons from *Khatkhati*. The results of cross-tabulation are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation of target and affected group variable

target affected group	Government	Local officials	Parliament	Healthcare system	Police	Oligarchs	President	Environment protection organization	financial criminals	State TV company	Education system	Domestic car manufacturers	Reformists	Former President	Regular people
Regular citizens	58	8	2	13	4	4	3	3	2	3	1	4	2	0	8
Teachers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Students	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0
Workers	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Women	2	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Khatkhati Magazine	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Homeless	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Journalists	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Children	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Ethnic minorities	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

76% of matches (105 out of 138) of *target* and *affected group* values connected regular people to the state officials (the government in general, the Parliament, the President, the healthcare and educational systems, the police, the local officials, the Reformist party, the state TV company and the environment protection organization). The prevailing form of *officials – regular citizens* power relation was that between the government and the regular citizens (58 out of total 138 matches). Other entities entering into asymmetric power relations with the regular citizens included the oligarchs, the domestic car manufacturers and financial criminals. All three of these groups are connected to the governing body in one way or another. This observation hinted at a power

relation triangle between the government, the elite and the regular people. Other notable dichotomies included those of officials and women, officials and ethnic minorities, officials and workers, reflecting the power relations between the state and commonly marginalized social groups.

Once the centrality of the *officials – regular citizens* power relation was established, a sample of 6 political cartoons representing this power relation was selected for the interpretative semiotic analysis. Five of the selected cartoons directly represented the power relation in question through their visual mode, while the sixth cartoon exemplifies the possibility of

deducing this power relation from the interaction of text and image within the cartoon.

3. Visual Social Semiotic Approach

Each image from the final sample was subjugated to interpretative analysis following the visual social semiotic approach conceptualized by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). This approach is especially apt given how visual metaphors in cartoons have proven powerful tools for conveying complex crises and public concerns (Abd Aziz et al., 2023). An overview of semiotic resources contributing to realization of representational, interpersonal and compositional metafunctions of the visual mode is presented below.

The first, *representational*, metafunction is realized through *processes* represented in the images. These processes are of two types: *narrative* and *conceptual*. Narrative processes communicate a story (narrative) to the viewer. The artist introduces narrative processes through *vectors* visually connecting the RPs within the. Depending on the nature of vectors, a narrative could be represented as either an action, reactive, or verbal process (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 59-68). In action processes we identify *vectors* (RP's limbs, tools pointed in a certain direction, other lines directing viewers' attention from one part of the image to another) that indicate the interaction between the RPs, the active participants of action serving as *actors*, and the passive ones as *goal*. Reactional processes are creating a narrative through *eyeline vectors* (gazes thrown at each other by the RPs), which guide the viewer through the story presented in the image. Here the *reactor*, or the RP, whose look serves as an eye-vector, looks at the *phenomenon*. In the verbal processes, the vectors are formed by dialogue balloons, that serve as *utterances*, attributed to the RPs serving as *sayers*. Narrative processes include transactional (with two participants, either bi- or unidirectional) and non-transactional actions (one participant), transactional and non-transactional reactions, and verbal processes (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 78).

Conceptual processes on the contrary lack vectors and represent a concept. These processes

can be distinguished as *classification* (exhibiting the RP as a member of a group or class), *analytical* (exhibiting the RP as a part of a greater whole, an example being graphs and charts), or *symbolic* (exposing the represented participant for what they symbolize). Classification processes are further divided into covert taxonomies (where a set of RPs, or *subordinates*, is distributed symmetrically within the image's composition) and single- or multi-level overt taxonomies (where one of the RPs enjoys the position of the *superordinate*, while the rest of the RPs are serving as their *subordinates*) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 87).

The second, *interpersonal*, metafunction enacts the social interactions within the image and between the RPs and the viewer. This metafunction is realized through three different systems of visual conventions which reflect the power relations between the RPs, and contribute to the viewer's engagement with the image.

