



Right or Wrong? An Image for Immigrants: An Interpersonal Multimodal Discourse Analysis of MIA's Music Video "Paper Planes"

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Abstract

Most of the time, the opinion that people have regarding immigrants is based on what media, press, and news offer to the public. The music video "Paper Planes" by MIA demonstrates some of the stereotypes that society has for people according to their identity, and the singer represents it with the most outstanding characteristics of the minority groups in America. To conduct a more in-depth analysis of the music video and lyrics of MIA, I will provide an interpersonal multimodal discourse analysis. The analysis is based on the theories proposed by Halliday (1978) on systemic functional linguistics and Machin (2010) for the visual semiotic framework. The results demonstrate how the discourse used in the song transmits the perspectives people create regarding immigrants and perpetuate them.

Keywords: immigrants, multimodal discourse analysis, systemic functional linguistics, visual semiotic framework.

1. Introduction

Presently, there are different perspectives on immigrants. This study provides an interpersonal multimodal discourse analysis of the lyrics and music video "Paper Planes". The song was written by MIA and as a co-writer Diplo. The music video depicts the singer as a drug dealer and emphasizes her ethnic and cultural background. To provide the analysis of the lyrics, I will use Halliday's (1978) theory for Systemic Functional Linguistics, and for the video, the theory provided by Machin (2010) on Visual Semiotic Framework will be the primary referent. Next, the critical aspects of literature supporting the discourse concerning immigrants and American people's attitudes towards them will be provided.

1.1 *Immigrants in the USA: A brief description*

The history of immigrants in America started around 1776. According to Koudela (2013), the pioneers of migration belonged to one ethnic group, and they were Scotch and English. Therefore, the first immigrants to arrive at what is known as the United States of America (USA) were Europeans. Until 1880, most immigrants in America were from countries of the north of Europe or Western Europe. Between 1880 and 1924, approximately 25 million immigrants came to the United States. Their reasons oscillated on religion, persecution, or some of them were

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looking for jobs (History, 2020). The United States has been considered a nation of immigrants. Presently, it stills seen as a spotlight for immigrants to go. Even though immigrants must get through a whole process to be recognized as citizens of the new country, it has is stated that they provide several benefits regarding economy to the United States (Blau & Mackie, 2016). Nonetheless, there is evidence that the new government wants to establish more strict policies for immigrants in the present day. These situations mentioned previously leads us to look for the different attitudes that society has on people who settled in their country.

- Stereotypes on mass media influence the attitudes of USA citizens towards immigrants.
- The music video of MIA shows the most outstanding characteristics that society infer from immigrants which is interpreted through the multimodal discourse analysis.
- Many immigrants' experiences can be related to what was found in the analysis about social labels.

1.2 American peoples' attitudes on immigrants

As a person who is not nationalized as part of the USA country and comes from a neighbor country, what is shown and perceived in social media regarding immigrants may have a negative impact on outsiders. Research on attitudes towards immigrants from the viewpoint of the USA society provides a different opinion. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2015), provide support for the previous assumption:

Immigration has been hotly debated in American elections and the media and based on these debates; one might think that Americans are deeply concerned with the issue and that many, perhaps even the majority, are opposed to immigration. Polling data suggest that this is not the case: most Americans assess immigration positively. (p. 47)

Even though many people tolerate immigration and see it as something beneficial for the country in different aspects, some perceive it as a negative factor impacting society. People who distinguish immigration with a negative connotation can be influenced by what they obtain from other people or sources. Shatell and Villalba (2008) state that "hearing about immigration on televised news broadcasts, print news stories, radio talk shows, or Internet blogs leads to having anti-immigration thoughts causing sentiment that is not related to law, but instead is veiled racism" (p. 541). Therefore, it can be understood the reason why most of the information we obtain on this topic is negative. People's negative thoughts are due to the focus that massive media draws on wrong perceptions only.

1.3 Cartels and gangs: Perspectives

To begin, I will share the definition for both terms, and a highlight of their relationship with this paper will be discussed. The first definition I will provide is cartels, and I will base the definitions regarding the Mexican territory because of the geographical closeness that the United States has with the country. A cartel is an organization that supplies drugs, realizing traffic operation between cartels (Flanigan, 2012). The author also describes the cartels' interaction to be carried out through corruption, political relationship, and violence to be necessary for their business operation to dissipate constraints with law.

This organization has its history related to the USA since the 1920s and 1930s because of the prohibition of alcohol. These cartels emerged from the need to gain notoriety and to take advantage of the country's situation (Astorga, 2005). As mentioned before, the geographical closeness to the border is relevant to define this term. Cartels start to establish strategically along

Mexico's border with the United States principally in Tijuana and Chihuahua, which presently are the epicenters of Mexican cartels and drug-related violence (Medel & Thoumi, 2014).

