

The Ornament of Grammar: Sarah Blair

Abstract:

Part of an ongoing research project to interpret linguistic grammar visually, this essay presents initial experiments to visualise rhetorical patterns in English sentences. Creative contextualisation is offered with reference to earlier visual forms that were treated as a kind of language. A certain strand in Modernism - in particular that running through the Bauhaus which used abstract devices as a foundational design syntax - opened the way for post-war picture books to activate the narrative potential of simple coloured shapes; and, again, avant-garde musical scores from the 1950s onwards used exploratory graphic notations to instigate expressive new treatments of sound. My own visualisations are playful in spirit but posit a serious idea that grammar works by means of deep aesthetic tendencies. My case studies - featuring a model user and a model abuser of English - flag up common patterns in typical sentence construction under seven descriptive labels. Ultimately the essay suggests that Illustration might flourish at the level of the sentence, the basic unit of meaning within word-based language and, in very simple terms, the expression of a thought. Ornamenting the rhythm and flow of how a sentence operates is one means of 'seeing' a voice give shape to thought.

Key words: language, visual grammar, sentence energy, abstract ornament, graphic communication

Note on the illustrations: all images other than Figure 1 are the author's own.

The context for the approach explored in this visual essay is a longstanding tendency to employ decorative 'coding' to signal foundational meaning and communicative energy within different types of text. Some such visualisations are readily called 'illustrations'; others less easily so. After a brief look at some intriguing Modernist examples, I make a case for taking this approach down to the level of the sentence, the foundational unit of expression in routine verbal language. The sentence diagrams presented illustrate typical patterns of rhetorical energy in commonly found sentence structures. To take the idea further, two playful case studies show how sentence energy can be visualised more subjectively to illuminate different characteristics regarding content and voice.

Modernism's Foundational Forms

The inclination for pattern in aspects of Modernist design was by no means a surface matter. Liking for abstract forms ran deep, for example, with Bauhaus artists such as Kandinsky and Klee championing formative shapes and profound rhythms through their pedagogical writings and their own graphic work. Both looked for a foundational underpinning of formal elements worked upon by dynamic first principles running right through nature and ripe for voluptuous development in creative design (Kandinsky [1947] 1979; Klee [1925] 1968).

In the Bauhaus curriculum, there was a re-valuing of the basic elements of geometry - circle, square, triangle - glowing with the colour of the primaries, equally elemental. Working rhythmically - repeating the same form in sequence - students grew acquainted with variations on a theme. Equally fertile, breaking a pattern by importing disruption showed the way towards wider transformation and a new direction.

In terms of Illustration, we might think of the great picture-book experiments of the post-war period as segueing out of Bauhaus technique. An interesting case is the Swiss artist and designer, Warja Lavater, who developed a taste for abstract narratives that eventually led her to rework iconic European folktales. Her leporello books of the 1960s and 70s are friezes of saturated geometry: a red dot devoured by a black hole (*Little Red Riding Hood* [1965]); an ash-blue ring finally stately beside her gold-and-pink triangular prince (*Cinderella* [1974]).

Leo Lionni's *Little Blue and Little Yellow* (1959), a narrative in torn paper, deals with the theme of a young childhood friendship. Growing away from the family milieu towards a new friend involves a shift in hue, a lessening of pure allegiance. Here the story's coding directly exploits fusion of form and content. Blue and yellow mix to make green, with something of the original colours but also fresh potential.

Away from Illustration proper,ⁱ post-war avant-garde music-makers are extremely thought-provoking in the context of this discussion. Here the reading being envisaged was in sounds rather than words, and these musicians were consciously pursuing new varieties of sound in their mission for a new music. Composers such as John Cage in the 1950s and 60s deliberately cultivated a personal visual language to galvanise radical performance styles and unconventional soundscapes. Cage's *Fontana Mix* (1958) used a small selection of separable graphic elements - including abstract marks on acetate overlays - which were flung together at random. Instead of a readily interpretable and stable score, something much more open and fluid was generated, conditioning a more subjective, intentionally unpredictable product. Nonetheless, an overarching framework arising from the visual prompts held this attitude of freedom within certain aesthetic limits; this was not anarchy but provocation for invention.

In the same vein, Tom Phillip's drawing, *Ornamentik Opus IX* (1968) was made at the behest of saxophonist Stuart Dempster to stimulate exploratory sounds:

Ornamentik was written and drawn at the request of the American trombonist Stuart Dempster who asked for a piece that would suggest, within the character of a sustaining instrument, various provocative challenges to corner him into inventing new sounds or techniques. (Philips n.d.)

