

Multimodal Literacy through Children's Drawings in a Romani Community

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Abstract

Being part of an ethnographic research project, which investigated the funds of knowledge and literacy practices of a Romani community in northwestern Romania, this paper presents an exploratory examination, seeking ways to understand drawings and sketches as multimodal texts produced by five Romani children in this community. In general, Romani people, living on the margins of society, have often been labeled illiterate and been discriminated against. The examination of these Romani children's drawings and sketches illuminated two features of their multimodal literacy practices—intertextuality and design—and scrutinized the stereotype of illiteracy thrust upon the Romani people. Based on the examination of the multimodal literacy practices of these Romani children, implications are drawn, including pedagogical applications, and future research directions are suggested.

Keywords: ethnographic research; funds of knowledge; literacy practices, Romani community; multimodal literacy

Introduction

The Roma¹ are an ethnically distinct group inhabiting almost all continents. A great number of the Roma make their homes in Europe (mostly in Central and Eastern European countries) and in North and South America (Hancock, 2002; Miquel-Martí & Sordé-Martí, 2008; Vargas Clavería & Gómez Alonso, 2003). To the Gadge (the non-Romani people), they are commonly known as Gypsies, a term that originated from a mistaken assumption that they came from Egypt (Liégeois, 1987, p. 10). Instead, many scholars believe that they originated from Northern or Central India and took various migration routes in a mixture of groups beginning around the ninth century, possibly due to military persecution (Achim, 2004; Hancock, 2002; Margalit & Matras, 2007; Mayall, 1988; Vargas Clavería & Gómez Alonso, 2003). Throughout their history, they have experienced racism and persecution in various forms, such as *Porrajmos* (a Romani Holocaust during the Nazi era), enslavement, and deportation under communist governments (more examples in Stauber & Vago,

¹ Around the world, different names are used to refer to those commonly known as Gypsies. In this paper, the term *Roma* is used to refer to this group. As suggested by Jean-Pierre Liégeois (2007), this name reflects “the sociocultural reality and the political will of a growing number of groups in the world, who do recognize themselves as Roma” (p. 9).

2007). Due to political and social discrimination, many Romani people worldwide are marginalized and live in poverty (Revenge, Ringold, & Tracy, 2002).

A great number of Romani people are labelled as illiterate, and thus their children are often viewed from a deficit viewpoint (Crespo, Pallí, & Lalueza, 2002; Cudworth, 2010). However, from a multimodal literacy viewpoint, I hope to make visible their hidden strengths through the drawings and sketches created by the Romani children.

This paper presents an exploratory examination, based on my dissertation project which investigated the funds of knowledge and literacy practices of a Romani community in northwestern Romania. Research in the Romani context has mostly addressed social issues, such as discrimination and poverty. Not many studies focus on literacy practices of Romani children. In the following section, I review the limited extant research on this topic.

Literacy Practices in the Romani Context

From a perspective that views literacy as a set of discrete skills for the decoding of print texts, the Romani people are considered to account for about 50% of the illiteracy rate in Europe, while in some areas the number can reach 80% or higher (Cudworth, 2010). In some studies, the concept of literacy is investigated “in the context of access (or the lack of it) to the mainstream education system” (Levinson, 2007, p. 9). Regardless, these views present an autonomous model that has been challenged by scholars, particularly from anthropology and sociolinguistics.