The system of *image act and gaze* is defined by presence or absence of eyeline vectors connecting the RPs and the viewer. Depending on the directions of the RP's looks, the image could present the viewer with either a *demand*, or an *offer* (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 118-119). When a direct eyeline vector connects the RP and the viewer, it creates a stronger engagement, calling the viewer to action as a response to the image's perceived demand. When the RP's look is directed elsewhere, the degree of viewer's engagement with the image decreases: the viewer contemplates the status quo offered by the image.

The system of social *distance and intimacy* refers to the intensity of viewers' sympathizing with the RP prompted by perceived closeness or distance between them. Social distance ranges between the *intimate distance* (close-up view of the RP's face, implying maximum intimacy), *social distance* (medium shot, with a full-body view of the RP) and *impersonal distance* (full-body view, at a long shot, implying minimum intimacy) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 148).

The system of *perspective* is concerned with the angles between the positions of the RP and the viewer, and between the positions of the RPs within the image. *Horizontal angle* implies involvement: the RP facing the viewer up-front (*frontal angle*) raises the degree of viewer's involvement, on the contrary, when an RP is positioned obliquely (*oblique angle*), the level of involvement drops. *The vertical angle* helps infer the power relation by following the RP's gaze: when looking down (*low angle*) the RP is in the position of power, and when looking up (*high angle*) they are in a subordinate position.

The third, *compositional*, metafunction is realized through three interconnected compositional systems of *information value*, *salience* and *framing* (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 177). *Informational value* refers to attaching specific informational roles to different zones within the general composition. The *left* zone of the image presents the viewer with something familiar, or a *given*, while the *right* zone is reserved for the *new* information (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 181). For the visual culture connected to the arabo-graphic tradition the opposite should be assumed. The *top* of the overall composition is associated with the *ideal* or desired state of being (*top – ideal*) as opposed to the bottom of the indicating existing reality (*bottom – real*) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 186). The center of the overall composition signals the nucleus of the process, while the margins are reserved for either subservient RPs or secondary information (*center – margin*) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 196).

Salience indicates the RP's ability to attract the viewer's attention through such factors as *size* (the larger the RP, the greater their significance), *sharpness and focus* (the RPs have lesser significance when depicted out of focus), *tonal and color contrast* (the greater its degree in the rendering of an RP, the more significant within the composition they appear), and *positioning* in either *foreground* or *background* (the former enhances or downplaying their role) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 202).

Framing refers to the degree of disconnection between the elements of composition (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 203): separation in framing can be achieved through the introduction of lines and empty spaces between the compositional elements, signifying their differentiation, while absence of intentional framing would suggest the group identity of the RPs.

4. Analysis of the Cartoons

This section of the paper documents the interpretative semiotic analysis of the selected cartoons. Each image's description is followed by a detailed account of the semiotic resources realizing the three metafunctions of the image. The analysis touches upon the interaction between the textual and visual modes of the cartoons and summarizes the motifs related to the discourse of state-people power relations connoted by the cartoons.

Cartoon 1



Figure 1. Cartoon 1. By Heybat Ahmadi; Khatkhathi No. 88 (2018, p. 29)

The cartoon depicts a large roof-shaped cement panel held by four casually dressed men shaking under its weight. The characters are throwing concerned glances at the figure in the foreground: an official wearing a protective cap is stacking a brick onto a wall, whistling, disregarding his surroundings.

We can observe two narrative processes: non-transactional action (the official laying a brick), transactional reaction (where regular men serve as reactors, and the officials' figure serves as the phenomenon), and the symbolic processes allowing us to guess what the RPs and the cement

panel signify. The image is anchored in the caption, a phrase by a former MP, Elias Hazrati): “*vazir-e eghtesad bayad me’mar-e eghtesad-e Iran bashad*” [The Minister of economy should be the architect of Iran’s economy]. Thus, we can decipher the visual metaphor: the house-like construction is to be perceived as “Iran’s economy”, the official as the Minister of economy, or its “architect”, and the other four RPs as Iranian people exploited at the construction site.