And finally, Carl Bergstrøm-Nielsen, the Danish composer and music therapist, is a contemporary exponent of a similar method. He explicitly advocates the stimulus provided by graphic annotations contrived in response to improvised music, where the objective is a further 'reading' in the shape of a subsequent performance: 'Since the medium is different, we view relevant details and structures in a new light and gain new insights' (Bergstrøm-Nielsen 2009: 73). The development of sensitive marks to encode untoward sound is specifically advocated so that the process of making music, capturing it as image, and then re-enacting this again as music, works like an open-ended chain of communication, evolving as unexpected discoveries accumulate, the resulting outcomes informing the next act of expression.

Bergstrøm-Nielsen's score for his 1992 composition *Towards an Unbearable Lightness* (Figure 1) indicates the significance of visual thinking in terms of his own approach to musical production. Abstract forms within the mix of notations are conspicuous. The overall shape of the music leaves well behind any notion of regular, left-to-right reading of bars and staves, and opts for a sense of spiralling evolution. Colour variation is part of the journey, and

so are interludes of drawn marks alternating with written instructions. There is clear selection in the disposition of the visual elements – cool blue moving towards hot red, sharper geometry replaced by bubbling micro-forms.

From Text to Sentence

The examples considered so far show creative practitioners from the mid to late twentieth century negotiating creative ideas via the medium of a personal system of visual coding. In each case a process of translation occurs where a creative outcome depends on a reading that bounces off a set of visual prompts into another medium - be it a spoken story or a musical performance. That invention takes place in the midst of the exchange was the point. Idiosyncratic visual directions such as those employed by Cage and Bergström-Nielsen were employed precisely because they were more open and ambiguous in their specifics than conventional coding, but by their nature they still presented a controlling framework in terms of an overall aesthetic drive and a sense of poetic compass. Visual coding lends itself to providing powerful physical and emotional metaphors to guide the expressive development of a work. This can take place through the emergence of a pattern or patterns of simple visual dualities - dark/light, cold/warm, hard/soft, orderly/chaotic, and so on – and these are prone to translate into a specific narrative mood or underpinning energy at the next stage.

My own recent work has taken these ideas to the level of the sentence, initially with a view to illustrating the mechanics of verbal language in close detail. In part, this has been driven by being involved in working with Illustration students trying to write, and realising that some sort of visual support might help them more closely appreciate the mechanics of verbal behaviour - that it might be their natural tool. Beyond this, though, there was the prospect of creative impetus coming from a method launched by an act of experimental visual processing. Such a technique seemed rich in potential for the development of narratives generally – indeed, for any direct engagement with different types of text and discourse, which, after all, is what the illustrator is about. Graziella Tonfoni (1994) has written in very stimulating terms about how types of texts may be beneficially couched as archetypal shapes, and I have tried to develop a similar range of simple visual ideas to indicate the essence of common English sentence patterns.

The focus here, I should stress, has been not to teach grammatical accuracy (though this may be a helpful by-product), so much as to show that common sentences rest on underlying aesthetic dynamics. The energy of a particular sentence depends not purely on the implementation of chosen vocabulary but on compositional structuring that can be readily explored – by being illustrated - in visual mode.

Sampling Sentence Energy

Grammatically speaking, there are only three types of sentences in English: Simple, Compound and Complex (Figure 2). Each involves the deployment of a subject and a verb, but each has its own distinctive quality of orchestration and flow. So, a Simple sentence is classically a balanced one, punchy and rapid, whereas a Compound operates as an accumulation of ideas - it is in fact a linked chain of Simple sentences. A Complex sentence, however, has a natural hierarchy of clauses (main and subordinate), signalling a relationship between two or more ideas and introducing capacity for substantial nuance or focus.

It is not necessary to unpick the technical intricacies of foundational grammar here, except to say that these very basic structures have aesthetic leanings beyond the level of their overt semantic content; they have *form*. Even a relatively unexceptional type of sentence can be shifted towards a feeling of aesthetic balance or imbalance, for example, or contrive to do both at the same time, thus producing a sense of intriguing paradox. Such a quality can be brought to the surface with a slight typographic highlight, as in Figure 3 which pulls out the three implicit beats of Shakespeare’s playful little sentence in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ‘I see a voice’ (Figure 3).

Across the core sentence types, layered aesthetic games occur all the time in English usage, engendering a whole variety of poetic or rhetorical effects. To give a flavour of the more conspicuous patterns, I characterise here seven very common ones:

Balance
Contrast
Repetition
Inconsistency
Accumulation
Framing
Sting-in-the tail

I have playfully summarised these tendencies as simple diagrams in Figures 4 – 10. I offer these to draw attention to the underlying features of countless different modes of actual language production, and also to posit a relationship between the mechanics of sentence design with the rhythms of the visual. Often these categories coincide in fact; sentences are confections rather than pure in their aesthetic make-up. *Repetition* builds to a *sting-in-the-tail*, or *front-framing* introduces *accumulation*. Hybrids are found at all levels of language usage and across completely different functions and contexts - in daily speech and common idioms, as well as in highly specialised texts.