Rather than taking the illiteracy perspective, some studies investigate literacy practices in the lives of the Roma from a sociocultural aspect. For example, in the Romani culture, *Patrins* were used in olden times as trail signs coded with natural materials, such as sticks, to represent messages, such as warnings and directions, on the road in nomadic and seminomadic Romani groups (Woods, 1973 cited in Smith, 1997). Additionally, literacy is usually practiced through an oral tradition; thus many Romani people are good storytellers (McCaffery, 2009; Smith, 1997). Furthermore, Levinson (2007) argues that to the Roma, languages are seen as a medium for daily communication, rather than an abstract concept to be studied (Piasere, n.d., Liégeois, 1987, cited in Levinson, 2007, p. 13). Along the same line of thought, Smith (1997) indicates that in Romani communities, languages are acquired “through contact rather than direct instruction” (p. 247). Many studies regarding literacy practices of the Roma are in the context of Western Europe. For example, McCaffery (2009) inquires into the literacy practices of English Gypsies and Irish Travellers in Southern England. Levinson (2007) explores the literacy practices of English Gypsy communities in the United Kingdom. On the other hand, in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, many Roma-related studies focus on social and political issues, such as race, identity, and ethnicization processes (e.g., Rüegg, Poledna & Rus, 2006), and access to education and schooling as well as to welfare and social services (e.g., Ringold, 2000; Vincze & Derdák, 2009). Such differences point to the need for more studies dealing with literacy practices in Central and Eastern Europe; thus, this is one major area this paper will contribute to.

Purpose of Study

Children's drawings are one type of literacy practices and can be used to illuminate children's literacy development (Kendrick & McKay, 2004). Furthermore, children in the research site dedicated a significant amount of time to drawing while I was doing my fieldwork in the community. Thus, this paper seeks an understanding of Romani children's literacy practices through drawing, using the lens of multimodality.

Theoretical Framework

The notion of multimodality offers a framework for this study. In multimodality, meanings are constructed and understood through multiple representations, including images, sounds, and traditional printed text (Jewitt, 2008; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). In this article, multimodality is highlighted via the following terms: modes, materiality, and affordance. Modes are units of "socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource(s) for meaning making" (Kress, 2010, p. 79), containing images, music, movement and so on (Kress, 2010; Kress & Jewitt, 2003). Citing the work of Halliday (1978), Hodge and Kress (1988), and Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), Albers and Harste (2007) indicate the significance of modes: "multimodal communication is comprised of 'modes,' forms within various sign systems that carry the meanings that a social collective recognizes and understands" (p. 11). In materiality, the emphasis is on the "material 'stuff' of the mode" (Kress, 2010, p. 80). Affordance refers to the "possibilities that a particular form offers a text-maker" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012, p. 31). These three terms are closely related to one another, as text-makers constantly make decisions about kinds of modes as well as what materials to use based on the "power and attention" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012, p. 31) the materials can give to the representation and communication of meaning.

Children's drawings and sketches are one type of multimodal text, as they frequently contain images, symbols, and print. These drawings and sketches provide a communication channel to understand the Roma children's world and their multimodal literacy practices.

Methodology

A qualitative study with an interpretive stance is conducted to gain a contextual understanding of a group of Roma children in the northwest area of Romania. This research site is very close to the border with Hungary, and thus contains a multiethnic population. While the majority of the residents in this area are Hungarians and Romanians, the Roma comprise the third largest group, yet many of them live on the margin of the community (Fundăția Jakabffy Elemér).

Research Setting

The research setting of the study is an after-school program at a local church. The staff consisted of one Romanian teacher, a male program leader from the Romani neighborhood, a Romani woman in charge of preparing food and cleaning the building, and a missionary from the US. The program leader usually opened the building, and other staff members arrived around noon to prepare lessons and activities. The Romani woman also came at noon to prepare simple sandwiches for the children. The program started in the early afternoon. Younger children usually arrived at this time, while older children arrived a few hours later, at the end of their school day.



Figure 1. Children's artwork

My fieldwork in the after-school program was divided into two periods, October–December 2011 and May–July 2012.

During the first period of fieldwork, children often drew during the beginning of the program as they waited for the teacher and other children to arrive. Drawing was used as a way to keep the children occupied during the winter when outdoor activities were not available. These drawings improvised by the children did not seem to be considered to be serious, academic learning. At the end of the day, the Romani woman often put many drawings and sketches in the trash can. Sometimes the teacher would design lessons that integrated artwork, yet many lessons involving artwork were bound within the framework of conventional literacy practices. Other times, the teacher would ask the children to draw by following fixed guidelines (e.g., Figure 1). Those drawings improvised by the children themselves were seldom displayed.