The image is an offer of a status quo: no visual contact with is established with the viewer. All of the RPs are depicted at the neutral social distance, decreasing the level of viewer’s engagement. The official’s figure is presented in a frontal angle in the foreground attracting additional attention from the viewer.

The official’s salience is hinted at by his stout appearance, the bright color of his cap, and crisper outline and of his stout figure compared to other RPs. Moreover, he is visually separated from the other RPs, united under the shadow of the cement panel. If interpreting the image through the top –bottom/ ideal – real compositional system, the cement panel becomes the ideal sturdy roof protecting the inhabitants of the house from external threats, while the lower part of the composition depicts the reality: the regular people’s efforts hold the Iranian economy together, while the senior officials, who keep devising plans for the economic development ignoring the pressing issues of the day.

Summary: The cartoon connotes a dichotomized power relationship between the officials and regular people, portraying the latter as suffering from the nonchalance and managerial inefficiency of the officials. The officials are connoted to be abusing the trust put into them by the people. The message conveyed by the image is of people’s resilience being the main pillar of Iran’s economy in the absence of an effective plan for economic development that should be devised by the government.

Cartoon 2



Figure 2. Cartoon 2. By Mohammad Kargar; Khatkhathi No. 89 (2018, p. 89)

The cartoon portrays the figure of Mahmoud Vaezi (the Chief of the Staff of the President at the moment of the cartoon’s publication), pulling a cheek of an elderly street-seller wearing shabby clothes. A speech balloon attached to Vaezi’s figure reads as “*Pedar jan!!! Yekam ensaf ro re’ayat kon!!!*” [Oh, grampa! Let’s keep it fair!] This scene of the scolding illustrates the cartoon’s caption: “*Vaezi az tojjar va kasebeh darkhast kard yek meqdar ensaf ro dar gheimatgozari re’ayat konand*” [Vaezi has requested the vendors to obey equity a little bit in regards to setting prices]. As could be discerned from the cardboard sign, the street-seller has just raised the price on his inexpensive merchandise. The RPs’ interaction is set against the background of two anthropomorphized garages that can be identified as local car-manufacturers due to the captions and logo of Saipa on one of them. The banners on the garages display exorbitant prices on domestically produced vehicles.

The image incorporates several processes, including a unidirectional transactional action (Vaezi’s figure being the actor, and the street-seller serving as the goal): a vector (arm) connects the actor to his goal. The physical reprimand is

foreshadowed and reinforced with the utterance in the speech-balloon (verbal process, where the actor becomes the sayer). We observe representation of physical and verbal offence. The third process is a non-transactional reaction in the background: the anthropomorphized garages throw cunning looks outside of the image.

As the RPs are not looking at the viewer, the image could be offering a status quo: the “economic equity” principle being infringed on Iranian domestic market. The semiotic convention of perspective is also contributes to the interpersonal meaning: the low angle of Vaezi’s look suggests his figure’s superior power-position.

The salience of Vaezi’s figure within the composition is highlighted by the figure’s size and centrality; his black hair and suit creating instantly noticeable color-patches. The foreground and background of the image differ in color-intensity and sharpness of lines but are not entirely separated, suggesting the setting to be a metaphoric illustration of Iran’s economic landscape. Framing is used to highlight separation between the two RPs in the foreground: the politician is bending over to the street-seller from a noticeable distance, appearing compositionally closer to the garages in the background. This signifies the semiotic connectedness between the politician and domestic car manufacturers and could imply that the politician is dancing to the monopolists’ tune in reprimanding the vulnerable street-seller.

The semiotic resources employed by the cartoon help it connote the abuse of power by the government within the paradigm of the *officials – regular citizens* power relation. The image’s message is that of the government choosing the interests of domestic monopolists (the economic elite) over the interests of regular citizens, where they should remain impartial and just. The image highlights the incongruity of the officials, whose duty is to defend the principles of economic equity, actually misusing their authority.

