Speech and thought presentation in comics

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Abstract

Comics are a bimodal text using words and images to tell stories. Direct speech (DS) and direct thought (DT) are the most common types of speech and thought presentation in comics. They are typically presented within tailed speech and thought balloons that point to the characters that are speaking or thinking. There are visual forms of speech and thought presentation in comics too. Speech and thought balloons can contain pictorial and symbolic content and thought can be presented through mental images. Speech balloons are also used to present non-verbal content in the form of exclamation and question marks which are used to indicate mental states such as surprise and confusion and dotted lines which indicate pauses or silence. I argue that narrator interference is sometimes present in comic DS and DT too. Narrative information can be included within the written content of speech and thought balloons. It is often identifiable because it is un-speech-like, unnatural and excessive within DS or DT and it seems more likely to come from a narrator than from a character-speaker or thinker, for instance, when awareness of the audience is demonstrated in a character's DS by addressing or referring to the reader. Knowledge of an audience and ability to communicate to them are qualities attributed to the narrator. DT can become almost synonymous with internal narration in comics as a result of narrator interference in DT. Both DT and narrative text can be presented within caption boxes which bring thought presentation and narration closer together in comics. The preference for mimetic, direct presentations of discourse in comics means there is a lower occurrence of diegetic, indirect presentations of speech and thought which are found in prose texts. Narrator-controlled reports of speech and thought are minimized in favour of faithful representations. Like prose texts, DS remains the norm for speech presentation in comics. But whereas indirect thought (IT) is the norm for thought presentation in prose texts, it is no longer a quantitative norm in comics. Instead, DT is the most frequent form of thought presentation in comics.

Keywords: Leech Short Speech Thought Comics

1. Introduction

This article looks at types of speech and thought presentation in comics, specifically the prevalent forms of direct speech (DS) and direct thought (DT) that occur in speech and thought balloons and caption boxes. It proposes that, because of a lack of indirect forms of speech and thought, more than one form of DS and DT have arisen in comics. These forms include: DS, diegetic forms of DS and visual forms of DS, and the corresponding DT forms: DT, diegetic DT and visual DT. General DS and DT in comics equate to the DS and DT found in prose texts which are made up of reporting and reported clauses. Narrator interference is argued to occur in diegetic DS and DT. And there is use of pictorial and symbolic content in visual forms of DS and DT. Also, non-verbal balloons which do not present speech or thought but rather feelings and mental states of characters are brought up. Each of these types of DS and DT and non-verbal balloons will be addressed in this article. First, I will start off by giving a brief background and explanation of direct and indirect forms of speech and thought presentation in section 2. Then section 3 will address speech and thought presentation in comics and present the types of DS and DT that occur in them. Section 4 will place these types of DS and DT from comics on Leech and Short's (1981) speech and thought presentation scales. Section 5 will provide a summarizing conclusion.

2. Mimetic and diegetic forms of speech and thought presentation

The distinction between *diegesis* and *mimesis* was made originally by Plato (*Republic* III, 392D-394E). He spoke of diegesis and mimesis simply in terms of narration versus speech. They correlate with the linguistic concepts of indirect and direct discourse. Rimmon-Kenan (2002) describes diegesis and mimesis as ‘telling’ and ‘showing’

(2002: 107-108). Diegesis or ‘telling’ is a mediating narrator’s report of events or discourse, such as in narrative texts. Mimesis or ‘showing’ is the direct, apparently unmediated presentation of events or discourse which allows the audience to ‘see’ or ’hear’ them, such as in films, pictures and direct speech quotes. Direct speech (DS) and direct thought (DT) then are considered mimetic reports of discourse as they claim to be faithful reports of what is said or thought, presenting the exact words which were used in the original speech or thought being reported (Leech & Short 2007: 257). Direct discourse presentations are often identified by the use of quotation marks and reported and reporting clauses:

["Look in the drawers,"] [he said to them]. (DS)
reported clause reporting clause

["This can't be true,"] [he thought]. (DT)
reported clause reporting
clause

Indirect speech (IS) and indirect thought (IT) are diegetic reports of discourse as they involve a mediating narrator reporting what was said or thought. Speech and thought are presented in the words of a narrator and thus do not claim to be an exact replication of the words spoken or thought. Quotation marks are absent and the reported clause becomes subordinate to the reporting clause, adopting the tense of the reporting clause:

[He told the others] [to search the drawers]. (IS)
reporting clause subordinated
reported clause