So, in the first instance, these basic illustrations of sentence characteristics are offered simply to draw attention to common linguistic patterns that are invisible to the vast majority of speakers of English. The aesthetic characteristics of English are shown through abstract forms to make them more accessible and appreciable. Ultimately, in the context of an Illustration education, this is something that might be worked with creatively and personally: out of a close analysis of verbal meaning-making comes the potential for graphic expansion. One possibility is the development of more integrated styles of expressive communication, with visual and verbal forms coming together intimately, yielding the potential for fresh hybrid forms such as personalised pictographs and highly tailored expressive infographics. The attention being given to Georgia Lupi’s and Stefanie Posavec’s year-long mail-art project *Dear Data* (2016) is an indication of the renewed contemporary interest in idiosyncratic use of diagrams, the data in this case being the artists’ own weekly rituals.

Characterising Specific Voices

Beyond exploring basic linguistic behaviour – and also trying to demonstrate how this might be more aligned to other forms of creative practice than is often acknowledged – I have begun to make diagrams of the language of specific voices, to try to capture the identity of individual instances of speech and writing in the flow.

Figures 11-16 are visual explorations of sentences by two well-known English-users, personalities living more than a hundred years apart and functioning on different continents and in entirely different cultural contexts.

The first is Beatrix Potter, writer and illustrator of some of the best-known books for children in the English language, with a conventionally very secure command of English prose that ripples with knowing lexis and a range of elegant sentence structures: a model user, if you like.

The second is Donald Trump, whose language is widely discussed often for its magnetic dreadfulness: ‘redundant, formulaic, aggressive, “post-literate”’ is its spicy summing-up by two academic commentators, decrying its pernicious imitability (Moyd and Komska 2017).

True to her reputation, under visual analysis Potter emerges as a sentence-writer of appreciable aesthetic variety: an expert in graceful rhythms and in careful composites such as integrated balance and repetition (Figure 11), in subtle inconsistency (Figure 11), lucid accumulation (Figure 12), and a beautiful use of holding back a detail to give a sudden surprise (Figure 13), which proves pivotal to the narrative. This expertise underpins the crafting of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) – generally acknowledged to be a highly radical first book in format and scale, in its unusually subtle application of irony in a text for young children, and in the courageous sophistication of its vocabulary.

Trump, by contrast, might stand as a model abuser of the English language, colourful in his disregard for the rules of grammar and the niceties of spelling. On the surface, he could not be more dissimilar to Potter, with his propensity to lose a train of thought mid-sentence and to blurt out fragments of indignation. Yet, on closer investigation, the core patterns of the seven sentence types are well represented in his style, which is by no means unknowing or lacking in dexterity. Trump certainly has a repertoire of tricks; he is in his own way highly inventive through his curious treatment of meaning. Indeed, his voice is a lesson in vocal tonality: punchy contrasts (Figure 16), pronounced repetition (Figure 15), breezy fragmentation of sense units even to the point of breakdown, striking deflations (Figure 16), and everywhere quirky deviations (including idiosyncratic capitalisation, sudden out-of-place formalities, rushing superlatives and a routine use of hyperbole). Trump makes his own idiosyncratic poetry and, closely unpicking the aesthetic forms that underpin his soundbites, it is possible to appreciate the workings of an undeniably expressive communicator - particularly in terms of his propensity for sting-in-the tail clangers (Figure 16). If I try to characterise the tendency of his overall voice, a very recognisable pattern in a Trump sentence is shown in Figure 15 where insistent front and back framing direct the listener/reader towards the central content, itself released like fireworks in a series of quick-firing bangs.

So, where does all this take us? In terms of the field of Illustration, a close visual reading of the extreme detail of language brings with it a very rich level of attentiveness in the interpretation of a particular text or speech. It turns even ordinary language into something that is suddenly very fresh - packed with purposeful rhythm and pulsing with energy that has distinct form. It is in effect a type of visual note-taking: a useful process of enquiry for anyone working to develop a personal language of visual expression. It is also a kind of translation – an unpicking of aesthetic patterns flowing beneath words and grammar, which are then re-suggested by means of improvised visual devices and playful symbolism. As with

Lavater's re-formulated fairy tales, by looking for the basic mechanics of expression within a sentence, it is possible to extract something of its essence and move this into other creative media, inevitably with surprising discoveries along the way – not least the understanding that patterns of meaning arise in the very process of reading, which is an excellent place for illustrations to begin.

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¹ I use this term not from any particular sense of limitation regarding the idea of what Illustration is or might become: quite the contrary, as the following should make clear. I simply acknowledge that musical scores are not typically recognised as pertaining to ‘Illustration’, whereas picture books – largely without exception – very readily are. The intention is to step towards a broader spectrum of reference for the discipline, encapsulating visualisations of diverse forms of expression.