Cartoon 3



Figure 3. Cartoon 3. By Mehdi Azizi; Khatkhathi No. 91 (2019, p. 45)

The cartoon depicts the figure of Eshaq Jahangiri (Iran’s vice-president at the time of the cartoon’s publication) against the backdrop of a 500,000 Rial banknote, speaking to a group of people and simultaneously throwing three zeroes taken off the banknote onto the ground. Three other RPs right (two men and a woman dressed in patched clothes) are positioned to the lower-observing the zeroes fall with confused looks on their faces. The image illustrates the caption: “*Mo’aven-e sabeq-e vazir-e eghtesad: Ba hazf-e chahar sefr faghat mardom rasargarm mikonim* [The former deputy minister of economy: By taking off four zeroes we are just entertaining people]”.

Conceptual symbolic processes in the image allow us to interpret the enlarged banknote as a screen or a stage-curtain, Jahangiri’s figure as the embodiment of the Iranian government at the same time serving as a stage-performer, and the other three RPs as regular Iranian citizens, or the audience. The visual metaphor conveyed by the setting and the verbal mode of the image, as well as the cunning look of Jahangiri’s figure, is that of

the government trying to divert people's attention from the dire state of the domestic economy. As for the narrative processes depicted in the cartoon, the first one is a unidirectional transaction, with Jahangiri's character being an actor, his extended hands creating a vector continued by the falling zeroes and directed at the regular people (goal). The second narrative process is verbal: the utterance contained in the speech-balloon emanating from Jahangiri's figure (sayer) reads as an order for the rest of the RPs: "*Bazi konid! [Go, play!]*". The third narrative process is a unidirectional transactional reaction, marked by the eyeline vectors connecting the four RPs (reactors) with the falling zeroes (phenomenon): Jahangiri's look is that of content, the peoples' looks are those of bewilderment.

The social distance of the RPs, and the absence of direct looks at the viewer, suggest that the cartoon is offering the viewer with the portrayal of status quo. The Jahangiri's figure enjoys the low angle of power.

The salience of Jahangiri's figure in the image's composition is highlighted by its polychromatic rendering, standing out of the cartoon's limited color-scheme. The artist used framing to visually separate the politician's figure from other RPs, placing it onto a different plane, opposite the grouped RPs in the lower-right.

The image could be interpreted through the information values assigned to the parts of the composition along its horizontal axis. On the right, the current situation (given) of Iranian citizens is represented through a group of modestly dressed people taken aback by both the worsening inflation and the government's futile promises to mitigate it. On the left, a re-denominated version of the banknote is presented as something to be looking forward to (new).

Assessing the semiotic resources employed by the cartoon helps reconstruct the connotative message of a polarized relationship between the government and the regular citizens, where the dominant actor abuses their power by exploiting the trust of the subordinate actor. The image also

connotes the motif of inherent hypocrisy exhibited in actions of the ruling politicians trying to win the people's support by concealing their own inability to deal with complex economic issues such as inflation, much like how image-driven systems can simulate progress while obscuring deeper structural concerns (Toosi et al., 2024).

Cartoon 4



Figure 4. Cartoon 4. By Mohsen Izadi; Khatkhathi No. 89 (2018, p. 11)

The cartoon presents a sequence of five image-frames, meant to be read from top right, gradually moving to the bottom. The sequence follows the main character, a casually dressed man, as he notices an approaching official (wearing a suit and a band-collar shirt, associated with governmental work). Frames three to four represent an exaggerated version of traditional greetings performed on such occasions. The main character keeps bending deeper and deeper till his opponent starts patting his head: the two characters look at each other contented. In the final frame, another character joins the scene, (a stout man also wearing a band-collar shirt) having instantly jumped onto the bending person's back. The

official explains the situation, asking the main character to remain calm and duly participate in the game of entertaining his child: “*Aroom bash azizam, hala ke dolla shodi, del-e aghazade-ye ma ro ham shad kon!* [Calm down dear, now that you’ve bent, you might as well make our *aghazade* happy!]” (The Persian word *aghazade* usually refers to members of the elite related to governmental circles through blood ties, and could be literally translated as “son of an official”).