[He thought] [it had to be a lie]. (IT)
reporting subordinated
clause reported clause

3. Speech and thought presentation in comics

Mimetic forms of discourse presentation are prevalent in comics whilst diegetic forms are minimal. DS and DT occur commonly in speech and thought balloons whereas IS and IT are rarely found. This means DS and DT are the quantitative norms of speech and thought presentation in comics, different from Leech and Short's norms of speech and thought presentation: DS and IT (Leech & Short 2007: 276). Whereas DS remains the speech presentation norm in both prose texts and comics, the thought presentation norm for prose texts, IT, does not apply in comics in terms of use and frequency; DT is the most frequent form of thought presentation in comics. This prevalence of DS and DT may be because of the visual nature of comics which favours mimetic presentation of information. Comics are a bimodal medium which use pictures as well as words to tell stories. There is a preference for direct presentations of speech and thought in images as they are mimetic like pictures, claiming to accurately report the words of speech and thought as the pictures claim to truthfully show characters, objects, locations and events of the story. The frequency of direct discourse presentations and the scarcity of indirect discourse in comics have resulted in some unique forms of DS and DT that do not occur in prose fiction.

3.1 Direct speech (DS) and thought (DT) in comics

The most common types of discourse presentation in comics are DS and DT. They are presented in speech and thought balloons. The dialogue within a balloon is equivalent to a reported clause ("**Give me that**," he said.), the speech or thought balloon itself is equivalent to quotation marks ("Give me that," he said.), and the balloon's tail is a graphological equivalent to a reporting clause ("Give me that," **he said**.). Visual features such as the shape and colour of the balloon, font size and type and the use of bold, italics and capitals are used to signify prosodic features such as emphasis, volume and voice quality. DT is also presented in caption boxes as well as thought balloons. From general observations, thought balloons are not as common in modern comics as they once were in older comics; DT is often presented within caption boxes now. In the

case of DT in caption boxes, the caption box becomes the equivalent of quotation marks and a reporting clause combined as it does not have a tail like balloons.

(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol. 7*, pg. 119.)

In the panels above from the *Tintin* comics, the left panel shows a normal white speech balloon containing non-outstanding words which signifies normal speech, but the panel on the right displays a spiky red speech balloon that contains bolded and enlarged words in capitals. The effects generated by the red balloon's visual features are loudness and urgency, so we read Tintin's speech as shouting.

(Z. and Green (Mar. 2000), *Witchblade #38*, pg. 7.)

The bolding of words in this picture indicates emphasis. The red border around the lower speech balloon suggests forcefulness or aggressiveness. The larger-sized words within this balloon are words which are spoken louder than the rest.

(Mackie et al. (Aug. 1999), *Peter Parker: Spider-Man #8*, pg. 4.)

DT can be presented within cloud-shaped thought balloons with tails made up of a line of bubbles. Like speech balloons, the thought balloons containing verbal content equate to reported clauses and their bubble tails equate to reporting clauses.

(Puckett et al. (Sept. 2000), *Batgirl #6*, pg. 6.)

DT is also presented within caption boxes. This second way of presenting DT is more like how narrative text is presented within caption boxes and thus creates more visual similarities between thought presentation and narration. This may be a deliberate attempt to bring thought presentation and narration closer together in form and function, allowing the two to be used interchangeably or even to be combined. As a result, it can be difficult to distinguish thought from narration at times. This allows narration to be sometimes mimeticized in a form resembling DT and allows DT to perform narrative functions. The use of caption boxes for both thought presentation and narration makes thought balloons unnecessary and thus reduces the number of different frames used for presenting discourse.

3.2 Indirect speech (IS) and thought (IT) in comics

Indirect reports of speech and thought are hard to find in comics. It is not often that the contents of characters' speech or thoughts are conveyed through indirect narration, though it is not impossible. Because of the visual and mimetic (show rather than tell) nature of comics, direct forms of discourse presentation are favoured over indirect forms, to the point that indirect discourse is hardly ever seen in comics. Speech and thought are most commonly presented directly in speech and thought balloons attached to characters in pictures, claiming to report the exact words spoken or thought by characters. Though IS and IT report the same essential message and content as direct speech and thought, they are not presented in the same way. IS and IT do not use quotation marks in prose and they do not use speech and thought balloons in comics; markers of direct speech and thought cannot be used for IS and IT. So because IS and IT cannot be presented in balloons like direct speech and thought, they cannot be as closely tied to characters visually and integrated into a pictured scene.