Data Collection

The data were collected from the following two sources:

Drawings and sketches

Children's drawings and sketches were collected over two periods of fieldwork. In this paper, I focus on the drawings and sketches of five children. Figure 2 below presents basic information on these five children and their drawings presented in this paper.

Name	Age	Gender	Reference of Drawings
Sorin	12	Male	Figure 3 Sorin's drawing of the "Pasărea Floare" story
Iulia	12	Female	Figure 4 Iulia's drawing of princess Figure 8 Visual space of Iulia's drawing
Bianca	12	Female	Figure 5 Bianca's drawing of princess Figure 9 Visual space of Bianca's drawing
Diana	7	Female	Figure 6 Diana's drawing of her parents Figure 7 A close-up of Diana's drawing
Adi	7	Male	Figure 10 Adi's drawing of Santa Claus I Figure 11 Adi's drawing of Santa Claus II
Figure 2 Background information on the five Romani children			

Participant observation

I took copious field notes to document my participant observation as a volunteer in the after-school program. I also wrote down informal conversations with the children and their parents in order to gain a contextual understanding of their drawings and sketches.

Data Analysis

The analysis of children's drawings and sketches was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, I drew from the field notes of my observations and informal conversations with the children (some with their parents or family members). I wrote a short passage regarding the context in which the drawing or the sketch was situated (Riessman, 2008, p. 177). After that, I did a preliminary "reading" of the drawings and sketches by answering the following questions, which are adapted from Albers (2007, p. 154):

- What is this child trying to convey in this drawing?
- What immediately comes to your mind?
- What colors and shapes are used?
- What impressed you in this drawing?

During this initial phase, some of my general impressions were that some children used drawings to convey their emotions, such as love and affection, and to describe their daily life experiences. Another impression is that many children used rich colors (e.g., red, blue, yellow) in their drawings. In the second phase of the analysis, I worked iteratively and recursively across all the drawings again with the following two foci:

(1) The use of space. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) proposed a model to explain how meanings are represented and communicated in visual space. In their model, a visual text can be understood in terms of three dimensions. In the first

dimension, components in a visual text are divided into left and right sections. Similarly to Western languages, such as English, sections of the visual components are read from left to right. The components on the left suggest information that is given or known, while those on the right suggest new information. In the second dimension, components of a visual text are divided into top and bottom sections. The upper section represents information that is ideal and tends to have “emotive appeal” (p. 193), while images on the bottom suggest information that is real and tells “what is” (p. 193). In the third dimension, components of a visual text are structured as central and marginal zones. The components of the central zone are the focal point, while those on the margins are subordinate. Because of the prominent oral tradition in their non-Western Roma culture, only the top-bottom and center-margin dimensions were used to analyze the visual space of their drawings and sketches.

(2) Thematic elements. In this aspect of analysis, emerging themes were captured by closely examining elements in the drawings and by cross-referencing with other documents, including field notes from my observations and interviews (Riessman, 2008, p. 163).

Analysis of Drawings

Two categories were discerned through this exploratory examination: intertextuality and design. Intertextuality refers to the process when children make connections among different modes, including connections with past texts to produce drawings. The category of design highlights the process of how children integrate different modes, as well as the use of space in their drawings.

Intertextuality

According to Short, Kauffman, and Kahn (2000), intertextuality refers to a process in which children “[make] connections with past texts in order to construct understandings of new texts” (p. 165). This feature can be identified in 12-year-old Sorin’s drawing (Figure 3), produced during my second phase of fieldwork.

One afternoon in mid-May, Sorin mischievously grabbed a textbook from a girl in the after-school program and started to read aloud from the book, which was for Romanian Language and Literature (*Limba și literatura română*) in public elementary school. I asked Sorin to read a story to me. He chose to read the story “Pasărea Floare” (Bird Flower), written by a Romanian writer, Silvia Kerim. “Pasărea Floare” is a fairy



Figure 3. Sorin’s drawing of the “Pasărea Floare” story

tale, presenting dialogues between Copăcelul (Shrub), Lună (Moon Fairy), and an ill little bird. Copăcelul asked Lună to cast a spell to make clusters of flowers on the tree to save the ill little bird.