The cartoon contains symbolic processes allowing the viewer to recognize the characters as a regular Iranian citizen, an official, and an *aghazade*. The sequence of images presents an evolving narrative: a unidirectional transactional reaction marks the moment when the main character (reactor) notices the official (phenomenon). In the next three frames this reaction morphs into a bidirectional transactional action between the two RPs. The final frame incorporates three processes: the unidirectional transactional action (the regular citizen, reactor, throwing a look of terror at the smiling *aghazade* riding on his back), and two unilateral transactional actions directed at the main character – the first actor being the official his gesture of pressing against the regular citizen’s head creating one vector, and the *aghazade*, serving as the second actor, the second vector being shown as a bouncing line). A verbal process is present in the final frame as well.

There is no visual contact between the RPs and the viewer: the image offers a story illustrating the status quo within the power relations between regular people, officials, and the members of the government-affiliated elite.

The cartoonist consistently uses framing to highlight the separation between the main character and the official: although the amount of empty space between them decreases from frame to frame, they are kept at distance. The composition of the image could be interpreted through the informational values of top – bottom / ideal – real compositional system. The upper half of the image (the top three frames) presents the viewer with the ideal – an egalitarian relationship

between the officials and citizens, one of mutual respect. The bottom half of the image (two bottom frames) represents the existing state of this relationship, in which the official’s abuse of power leads to the objectification of regular citizens as a means of satisfying the whims of the elite.

The interaction of social resources in this cartoon allows one to reconstruct motifs of abuse of power by the dominant actors in the interaction between the regular citizens, the government and the elite, and that of forced servitude of the regular citizens towards the ruling classes, echoing internalized power hierarchies shaped by colonial-era self-perceptions (Sabbar et al., 2023). However, the image also connotes that victimhood was originally chosen by the regular people: in the cartoon’s storyline the character symbolizing the people exhibits readiness for self-humiliation for the sake of ingratiating himself with the figure symbolizing the governmental official. The image communicates the message of both actors of the *officials – regular citizens’* power relation being ethically corrupt and equally contributing to the distortion of social justice.

Cartoon 5



Figure 5. Cartoon 5. By Ali Ronaghian; Khatkhathi No. 84 (2018, p. 17)

The cartoon depicts the torso of an aging bald man wearing a ragged shirt; four arms of otherwise concealed people dressed in suits are outstretched from outside the picture’s frame towards the main figure, their hands, adorned with agate rings, are blocking the man’s mouth, nostrils, eyes, and left

ear. The caption quotes the speech of Hassan Rouhani (Iranian President at the moment of cartoon's publication) delivered on the 7th of May 2018: *Rouhani "Bayad begozarim mardom nafasi bekeshand, anha ra aziyat nakonim"* [Rouhani: We must let the people take a breath of air, we should not annoy them]. The phrase is a continuation of a statement about people being free to criticize the government on the Internet (Mehr News Agency, 2018, paras. 4-5).

The image combines conceptual symbolic processes with narrative processes (unidirectional transactional and speech actions). Symbolic processes allow the viewer to identify the main RP (captioned "asibpazir" [an aggrieved person, victim]) as the representation of the Iranian people and the outstretched hands as symbolizing the officials. The vectors created by the officials' arms outstretched to the figure of *asibpazir* represent the transactional actions. The speech process is represented through a speech-balloon being spitted into the cartoon from outside its frame. The utterance reads as "*Bacheha daran shookhi mikonan, shoma rahat bash! Nafas bekesh!*" [The guys are just fooling around, don't worry! Take a breath!], the sayer (potentially one of the officials) being placed outside the image-frame.