IS and IT are at a disadvantage compared to direct speech and thought in comics; the medium is not as suited to narrator-controlled presentations of discourse. Theoretically, IS and IT in comics would have to be placed in narrative text boxes where the words of the narrator are presented, separated from the pictures they accompany and existing outside of the fictional world of the picture. IS and IT are non-integrative with pictures as they are products of the textual narration of novels, are used

in second-hand reports of discourse and require the voice of a narrator to present them. Because indirect discourse is told through the mediating words of a narrator, it cannot be presented as immediate to and directly involved in the fictional world of the pictures in comics, hence it will always be narratorially distanced from a pictured situation and characters.

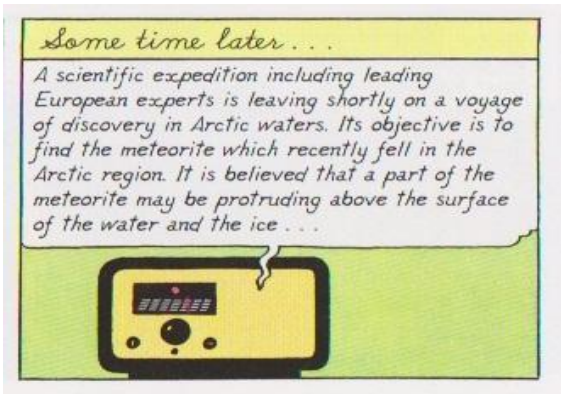
Where IT is the norm for thought presentation in prose texts according to Leech and Short, this is not so in comics in quantitative terms. The scarcity of indirect discourse in comics means that IT is not as frequent in comics as it is in prose texts, hence it is not a quantitative norm for thought presentation in comics in the same manner as it is in prose texts.

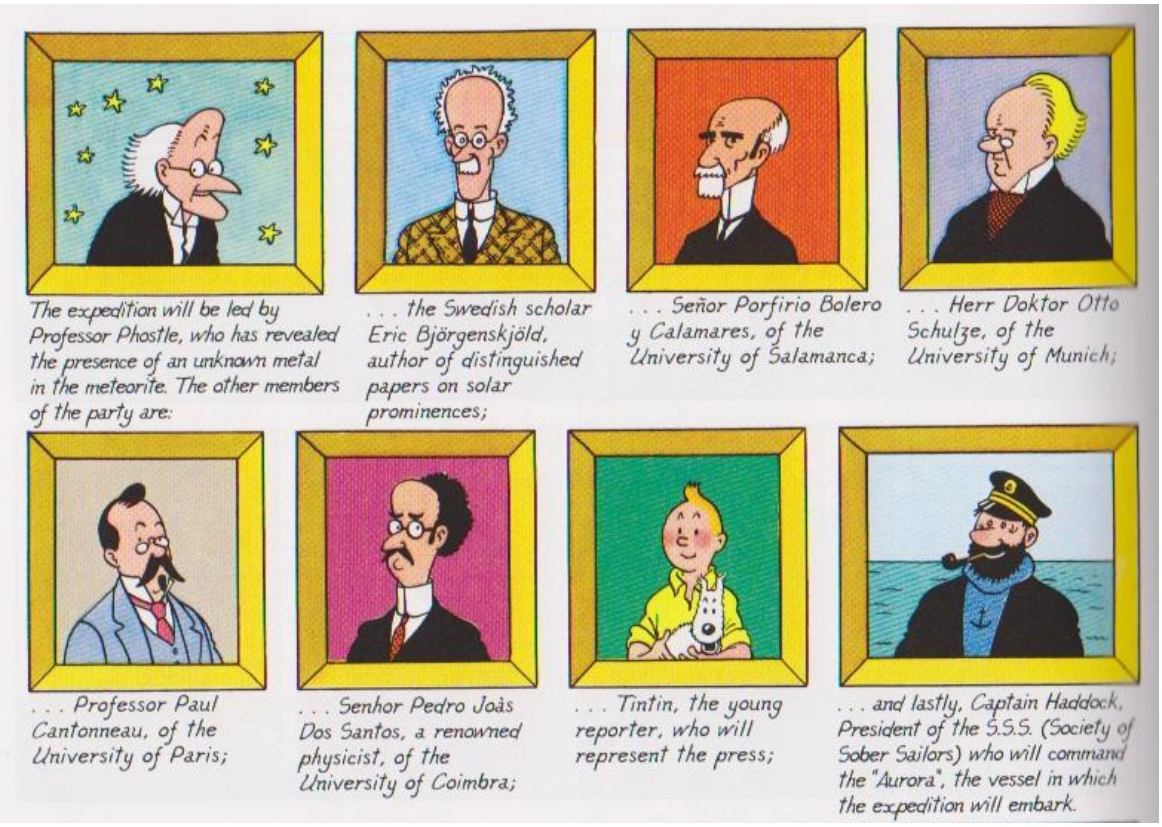
3.3 Diegetic or narrator-influenced forms of DS and DT