It is noticeable from the previous statements that drug cartels have a remarkable and robust history with the United States, which provides one of the main topics to be discussing in this multimodal analysis. The perspective on drug cartels was built decades ago, and it stills present. Therefore, it can be understood that the topic of drugs and cartels is a subject that seems to be arguable from different perspectives. The concept of Mexico as a country with an abundance of drug cartels can affect the perception of the United States citizens about the country and the people itself.

The term gang has been constructing its definition through a social perspective since the 1980s. Therefore, here are provided some of the definitions that have been build up by experts in the area. The first definition emerged from a survey in which people from different areas of society provided their characteristics for this term after the results were obtained the following definition was provided by Miller (1975):

A self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise. (p. 121)

The author did not use any negative words to describe the term, but it defines it with an inclination to illegal behavior, which can lead to a negative meaning. Recently, Klein and Maxson (2006) provided a commonly accepted definition for the word gang. The authors refer to gangs as "any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity" (p. 4).

Considering this definition, when people hear the word gang, it is automatically related to harmful situations and criminal circumstances. Holmes et al. (2011) reinforce this assumption stating that "whenever the term "gang" is used or heard, individuals undoubtedly get a mental picture of a particular type of person, most probably someone threatening, or a minority, or someone that is easily recognizable as a bad guy" (p. 1). For instance, persons who have had experiences close to these groups of people will immediately have wrong perspectives, not only gangs but also in more straightforward matters such as the term.

2. Methodology

The approach considered for this paper is based on the theories provided by Michael Halliday's (1978) work and David Machin (2010) to analyze the lyrics and music video of the song. Also, the descriptions to consider during the analysis will be summarized to make the interpretation of the video. This section will also describe the characteristics of multimodal discourse analysis from Kay O'Halloran's (2013) perspective.

2.1 *Multimodal discourse analysis*

In conducting this analysis, it is proposed to use multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) to understand the music video. MDA is a process that requires a broader analysis of speech, conversation, or texts. This form of analysis involves different characteristics considered for examination, such as language, image, sound, and music, in multimodal texts and communicative events (van Leeuwen, 2012). Introducing O'Halloran's (2013) perspective, this form of discourse analysis "extends the study of language per se to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, scientific symbolism, gesture, action, music and sound" (p. 1).

O'Halloran (2013) also emphasizes that with the inclusion of different resources to be analyzed, these will convey meaning. The different assets which also transmit meaning included in MDA are printed materials, videos, websites, three-dimensional objects, and daily events.

Also, there is a way to complement multimodal discourse analysis, which involves the use of semiotic frameworks. These semiotic frameworks take to a different level the analysis of discourse. The range for discourse in this framework encompasses printed media, dynamic and static electronic media, and three-dimensional objects in space (O'Halloran, 2013). The theory behind this approach is from Michael Halliday's (1994) work, who talks about the systemic functional theory of language that includes the consideration of other semiotic resources. The use of this framework includes the investigation of combined resources and not just one. Therefore, the systemic functional theory needs to be considered as an additional framework to complement MDA.

2.2 *Semiotic functional linguistics (SFL) theory*

The theory based on the focus that Halliday (1978) provided by stating that semiotics' boundaries changed from a study of signs to a study of sign systems. The theory can be understood as a change of SFL theory from a specific focus to combined attention in multiple systems. The author exemplifies his focus, defining any sign as an entity and a system of signs as entities working together to communicate meaning. Therefore, the term sign is defined as a "semiotic resource that includes written language in from of graphology or typography, as well as the semiotic resources of visual images, mathematical notations, and other technical symbols" (Fei, 2004: 51)

Additionally, since the 2000s, some authors (Baldry, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) have demonstrated the impact that multimedia has had on daily lives. Thus, the way meaning can be communicated works differently than in past decades. The new manner of communication started to be noted as a combination of semiotic resources that began to convey a meaning when put together. The function of two or more semiotic resources working together started to raise a new understanding of meaning-making. Moreover, the model proposed from Halliday is explained by O'Halloran (2008) with the following words:

SFL is an approach to multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) which involves developing theoretical and practical approaches for analyzing written, printed and electronic texts, three-dimensional sites and other realms of activity where semiotic resources (e.g., spoken and written language, visual imagery, mathematical symbolism, sculpture, architecture, gesture, and other physiological modes) combine to make meaning. (p. 444)

Most researchers investigating SFL theory have utilized similar words to define the term and make it understandable as language can be used for different objectives and situations. Additionally, their definitions mention how different sources can shape the meaning to convey meaning differently. Hence, we can infer that we must appreciate every item's function to understand its diverse linguistic meanings. Moreover, based on Halliday (1978, according to Bloor & Bloor, 2004), there are different ways human beings use and understand language and how meaning can be made with language. The author divided these methods into three categories which are:

- This is known as the ideational metafunction. The ideational metafunction is classified in the introduction of functional grammar into two subfunctions or modes: *the experiential* and the *logical*. The experiential is largely concerned with content or ideas. The logic is concerned with the relationship between ideas.