Although the represented participants cannot establish direct eye-contact, his portrayal in frontal angle, at a close distance ensures the maximum intimacy and engagement of the viewer. As for the perspective, the official's arms are outstretched toward the man from the above, indicating the officials' superior power position in relation to the main RP.

The cartoonist employs framing to highlight the distance between the *regular* and the officials: the cut of the image's frame leaves the actors and the sayer out of the picture. However, all of the RPs are united by the color of the background, suggesting a degree of commonality.

The cartoon uses different semiotic resources to connote the motif of the officials abusing their power in the power relation with the regular

citizens, reflecting how uneven critical literacy can heighten vulnerability to symbolic manipulation (Khodabin et al., 2024). The interaction of textual and visual modes of the image contribute to it communicating a message about the government engaging in hypocrisy when promising to respect the citizens' freedom of expression.

Cartoon 6



Cartoon 6. By Alireza Pakdel; Khatkhathi No. 84 (2018, p. 51)

The caption of the cartoon "*Mo'aven-e vazir-e behdasht: panjah dar sad-e jame'eh ezafe vazn darand*" [The deputy minister of healthcare: 50% of the population are overweight] sets the reading of the image: it is a profile of public health in Iranian society. The cartoon presents the viewer with six shots of different members of the Iranian population against the light beige background. Placed in rows of two, from upper-right to bottom-left, the RPs are as follows: a man wearing traditional Kurdish clothes, carrying a refrigerator on his back; a casually-dressed man, standing at the border with a backpack and suitcases; an office-worker, carrying an exaggerated pile of bills and tax receipts (as suggested by captions); a

pregnant mother surrounded by her children; a school-student carrying a backpack loaded with books; another office worker in a suite dropping his paperwork onto the ground while hurrying somewhere. All of the six main RPs hopelessly stare into the space in front of them.

The image is built upon conceptual processes. The RPs are participating in symbolic processes, impersonating a variety of socioeconomic issues existing in Iran: *kulbari* (smuggling heavy goods by carrying them on one's back across mountainous borders), migration, overwhelming taxation, women carrying the burden of raising children, twisted bureaucracy, outdated curriculum for public schools. These processes paired with the textual mode of the cartoon help us decipher the visual metaphor of the excessive weight troubling half of Iran's population: it is the weight of various socioeconomic issues. The children depicted with content faces, presumably unaware of the problems due to their age, could be interpreted as the healthy part of the society. The cartoon also depicts a process of classification, presenting a covert taxonomy: various social groups together constitute the Iranian nation.

The RPs are portrayed at a far social distance, and do not establish any eye-contact with the viewer. The viewer's engagement is ensured through use of exaggeration and incongruity, embedded in the interaction of text and image in the cartoon. The textual mode offers the viewer with the actual state of affairs in the Iranian society. From the compositional perspective, the monolith background highlights the RPs' connectedness.

The interaction of the textual and visual mode of the cartoon creates the incongruity between the official's perception of public health in Iran as communicated in a public statement (caption) and the actual state of affairs represented by the image, revealing how socially constructed ideals can obscure structural burdens and redirect blame onto individuals (Nosraty et al., 2020). The semiotic resources employed in the cartoon work together to communicate a message about the hypocrisy of Iranian officials, who tend to exploit

separate causes (e.g. a public health issue of obesity) to divert public attention from other pressing socioeconomic and political issues.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The visual social semiotic analysis of the six political cartoons from *Khatkhathi* allowed us to identify the ways in which semiotic resources, realizing the representational, interpersonal and compositional functions of visual mode, can contribute to communicating messages about the *officials – regular citizens* power relation.