A form of speech and thought presentation unique to comics is when the words of a narrator seem to come through in DS or DT presentations or when DS/DT is used to serve some narrative function or purpose. In these cases, the claim of faithfulness to an original discourse made by DS/DT is weaker, so the DS/DT may come across as unnatural, artificial, un-character-like and less plausible. It may not even seem to be the words of the character it claims to report the speech/thought of, instead channelling the voice and/or knowledge and awareness of the narrator through a character's DS/DT. DS/DT becomes a medium through which the narrator may communicate and convey information to the reader in this way. Disguised through the voice of a speaking/thinking character, the narrator is able to speak to the audience without overtly appearing in the story in the form of narrative text. By operating covertly through DS/DT, the narrator does not interfere directly in the story. This is useful for a highly visual medium which maximizes mimetic forms of presentation and minimizes diegetic forms. It helps to reduce the visible presence of the narrator in the telling of a story.

(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol. 4*, pg. 192.)

In the above example from *Tintin*, the DS of the final panel informs the reader of the adventures to come and tells us the title of the next *Tintin* story (*Red Rackham's Treasure*). The speech presented here does not so much seem like Tintin's, though it contains markers of his first person voice (pronoun 'we' and possessive determiner 'our') and uses tense relevant to his current temporal position (future tense in "[...]it won't be easy" and "we shall certainly have plenty of adventures[...]"). The knowledge of what is to come in future and the information about the next story given in the speech are more likely to come from the narrator or author than from Tintin. The fact that the speech is obviously directed at the reader (with Tintin even looking at us) also demonstrates narrative awareness of the audience which is an ability associated with the narrator. So the narrator here could be seen to be using Tintin's voice to promote the next story to readers.





(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol. 4*, pgs. 79-80.)

The DS being presented here comes from a radio. It serves a narrative purpose of introducing us to a major event in the story: a scientific expedition to the Arctic in search of a recently fallen meteorite. The DS proceeds to introduce to us all the members of the expedition: various academics along with Tintin and Captain Haddock. Speaking as a voice from the radio, the narrator is able to communicate details about the next event in the story and to introduce all the characters that will be involved. By using the radio as a medium, the narrator poses as an anonymous reporter's voice within the world of the story, presenting information internally and in a mimetic DS form.

(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol. 7*, pg. 131.)

Tintin's dog Snowy appears to be talking in the second panel on the right. He has a speech balloon containing words of DS. Because animals are not expected to speak, we are more inclined to take this representation of speech from a dog as a narrative translation of his sounds rather than what he is actually vocalizing. So there is narrator interference occurring here in the report of Snowy's verbalizations. In order for a non-speaking animal to gain a human voice, there must be a mediating narrator translating for the animal. But Snowy's words remain perceivable only to the reader. His DS is not perceived by Tintin or any other character within the story.

Diegetic or narrator-influenced forms of DT also demonstrate narrator interference as they possess narrative knowledge and awareness and/or serve some narrative function. Like diegetic forms of DS, this type of DT may seem artificial, unnatural, implausible and un-character-like. It is a way for the narrator to covertly communicate to the reader through the mental voice of a character. In conveying narrative information through DT, narration is presented in a mimetic way.

