

Janja Batič, PhD, Dragica Haramija, PhD

Rebus Stories as an Aid in Developing Multimodal Literacy

People communicate through different modes of communication. It should be noted that researchers are not unanimous about which phenomena should have modality status. The basic definition of multimodality comes from structural linguistics (de Saussure) and semiotics as a general science of signs (Barthes); as such, it is part of the philosophical cognitive theory and philosophy of language (Haramija and Batič, 2020). Theoretical bases (Kress and van Leeuwe, 2001; Serafini, 2014; Jewitt, 2008) do not offer a single definition of multimodality but the common point in theoretical principles on multimodal printed texts is that it is defined as the entire text, visual image (photographs, illustrations, images, graphs, tables) and design (margins, typography, other graphic elements). Multimodal reading demands of the reader to compose the meaning of the text by considering all the modes of communication that the printed text contains. The simplest multimodal texts have two modes of communication, i.e., the verbal and visual modes; more rarely there is also an audio mode. In the contemporary world multimodal ensembles are present in our physical environment (magazines, newspapers, textbooks, illustrated books, advertising boards, etc.) and on the Internet (web pages, social networks), which is based on multimodality. Through the use of technology, for example mobile phones, almost every individual is constantly interacting with some form of multimodal composition (e.g., watching videos, commenting on posts with words and emoticons, creating multimodal ensembles – photographs with texts). Here it is necessary to point out that young people are often “not critical enough towards such devices and it is important to make them aware of the importance of safe and responsible usage” (Cvek and Pšunder, 2019, p. 19).

When stating that “the basic knowledge and skills of literacy include reading, comprehending and creating information” (Sadar and Erjavec, 2021, p. 93) it is essential that we ask ourselves what kind of texts we are actually reading in modern times. With the appearance of multimodal ensembles, we should also systematically develop multimodal literacy which would enable the reader to decipher meanings from different modes of communication and create a complete meaning. But even in reading very distinctly multimodal ensembles, such as a picture book, the attention of the adult reader is directed towards the verbal mode of communication from which they draw their information and less towards the visual mode. Research that included nursery school pupils revealed that the children “substantiated their findings from the presented multimodal work mostly with the texts” (Bednjički Rošer and Batič, 2022, p. 119). “Texts written, spoken and visualised in the pre-school or early school period present an important contact with artistic language for the growing child” (Mejak and Udovič Medved, 2019, p. 4). The most important multimodal composition with which a child steps into the world of printed materials is the picture book. Picture books contain a design and content relationship between the texts and the illustration which has an important effect on deciphering the meaning (Nodelman, 1996; Nikolajeva, 2003; Sipe, 1998). Rebus stories are similar in that they are also a multimodal composition, though rebus stories have a distinctly cognitive function to the detriment of the aesthetic and partly also the ethical functions of the text, using the terms defined by Kos (2001).

Even though rebus stories are multimodal texts, their reading is distinctly linear. This is why reading a rebus story is the least demanding way of reading multimodal texts and consequently of acquiring reading literacy skills. This kind of reading can be classified as part of the first phase of reading development in its narrowest sense, i.e., the logographic or pictorial stage (Pečjak and Gradišar, 2015) in which the child recognises words as pictures. At the same time the images in rebus stories are a recognisable pattern that help the child in developing and

understanding the meaning of the text. With the help of rebus stories, a child not only acquires the skills of reading literacy but also multimodal and visual literacy. Visual literacy relates to the ability of reading and interpreting visual material and is one of the conditions for multimodal literacy whenever the multimodal composition also includes a visual mode of communication (Serafini, 2014; Haramija and Batič, 2016).

Due to their didactic stance, rebus stories are generally not discussed within the framework of literary-theoretical studies about picture books but as part of the didactics of language and literacy. For example, pointing out the multiple modes of communication in the Curriculum for Slovene Language (2018), studying textbook material for various subjects (e.g., Starc, 2009) and acquiring literacy skills with the aid of multiple modes of communication or recognising composite messages, which also include rebus stories (e.g., Grosman, 2009).