- Language is used to enable us to participate in communicative acts with other people, to take on roles, and to express and understand feelings, attitudes, and judgments. This metafunction is known as the *interpersonal metafunction*.
- Language is used to relate what is said (or written) to the rest of the text and other linguistic events. This involves the use of language to organize the text itself. This is known as the *textual metafunction*. (p. 11)

The three different methods are shown in *Figure 1* to have a more innate understanding of how it works and how they are divided with their subfunctions.

Ideational metafunction	Experiential
	Logical
Interpersonal metafunction	
Textual metafunction	

Figure 1. The three metafunctions with subfunctions (Adapted from Bloor & Bloor, 2004: 11)

After explaining the metafunctions, it is of importance to mention that only one will be the base for the analysis of the lyrics of MIA’s song “Paper Planes”. The section that follows reviews the approach that will be used to analyze the music video to determine if there is any other relevant source that conveys meaning.

2.3 Visual semiotic analysis

First and foremost, it was decided to use multimodal discourse analysis and associate it with systemic functional linguistics to analyze not only the lyrics of the song but also the visual context in the music video, as it is considered a system of communication. According to O’Halloran (2008), the systematic approach to visual literacy, and the dominance of the verbal modes of communication have been challenged by non-verbal modes such as visual resources. Besides, Hyland and Paltridge (2011) state that “the multimodal analysis includes the interactions between the spoken language, kinetic features (including gaze, body posture, and gesture) and cinematography effects (including camera angle and frame size)” (p. 127).

A good summary of the area is that even though that analysis started with textual language now, sometimes it communicates more meaning encompassed with videos, such as the case of this study, in which a music video will also be analyzed. Therefore, “discourses, along with their values, participants, action settings, can be connoted by both linguistic and visual choices. They revealed that just as we can study lexical choices in language to reveal discourses so, we can study choices of visual semiotic resources” (Machin, 2010: 7). As visuals are analyzed, the potential examined aspects are provided by David Machin (2010), who bases his analysis from Barthes’ (1973; 1977) sight, which provides the characteristics of the images considered in the process of examining the video. Barthes provides important connotators of meaning, and there are described in *Table 1*, which includes only the aspects considered to analyze the video of “Paper Planes” by MIA.

Table 1. Connotators to analyze visuals

Connotators	Description
Pose	Postures must suggest something about the individual/group, whether they are approachable, independent, or moody, whether they are thought of as a unit or as individuals.
Gaze	Based on the Halliday (1985), the gaze analysis if the individual whether they look out at the viewer, whether they look downwards or upwards. Kress and van

	Leeuwen (1996) show their interest in the way that images can be view as completing the speech acts as described for language.
Social distance	As part of the pose and gaze, social distance provides information about the proximity that the image has with the viewer. Distance seems to reveal if there is any social relationship that intends to be demonstrated. This aspect is analyzed through the shot.

Note: Adapted from Machin (2010: 36-47)

The three elements shown in Table 1 will be examined in the analysis and discussion section. In which first, it would be exposed to the different elements encountered in the lyrics of the song to next proceed to the visual analysis of the music video scenes.

3. Results and discussion

Having defined the methodology for this paper, I will now move on to the results obtained from the analysis and the discussion to connect the results with the previous literature provided. First, an interpersonal analysis of the lyrics will be presented based on Halliday’s (1978) theory, followed by the visual analysis provided by Machin (2010).

3.1 *Lyrics*

To provide a grammatical analysis of the lyrics of the song “Paper Planes” by MIA, I used the systemic functional linguistics theory proposed by Halliday (1978). To provide the analysis, I will be using one metalinguistic category proposed by Halliday. First, in Table 2, we can find the data for interpersonal metafunction and the two different moods identified in the song. It was decided only to analyze one metafunction aspect as it was more relevant for the meaning of the song and to understand the addresser’s attitudes.

Table 2. Interpersonal functions

Mood	Clauses
Declarative	I fly like paper, get high like planes/I got visas in my name/ I make ‘em all day/ I get one done/ I’m clicking/ everyone’s a winner/ I wanna do/ making my fame/ making my name/ we pack and deliver/ just pumping that gas
Imperative	Catch me/ hit me/ we hit’em
Interrogative	Are you ready, all?

In the lyrics, there was only one interrogative clause (0.64 %), which did not contribute anything to the analysis more than asking if people were ready for something that may happen, something important. Therefore, declarative clauses have major priority by covering 97.44% of the total by being repetitive in the song. Imperative clauses only cover 1.92% as only three clauses were identified in the category.