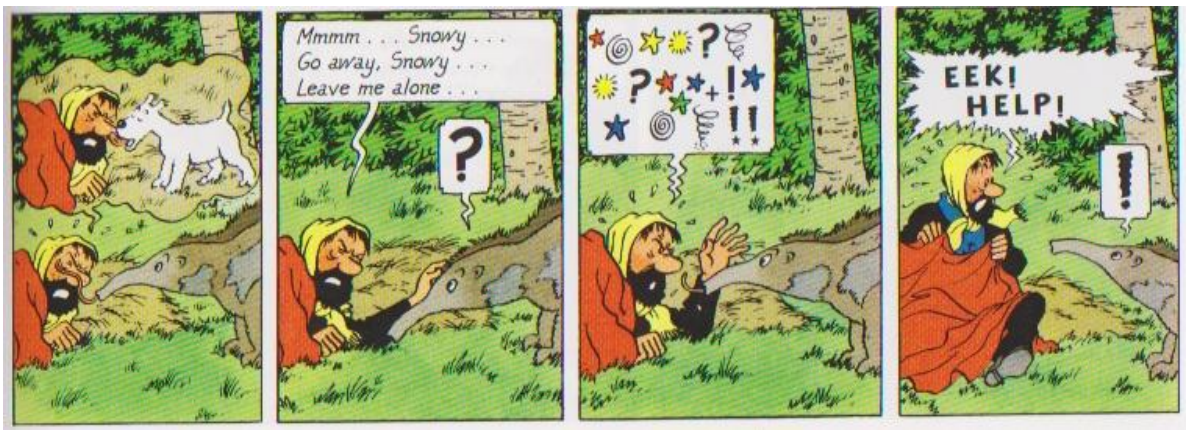
(Herdling et al. (Nov. 1999), *Fast Lane, Part 1 of 4: Media Blitz!*, pg. 2.)

In the above comic page, Spider-man's DTs are presented in thought balloons. The content of the balloons consist of narrative information about the villain that Spider-man is currently engaged in combating. Through DTs, Spider-man gives us a short description of the villain called Mysterio, explains the reason for his attack and tells us

of the havoc he has caused. It does not seem reasonable that Spider-man should be mentally telling himself these things which he already knows. The information given here through Spider-man's DTs is more for the benefit of the reader. It is historical information that contextualizes what is currently happening in the pictures. Though it is presented in Spider-man's internal voice, this information seems more suited to come from a narrator than from a character. But by communicating through the voice of a character, the narrator's presence is concealed in the mimetic form of DT and presenting narrative information via caption boxes becomes unnecessary. The merging of DT and narration allows the two discourses to be presented together as one dialogue that serves both thought presentation and narrative purposes.

3.4 Visual forms of DS and DT

DS and DT can sometimes be represented by pictures or symbols rather than words. These visual types of DS/DT can convey the essential meaning of speech/thought with no presentation of its propositional content and actual words. The tone, manner and/or function of speech can also be indicated by the use of pictorial or symbolic content in DS. Pictorial representation of DS provides a useful way of presenting speech that is extreme, profane, foreign and unfamiliar. It communicates the basic message of an utterance non-verbally.



(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol. 5*, pg. 167.)

In the above Tintin example, the third panel shows Captain Haddock waking to find an anteater licking his face. His speech expresses his initial surprise and confusion through a multitude of visual symbols consisting of question marks, exclamation marks, stars, spirals, curly lines and small flashes. These symbols in combination represent the captain's utterances in response to his first sight of the creature before him. The jumbled and mixed content of the speech balloon may indicate that the captain's utterances are incoherent and improperly formed and structured.

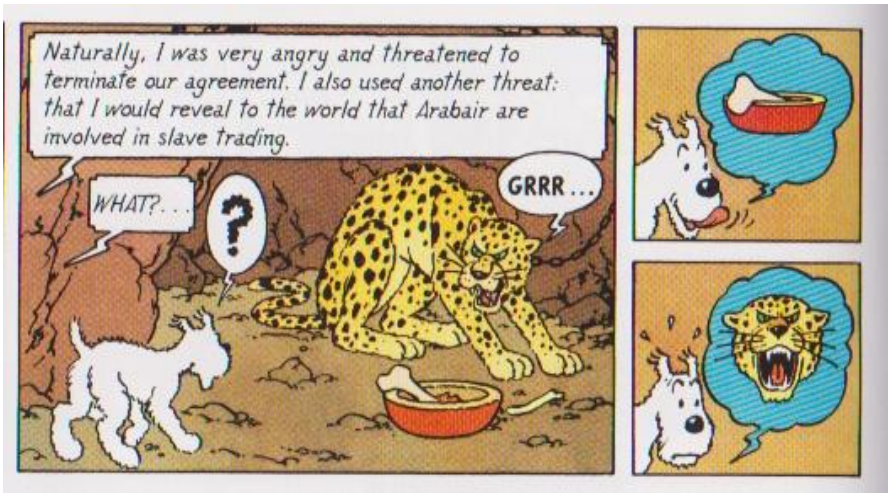
(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol.* 7, pg. 116.)