After Sorin read some of the story, to check his comprehension, I asked him to summarize the story for me without reading from the book. He shook his head, and then read the whole story from the book. After he completed it, I asked him to draw the story on a piece of sketch paper (Figure 3). After drawing, he told me a story about his drawing:

Sorin:	<i>A fost odată ca niciodată un copăcel. El la primăvara o înverzit și prietenele sale au fost floarea, iarba, soarele și cerul. Ele...toți au înverzit și înflorit și copăcelul a facut măr, mere și iarba a fost tăiată.</i>
	(Once upon a time there was a tree. In the spring, it sprouted leaves and became green. Its friends were the flower, the grass, the sun and the sky. They ... everything was green and blooming. Then the tree had apple, apples, and the grass was cut.)
Me:	<i>Măr. Mere?</i>
	(Apple. Apples?)
Sorin:	Yes.
Me:	Oh.
Sorin:	<i>Și, (pointing to the flowers in his drawing) floarea o fost tăiată și la sfârșitul anului și copacul a fost tăiat. După aia, norul tot a plouat. Și atât.</i>
	(And the flower was cut, and at the end of the year the tree was also cut. After that, the cloud kept raining. And that's all.)

In Figure 3, his drawing of a tree and flowers is a connection back to the characters in the textbook story: Copăcelul (Shrub) and the flowers. He added the sun, the grass, and the cloud to his drawing. As he recounted the story about his drawing, he kept the imaginary friendship between the tree and its surroundings as it was featured in the textbook story. However, he changed the shrub to an apple tree. One possible explanation is that the image of the apple tree traced his experience or the practice he observed in his surrounding environment (Pahl, 2007; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012), as there was a big apple orchard in the neighborhood and working in apple orchards was a common labor job for the Romani people living there. In Sorin's case, he produced new meanings in his drawing based on his experience of reading the "Pasărea Floare" story and his personal experience with apple orchards.

Similar features of intertextuality can also be identified in Iulia's and Bianca's drawings (Figures 4 and 5). Both drawings were created on a Friday afternoon in late June, during my second phase fieldwork. On that Friday, I brought a pile of picture books, donated by friends in the US, to the after-school program. The children were told to pick their favorite books. Bianca and her friend, Iulia, both 12 years old, sat next to each other flipping through the book *Pinocchio*. Bianca stopped at the two pages with fairy characters and told me that they were princesses. She ascribed the first princess to Iulia and the second princess to herself. Then the children were given paper to draw about their favorite books. Both Bianca and Iulia drew the princess and added other graphics on their papers. In Figure 4, Iulia added another princess and changed the characters' names. They also drew flowers, a

butterfly (Figure 4), and a sun (Figure 5) to illustrate the outdoor scene where the new princess was situated.



Figure 4. Iulia's drawing of a princess



Figure 5. Bianca's drawing of a princess

The princess characters in Iulia's and Bianca's drawings were created based on their reading of the fairy pictures in the book. When the image was transferred from the picture in the book to their drawings, they changed the princess's appearance and accessories, as well as the scenery and surroundings of the fairy, and then gave new identities to their characters, which were Bianca and Iulia themselves.

Design

According to Kress (2010), the notion of design in multimodality refers to “the use of different modes—image, writing, colour, layout—to present, to realize, at times to (re-)contextualize social positions and relations, as well as knowledge in specific arrangements for a specific audience” (p. 139). Using the concept of design to understand the drawings and sketches of the Roma children can be discussed from two perspectives.

Process of designing

One feature of design is demonstrated in the process of producing the image. One example is Diana's drawing in Figure 6. Diana created the drawing one evening in early June. That evening, Diana came with her mother to join a women's event at the church. I helped watch the child on the other side of the room while her mother participated in the event. Diana was given a piece of blank sketch paper and a few pages of coloring paper. In Figure 6, Diana drew three human figures: an adult woman, an adult man, and a girl. I asked her if the adults were dad and mom (tată și mama), and she responded “yes.” Then she drew a girl next to the woman figure and told me that she would draw her sister and herself. She did not have the chance to finish her drawing, because her mother took her home from the event before she could.