The purpose of the lyrics is to express the singer’s point of view on things happening in the world and with attitudes towards immigrants. She intends to elicit the audience’s empathy to comprehend what she has gone through in her process as an immigrant. I have made and superficial analysis of the lyrics of the song and demonstrated the main objective that was intended to communicate by the singer. This general analysis was enough to identify her position on the topic involved. The next section encompasses the visual semiotic analysis of the different scenes encountered in the music video.

3.2 Visual analysis

Considering Machin's (2010) frameworks to analyze connotators in visuals, I will now examine and provide different examples of the video that are related to the literature reviewed in this study. The analysis will consider the pose, gaze, and social distancing of the individual/group to the viewer to convey meaning in conjunction.

3.2.1 Pose

Apart from the different movements which represent the actions mentioned in the lyrics. The most remarkable pose that MIA does is represented in Image 1.



Image 1. MIA principal pose (Source: MIA's music video "Paper Planes")

In this image, it can be seen that the most of the video she remains in a medium close up shot in which it seems that she is talking about something important as the shot infer that the singer is giving a talk. The pose she maintains in the video represents to the typical view that two persons have when talking between them. This pose is a complemented with the next section which describes the gaze of the singer.

3.2.2 Gaze

The video has several hand gestures and movements from the singer, but she constantly keeps eye contact with the viewers. Her look directed to the camera can be related to the attitudes that people have on immigrants as the songs say *All I wanna do is...* and gunshots are heard. The singer does the hand gestures simulating gunshots every time the same verse is in the song, as it can be seen in Image 2.



Image 2. MIA gunshots hand gesture. (Source: MIA's music video "Paper Planes")

The use of this hand gesture can be related to the gangs. Considering that the lyrics say *If you catch me at the borders...*, referring to the board that exists between the USA and Mexico and the constant problems regarding cartels and drug distribution. Therefore, based on the previous literature, her extract from the lyrics can be immediately driven to the country with the most negative social stereotypes.

Additionally, one scene of the video (Image 3) shows how the singer is giving to an Afro-American person a sandwich that is wrapped with aluminum foil. Simply, it is appreciated that she is just serving food to go.



Image 3. MIA is serving food (Source: MIA's music video “Paper Planes”)



Image 4. Costumer giving chain (Source: MIA’s music video “Paper Planes”)

In-depth perception and after the scene presented in Image 4, one persona gives her a silver chain in return for food. Hence, it can refer to the people who buy drugs as sandwiches do not have the value of a silver chain. Therefore, it can be understood that she is working in a food truck to sell other things besides food. As it is known, drugs tend to be wrapped carefully either on tape or foil.



Image 5. MIA dancing at subway stairs. (Source: MIA’s music video “Paper Planes”)

Here, we can appreciate that the shot is taking at the top of the subway stairs and that MIA is dancing near the first step. It looks like she is in the subway, which is used constantly for people that cannot afford a vehicle that is expensive in the country. Hence, the scene infers that she provides her social status by showing in the scene the subway station.

3.2.3 *Social distance*

For this aspect, the music video encompasses different shots from the singer as well as individuals in the scene. Which intends to demonstrate proximity between the addresser and the audience. Thus, the meaning obtained from these shots is to establish any potential relationship with the viewers. For instance, in Image 6, we can see that the addresser is shown in a close-up shot complementing with a gaze to the audience.



Image 6. Close up shot of the addresser (Source: MIA's music video "Paper Planes")

Additionally, it can be emphasized in a different scene the proximity with other people on the video, the song in this scene states *No one on the corner has swagger like us*, demonstrating that the community is big and that they as part of it do stand out for all of them.



Image 7. Long shot of the group (Source: MIA's music video "Paper Planes")

In this scene, we can see that the main addresser of the song is in a company with people that are dressed like her. This denotes that she has a friendly relationship with them. The people surrounding MIA's group are Afro-Americans mostly, which again relates the video to the minority groups of immigrants in the country.

4. Conclusion

In this study, I provided an interpersonal multimodal discourse analysis of MIA's music video and lyrics "Paper Planes" using Halliday's (1978) and Machin's (2010) frameworks to have an analysis of this study. I explored most of the salient elements that MIA uses in order to represent the attitudes and perspectives that society constructs concerning immigrants and people from different countries. As mentioned previously by Villalba (2008), "hearing about immigration on televised news broadcasts, print news stories, radio talk shows, or Internet blogs leads to having anti-immigration thoughts causing sentiment that is not related to law, but instead is veiled racism" (p. 541). It can be inferred that the information that we receive in different communication media causes effects on society by thinking that immigration is negative. However, as stated in the literature key aspects, most of the studies demonstrate that the attitude from people regarding immigrants is positive, which contradicts to what media shows.

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