In this picture, Captain Haddock's angry speech is represented by a combination of pictorial symbols including lightning bolts, a skull over crossed bones, stars, a spiral, a cloud of steam, small flashes, an exclamation mark and a musical sign. The charged and stormy nature of the captain's speech is visually indicated by these symbols.

(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol.* 7, pg. 83.)

In the second panel, a speech balloon containing symbols that resemble Arabic writing represents the DS of an Arab man. These Arabic-style symbols indicate that the man is speaking a foreign language. Though we have no clue as to the content of the man's speech, his fearful expression and the jagged shape of the balloon suggest that he is afraid of something.

Real thought, unlike speech, occurs in visual as well as verbal forms, so presenting DT in pictorial form is potentially as accurate to true thoughts as verbal presentations of DT. Visual forms of DT can be used for the presentation of mental processes such as memories, visualizations, dreams and hallucinations.

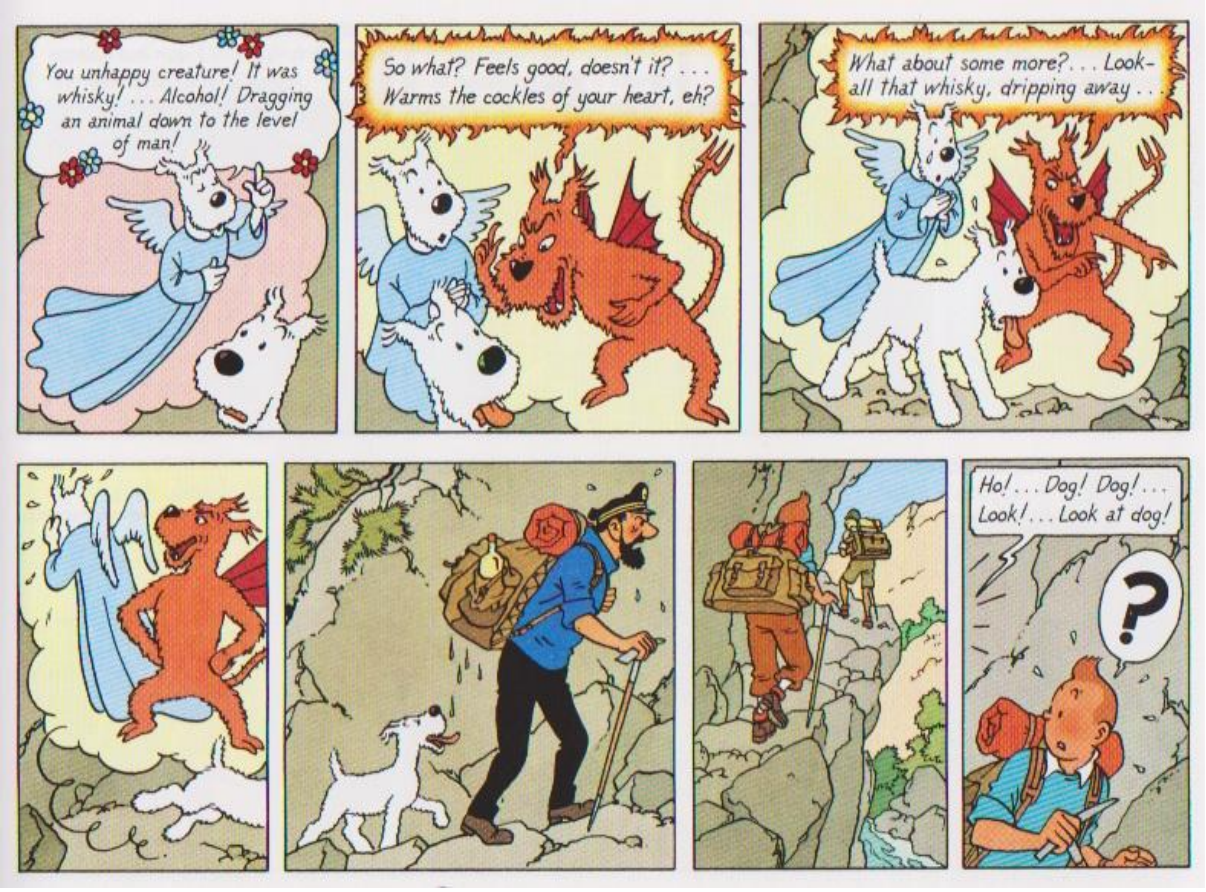


(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol. 7*, pg. 96.)