In terms of the representational meaning, the analyzed cartoons (*Figures 1-6*) use symbolic processes to facilitate recognition of the depicted RPs for what they connote by the viewer, through usage of culture-specific emblematic and universally familiar symbols. One of the cartoons presents a classification process, resulting in a covert taxonomy of Iranian citizens, as seen by the officials (*Figure 6*). The cartoons also employ a range of narrative processes to depict interactions between RPs signifying government and regular people. These interactions are portrayed as transactional actions of physical abuse of regular people (goal) by the officials (actors), disguised as either endearing gestures (*Figure 2*), or a part of a game (*Figures 4,5*). The abuse of power inferred from these processes is tightly interconnected with the motif of hypocrisy: RPs representing the government perform certain actions (including action and verbal processes) just to camouflage their intentions (*Figure 5*) or the real state of the country's affairs (*Figures 1, 3*), or their impartiality when it comes to the country's elite (*Figures 2, 4*). Transactional reactions depicted in the cartoons through the gazes that the RPs representing the people are throwing at the RPs symbolizing the officials range between bewildered observation of actions performed by the officials to handle the critical state of Iranian economy (*Figures 1, 3*) and pure terror of realizing the danger of being mistreated by the dominating actor within the power relation (*Figure 4*).

As for the interpersonal meaning, the cartoons reserve low angles of power for the RPs portraying

the officials (*Figures 2-5*), which helps highlight their dominant position as opposed to the subordinate RPs symbolizing the regular citizens. The cartoons present their viewer with an offer of the status quo (the RPs do not establish eye-contact with the viewer and are portrayed at a neutral social distance, image in *Figure 5* being an exception). In one of the cartoons (*Figure 5*) the victimized RP symbolizing the regular people is portrayed in a frontal angle at a close distance, helping create the intimacy and engaging the viewer to empathize with them.

From the compositional perspective, the analyzed cartoons adhere to direction familiar to the Iranian audience when placing informational value along the horizontal axis of the image: the images should be read from right to left (right – given, left – new). As for the placement of information value on the top and bottom parts of the composition, it helps highlight the incongruity between the regular people's expectations of the government officials to fulfill their duties (ideal, placed in the upper part of the image) and the reality as represented by the cartoons (real, on the bottom of the image) (*Figures 1,4*). Saliency of the RPs symbolizing the officials is highlighted by various visual conventions (including central in the composition, size, color, reinforcing their dominant role as opposed to the regular people (*Figures 1-3*). The relationship between the officials and the regular people is portrayed as increasingly polarized, their attire and placement in the composition suggesting stark contrast, however, is the framing that helps establish the divide between the two groups. The analyzed political cartoons indicate disconnection between the RPs symbolizing the government and those signifying regular citizens by placing extra space between them even in processes requiring physical interaction (*Figures 2, 4*), the separation can go as far as pushing the dominant actor outside of the image's frame (*Figures 5, 6*). At the same time, the compositional separation between the people and the government is contrasted with the connectedness of the latter with the RPs symbolizing the economic elite (*Figures 2, 4*).

CONCLUSION

The current study was an attempt to explore how Iranian political cartoons published in *Khatkhati* employ various semiotic resources characteristic of the visual mode to communicate messages contributing to the discourse of state-people power relations to their viewers. The paper testifies to the applicability of the visual social semiotics methodology outlined by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) to analyzing Iranian political cartoons and their communicative potential.

The interpretative analysis of selected caricatures demonstrated that Iranian political cartoons use a range of semiotic resources responsible for realizing the representational, interpersonal and compositional functions of the visual mode to communicate messages related to the discourse of *officials – regular citizens' power relations* to the viewer. The analyzed images connoted the following motifs symptomatic of this dichotomized power relation: abuse of power by the officials, their predisposition to mismanagement and neglecting pressing domestic issues, resulting in the desire to conceal their incompetence, the officials' hypocrisy when it comes to defending principles of economic equity, social justice and freedom of speech. Additional research should be conducted to trace further evidence of the power relations discourses reflected in Iranian caricatures.

Having briefly drawn upon the interplay of textual and visual modes in selected political cartoons, the study should be concluded with a suggestion for further inquiry into the interaction between the verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources in Iranian caricature through the framework of the MDA.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of Interest declared by the author.

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