Figure 6. Diana's drawing of her parents



Figure 7. A close-up of Diana's drawing

In the process of producing the images in Figure 6, she first drew a female figure, as illustrated in the middle among the three human figures. After that, she drew a male figure. While drawing the male figure, she tried to locate the position of the man's eyes. First she used her index finger to point at where the woman's eyes were. Then she moved her finger horizontally toward the face of the man and stopped her finger at a certain spot. The process occurred several times until she finally decided where to draw the man's eyes. Upon closer examination (Figure 7), it can be seen that the man was looking toward the woman while the woman was looking toward the audience of the drawing. The human figures were composed with simple shapes, including circles to represent heads, squares for the upper bodies, rectangles for the man's legs, and a trapezium for the skirts. She used a pencil to draw the basic shapes, and then used color markers to add red lips on the woman's face and a brown beard and mustache on the man's. This contrasting use of colors (i.e., pencil and color markers) highlighted the gender difference in the human images. In the process of producing her drawing in Figure 6, Diana used simple shapes to represent male and female figures, and carefully measured the location and distance between the eyes of the two human figures. She also used contrasting colors to highlight gender difference in her drawing. In her design of the drawing, her use of shape, color, and layout demonstrated her observation of her family members and knowledge of gender difference.

Use of space

Another design feature is presented in the use of space. Using Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006)'s top-bottom model to examine the visual space of Iulia's and Bianca's drawings about the princess (Figures 8 and 9), the princesses and the heart-shaped symbols are presented in the upper half of the space, which communicates an "ideal" and "emotive" message (p. 193). This upper position of the princesses revealed an ideal self that Iulia and Bianca perceived in the image. This projection of an ideal self is supported by Bianca's statement above when she pointed at the fairy images in the picture book and said that they were Iulia and herself.



Figure 8. Visual space of Iulia's drawing



Figure 9. Visual space of Bianca's drawing

A similar feature is also discovered in Adi's drawing about Santa Clause in Figures 10 and 11. Adi, 7 years old, created these drawings in early December during the first period of fieldwork. It was the Christmas season, so the children at the program were taught to draw Christmas trees (Figure 11). During the first period of fieldwork, at least three nonprofit organizations from Western Europe and the US came to this neighborhood to give the children Christmas presents. The presents from those organizations were usually one of the highlights in the lives of the children in December. I asked Adi who the person in the red dress was and he said, "Moș Crăciun" (*Santa Claus* in Romanian).



Figure 10. Adi's drawing of Santa Claus I



Figure 11. Adi's drawing of Santa Claus II

Examining the position of the Santa Claus demonstrated Adi's longing toward Santa Claus and Christmas. The Santa Claus images in these two drawings are all positioned on the upper level of the drawings, and that illustrates Adi's emotive feeling toward Santa Claus and the atmosphere of Christmas. The hearts drawn in Figure 10 also indicate his emotive feeling.

Another way to examine the use of space is through what Van Leeuwen (1999) called "perspective," which "creates horizontal and vertical angles" from the viewers' point of view (p. 13). For example, both Adi's drawing of Santa Claus and Bianca's and Iulia's princess drawings demonstrate a vertical angle of position, so

that the viewer would look up at the characters in the image, in this case Santa Claus and the princess. This kind of position creates “an imaginary power relation” (p. 13), in which the characters are granted power over the viewer. That imaginary power relation reveals Adi’s perception of Santa Claus in his inner world, as well as Bianca’s and Iulia’s self-projection toward the princesses they drew.

Moreover, according to Van Leeuwen (1999), a horizontal angle can be “frontal, confronting us directly and unavoidably with what is represented, *involving* us with what is represented, or profile, making us see it from the sidelines, as it were, in a more detached way” (p. 13). Not only were Adi’s Santa Claus and Bianca’s and Iulia’s princesses drawn in the frontal position, but they all also faced directly toward the viewer. This creates a “relation of imaginary intimacy” (p. 13) between these characters and the viewer.