In the above Tintin example, Snowy's (Tintin's dog) DTs are presented pictorially in the panels on the right. These visual DTs show two items that are occupying Snowy's thoughts: a bone in a bowl and a hostile-looking cheetah. Snowy is tempted by the bone, but fearful of the cheetah near to it. The conflict between his temptation and fear is evident from the pictorial DTs.

(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol. 7*, pg. 88.)

The bottom panel on the right shows a combination of words and pictures in the presentation of Captain Haddock's thoughts. The sleeping captain has heard the pop of a cork being pulled out from a bottle by Tintin and his semi-conscious mind is linking the sound to a bottle of alcohol.

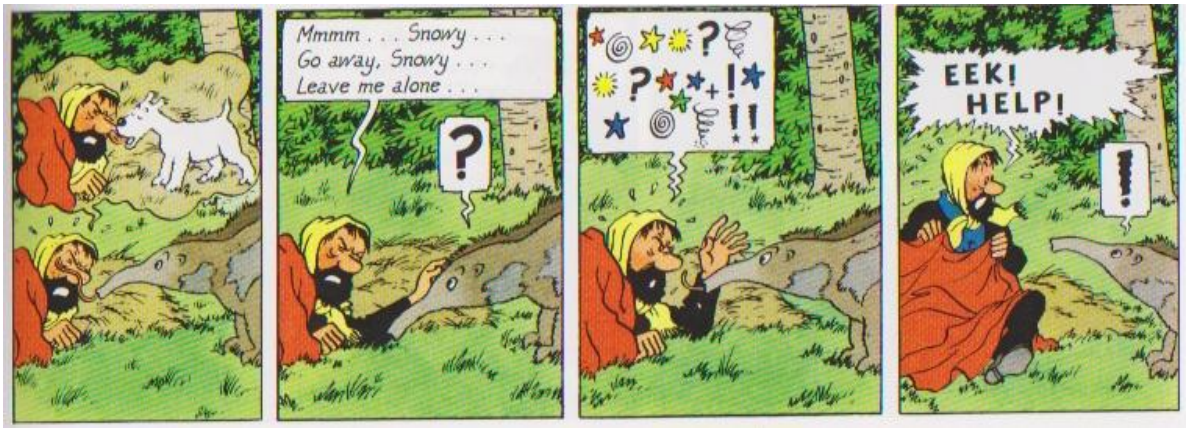


(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol. 7*, pg. 149.)

In these panels, Tintin's dog, Snowy, is confronted in his thoughts by his inner angel and demon after lapping up some alcohol that had dripped from the bag of Captain Haddock. Snowy's angel and demon are visual representations of his moral will and temptation which are competing for control of him. Unfortunately, temptation succeeds in driving Snowy to consume more alcohol dripping from the captain's bag.

3.5 Non-verbal balloons

Speech balloons do not always contain DS. There are instances of speech balloons that contain non-verbal content which are used to express reactions, states of mind and feelings.



(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol. 5*, pg. 167.)

In the second and fourth panels of the Tintin example I used earlier, there are speech balloons coming from an animal which contain a question mark and an exclamation mark. These non-verbal balloons do not represent speech, but the mental states of the animal. The question mark is used to represent confusion and lack of understanding and the exclamation mark is used to represent surprise.

(Hergé (2011), *The Adventures of Tintin Vol. 7*, pg. 89.)

A combination of question and exclamation marks, as shown in the panel on the right, represents both confusion and surprise together. In this case, it presents the startled reaction of the bald man when Captain Haddock wakes up suddenly beside him shouting.