The purpose of the study was to investigate and define the characteristics of quality Slovene rebus stories. In our research we set ourselves the following research questions: What are the content and design characteristics of original Slovene rebus stories, and what is the typical use of images in rebus stories? The study included rebus stories that were published in book form over the last five years (between 2018 and 2022). By searching for the keyword 'rebus story' (*slikopis*) in the COBISS national library information and shared cataloguing system for Slovenia, applying filters (children as the target group; Slovene language; type of content – picture book, short prose, fairy tale, poetry, various literary genres, and printed material), and limiting the results to the last five years of publication, we were left with 45 units of material. For these 45 items, all the material was examined physically and a further 21 rebus stories were excluded due to factors such as reprints (years of publication are included in a table) or inappropriate basic conditions (translations, inaccessibility). Our contextual and design analysis thus included a total of 24 original Slovene rebus stories published between 2018 and 2022. The material was analysed from the aspects of its content characteristics (literary type and theme) and design characteristics (structure and number of words and the presence of visual images or pictures). The results were presented in tables.

An analysis of the content characteristics of the rebus stories examined revealed that rebus stories can be either a form of informative literature (on seasons, vehicles, relationships) or fiction. Some rebus stories include texts that can be categorised into various literary genres. Of the 24 analysed rebus stories, as many as 21 are prose and their texts can be classified as fables, fairy tales, short fantasy stories or short realistic stories. The most extensive group of rebus stories according to literary genre were fairy tales (9 examples), followed by short fantasy tales (7 examples), fables (2 examples) and short realistic stories (1 example). One single example also included jokes. Fiction rebus stories can be either original texts or adaptations (especially of short folk stories).

The design analysis of the prose rebus stories that represent the most extensive group showed that a rebus story can contain a single story or more short stories. In the group of fables, both cases are single stories. In the group of fairy tales, one rebus story contains four stories of varying lengths. In the group of short fantasy tales, apart from one example, all the rebus stories contain multiple stories.

The analysis of design characteristics revealed that between 10 to 20% of words are replaced with pictures. In quality rebus stories the pictures are simple but not stereotypical, and are artistically clear and easily recognisable. Most often they appear in three types:

- Duplication (a picture with the word in a smaller format below it);

- Replacement (the picture replaces the word in the text);
- Supplementation (the picture supplements the words).

About half of the examples also included a picture dictionary, and these can be present in three different formats:

- A picture dictionary at the end of the text (usually where the rebus story is a single story);
- A picture dictionary at the bottom of each page;
- Duplication of the pictures and words throughout the entire text.

Most rebus stories use capital letters which is to be expected from the aspect of local practices in teaching children letter recognition and gradual acquisition of literacy skills. Sans-serif and non-italic fonts prevail, making reading easier for the novice reader. It can also be noted that in rebus stories the writing of individual titles can often be colourful and artistically embellished (e.g., letters complemented with illustrations).

It is important to point out, however, that rebus stories can often also include larger illustrations, which can vary in size (they can take up half a page or even an entire page). Such cases are essentially rebus stories with additional illustrations which need to be considered as part of the multimodal composition. In analysing such cases we must look at the interaction that is created between the rebus story and the illustration in the same way we would look at the relationship between the text and the illustration in a picture book.

We can see that rebus stories, together with picture books, represent an important part of multimodal ensembles intended for the youngest readers. A review of the literature, however, reveals that not much, if any, attention is given to discussing rebus stories from the aspect of their multimodal nature and consequently their role in developing multimodal literacy. This was why we wanted our study to investigate what quality Slovene rebus stories are like in terms of their content and design characteristics. Results point to an extremely rich multimodal composition, which contains quality information or fictional texts (with the latter including a variety of literary forms), small images in various functions (supplementation, replacement, etc.), and in some cases also larger illustrations.

In the future it would be necessary to look in greater depth at the different multimodal ensembles aimed at children. We can also notice that among the rebus stories with adapted texts, the most interesting ones in terms of researching multimodal characteristics are the texts that had previously been published as picture books – for example, *Kekec in Pehta* (Kekec and Pehta), *Kdo je napravil Vidku srajčico* (Who Made Videk's Shirt).