Implications

The implications of the visual analysis in this paper can be addressed in four aspects. In the first aspect, the analysis has revealed that these Romani children have capacities to create rich meaning through multimodal representations. For example, Sorin’s drawing (Figure 3) represents a story, which combines what he read from the textbook and what he experienced in his daily life.

Furthermore, the two categories also provide directions for how such curricula can be designed for the Romani children. For example, as mobile phones are commonly used by the Romani children in the neighborhood for oral communication and game playing, teachers could ask the students to design a mobile phone advertisement to teach the concept of persuasive texts (United Kingdom Literacy Association, 2004). Teachers can encourage these Romani children to use different modes (e.g., images, symbols, space, words) and materials (e.g., papers, crayons, pencils, types of fonts) to present their art work. While designing their work, they will need to consider the affordance of chosen modes and materials. For intertextuality, the children will need to connect to their experience of cellphone use. For example, they may create a game image in their cellphone advertisement based on a game they have played in the past. They may need to investigate the market price of popular cellphones in order to promote their cellphone value. Such purposeful design of a curriculum that incorporates ideas from the above two categories and integrates multimodal texts along with words can help engage these children in a more meaningful learning process.

In addition, multimodal literacy, as seen in the drawings and sketches in this paper, provides an alternative way to understand the unique world perceived by these children. Throughout their history, the Romani people have been portrayed negatively, such as dirty, poor, and uncivilized, through the eyes of non-Romani people (Hancock, 2002). On a personal level, when I walked into this Romani neighborhood for the first time, I saw many broken houses and children with dirty clothes. Yet the drawings and sketches of these Romani children have taught me a different story about their world. For example, in Adi’s portrayal of Santa Claus (Figures 10 and 11), heart-shaped images in cheerful red reoccurred in his

drawings. Adi's drawings create a space for him to express the joy and delight in his world. After studying their drawings and sketches, beyond poverty, I started to see resilience in the lives of these Romani children. Albers's (2007) profound statement describes my new understanding of their life and culture through their drawings and sketches:

Understanding these recurring details in artworks allows readers to recognize the composition more immediately, and then to make their own meaning from these visual texts. In other words, artists develop "memory images" and continue to reproduce these images time and again. In so doing, they visually teach viewers how to look at particular aspects of culture, life, and experience. (p. 158)

Finally, future research can include more follow-up conversations with the children about their drawings to gain deeper contextual information about each child. Some scholars have argued that children's drawings provide a critical communication space for others to understand their world (United Kingdom Literacy Association, 2004; Coates & Coates, 2006). Such a space allows conversations and dialogue about their artworks to take place naturally. For example, Sorin mentioned apple trees in his drawing (Figure 3), and picking apples in the orchard is a common income source for families in this Romani neighborhood. A follow-up conversation with Sorin could include his experience or observations about apple picking. This type of communication brings forward information about children's home practices and funds of knowledge. An in-depth understanding of children's lives can be possible through examination of their multimodal texts and conversations about them. This is especially important for educators who deal with children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion

This study reveals the complexity in the use of visual space, composition and structure, and meaning-making of multimodal texts produced by the above five Romani children. These texts also illustrate a world that is seen, heard, experienced, and creatively imagined through the eyes, the ears, and the minds of these Romani children. Nevertheless, this complexity is not valued in a traditional print world, and thus labels such as *uneducated*, *deficient*, *problematic*, and *illiterate* are commonly used in public to describe Romani children. Therefore, curriculum design for the Romani children should include a purposeful use of multimodal literacy. The categories of intertextuality and design provide a helpful initial framework for such curriculum design.

Furthermore, the findings of this study carry implications for Roma-related scholarly work in the future. As the Roma population grows rapidly across the globe, research regarding their culture is especially important, not only because many Romani students come from marginalized or neglected communities, but just as importantly, because Roma-related topics are often neglected in the discourse of minority education. As this study focuses on the Romani people in Europe, the

findings will benefit future scholarly and educational inquiries regarding Romani groups around the world.

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