4. In relation to Leech and Short's (1981) speech and thought presentation scales

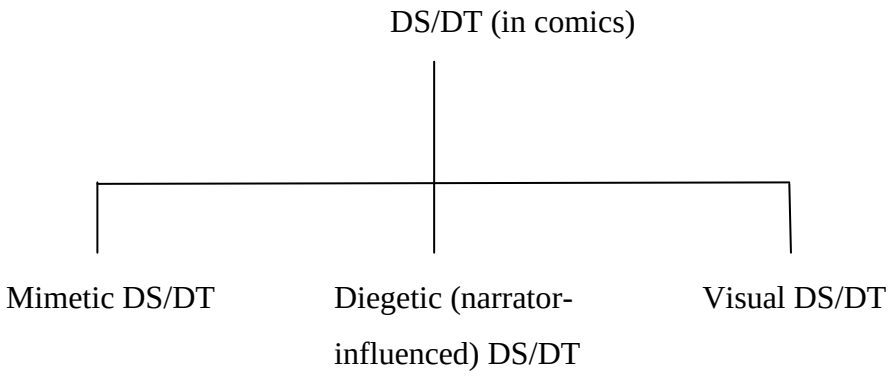


Figure 1 Sub-categories of DS and DT in comics

DS and DT in comics correspond to DS and DT in prose texts, being mimetic reports of speech and thought. But their diegetic (or narrator-influenced) and visual forms are new sub-types of DS and DT which are relevant specifically to comics. In Leech and Short's (1981) speech and thought presentation scales, these comic-specific types of DS and DT would be additional sub-categories under DS and DT. Diegetic and visual DS and DT are different from traditional mimetic presentations of DS and DT, but they are still variations of direct discourse.

5. Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the prevalence of direct discourse and the scarcity of indirect discourse in comics and proposed forms of discourse unique to comics: diegetic or narrator-influenced and visual DS and DT and non-verbal balloons.

The concepts of diegesis and mimesis have been used to distinguish indirect and direct forms of discourse presentation. Diegesis relates to the 'telling' of information through the report of a mediating narrator, as in prose narrative texts. Mimesis relates to the 'showing' of information in a direct and unmediated form, such as in films and

pictures. Direct speech (DS) and thought (DT) are mimetic as they claim to be faithful reports of discourse. Indirect speech (IS) and thought (IT) are diegetic as they are reports of discourse from a mediating narrator.

DS and DT are the most prevalent form of speech and thought presentation in comics, but IS and IT are rare. Leech and Short's speech presentation norm for prose texts, DS, remains the same for comics, but their thought presentation norm, IT, is no longer relevant for comics where DT is the quantitative norm for thought presentation. As a result of the frequency of DS and DT, other types of DS and DT have developed in comics which do not occur in prose fiction. The types of DS and DT that occur in comics include: DS, diegetic forms of DS and visual forms of DS, and the corresponding DT forms: DT, diegetic DT and visual DT.

Normally, DS in comics is presented within speech balloons and DT is presented within thought balloons or caption boxes. The balloon is equivalent to quotation marks, its tail to a reporting clause, and the text content of the balloon is the reported clause. The shape and colours of speech and thought balloons and the font type and font size of and use of italics and bold in their contents can create various effects like emphasis, volume, tone and voice quality. Jagged, pointed speech balloons could indicate words said forcefully, at high volumes, in shock or surprise or from phone, radio or other transmitting sources. Bold words of a large font size in speech balloons often indicate loud and forceful speech. A unique or uncommon font type in a speech balloon could be indicative of a particular character's voice or a distinctive quality of speaking voice.

Diegetic forms of DS and DT involve narrator interference. They may demonstrate narrative knowledge and awareness and provide narrative information. They allow the narrator to communicate messages through the direct voices of characters and thus narrate in a mimetic form. In these narrator-influenced forms of DS in comics, DS can no longer be considered strictly faithful and accurate as narrator interference is present in it. Using the DS of a character as a channel through which to provide narrative information to the reader allows narration to be conducted indirectly and in a mimetic form. By a character acting as an internal narrator through his/her own DS, the presence of an external narrator is minimized and narratorial information is presented through the mimetic channel of DS.

Visual forms of DS and DT involve the use of visual symbols and pictures to represent speech and thought. Words of DS can be represented by pictorial symbols at times. To avoid writing out bad language directly, rude words often are indicated by a set of various marks, signs and symbols. And foreign or invented languages may be represented by invented symbols. Pictorial symbols may be used when the exact content of DS does not need to be known or shown and when simply conveying an impression, quality, characteristic or general sense of meaning is satisfactory.

There are also presentations of non-verbal content in speech balloons. Question and exclamations marks can be used in balloons to represent mental states of confusion, shock and surprise. The use of speech balloons in presenting the mental states of characters makes these non-verbal behaviours seem active and brings them into a pictured scene in the same way as DS by linking them to characters. Aside from representing non-verbal mental states in a simplified visual way with symbols, non-verbal balloons are more immediate and dynamic than written narrative reports of mental states, which tend often to be narrated in past tense and externally.

DS and DT and their diegetic and visual forms in comics are variations of DS and DT. They would be included in Leech and Short's (1981) speech and thought presentation scales as sub-categories of DS and DT which are relevant specifically to comics.

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