

Japanese Visual Language

The Structure of Manga

By Neil Cohn

ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, manga has exploded in readership beyond Japan, and its style has captured the interest of young artists all over. But, what exactly are the properties of this "style" beyond the surface of big eyes and "backward" reading? This paper explores the structural elements of the Japanese Visual Language (JVL) that comprises the "manga style" — ranging from looking at the “big eyes, small mouth” schema as a “standard” dialect, to examining the graphic emblems that form manga’s conventional visual vocabulary. Particular focus will be given to JVL grammar — the system that creates meaning via sequential images — and how it differs from the visual languages from other parts of the world. On the whole, manga provide an excellent forum for understanding the scope of the visual language paradigm.

KEYWORDS: manga, visual language, Japanese comics

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Many authors have intuitively associated the “comic” medium to language, and the same analogy holds with manga. The celebrated “God of Manga” Osamu Tezuka commented on his process by stating, “I don’t consider them pictures... in reality I’m not drawing, I’m writing a story with a unique type of symbol” (Schodt 1983:25). One of the first Americans to write about manga, Frederik Schodt, reiterated this, commenting that “manga are merely another ‘language,’ and the panels and pages are but another type of ‘words’ adhering to a unique grammar” (1996:26).

Schodt’s remarks are perhaps more than just an eloquent metaphor, as recent theories have proposed that the visual expression of concepts, when put into discrete sequences, is literally a form of *language* (see Cohn 2003, 2005). Like sequential units of sound in speech or bodily motions in sign languages, sequential drawings ordered by a rule system — a grammar — literally comprise a *visual language* (VL). Culturally, this visual language combines with written language in *comics*, *manga*, *bande dessinée*, etc., uniting their readers and authors in a common (visual) linguistic community. Following this, unique cultural styles of drawing simply become different visual languages, the same way that verbal (and signed) languages differ throughout the world.

Bearing this in mind, the word “manga” has come to have two meanings outside Japan. Some use it to designate Japanese “comics,” the socio-cultural objects, and often the industry and community surrounding them. However, others use “manga” to name this visual language itself — loosely conceived of as an “aesthetic style” (as in Rommens 2000). Since the conflation of these ideas can be confusing and inappropriate, in this piece “manga” will be used in the first sense — to designate a socio-cultural artifact — while referring to the system of graphic expression as “Japanese Visual Language” or JVL. While JVL is the graphic system of communication, “manga” is the socio-cultural context in which it appears most.

This piece will focus on the structural properties of JVL — what is known about how it works and functions — especially in contrast to the visual languages found in other cultures. Many readers are probably familiar with the well-known elements of manga. For instance, that manga pages are read right-to-left and that human faces are often drawn with large eyes and pointy chins. While somewhat superficial in the scope of

the totality of JVL, at the very least, these features can point towards many deeper insights into the rich structure of Japanese Visual Language.

Standard JVL

Conceiving of visual creation as a language might seem odd, since the signs are often *iconic* — they *resemble* what they mean — leading to almost universal intelligibility. A drawing of a person means “person” because it looks like a person. Iconic signs differ from two other types of signs: those that are *indexical* and those that are *symbolic* (see Peirce 1931). Indexical signs express meaning by an indicative or causative relation, such as the index finger when pointing. In contrast, symbolic signs convey meaning through cultural agreement alone, such as most words. These characteristics are not rigid categories either — a *mixed sign*, like a weathervane, might be iconic to a rooster, yet indexical to the wind in the direction it points. Symbols are not the only conventional sign though,¹ since icons and indexes can also appear systematically throughout a culture. For instance, smiley faces ☺ are iconic to the human face, yet they occur in a specific schematic pattern that pervades our culture. In contrast, the faces that are created through life drawing are not conventional at all, since they mimic ever-changing perception of the real world.

Traditional thinking about language has held that it only uses symbols (e.g. Hockett 1977; for a dissenting view, see Clark 1997), which would exclude iconic representations, like drawings. The iconicity of images gives the illusion that all drawings are universal and easy to understand, since they can mimic the character of objects in our daily perception. Despite this, the ways “visual speakers” draw people remain just *patterns in the minds of “artists.”* This is particularly evident in JVL, since people are commonly drawn in a recognizable pattern — the stereotypical big eyes, big hair, small

¹ For completeness, Peirce (1931) calls systematically understood signs “Legisigns” and those that are unique and different every time they appear “SinSigns.” Thus, signs that are symbolic are technically “Symbolic Legisigns” while conventional icons are “Iconic Legisigns.” I will refrain from using this jargon throughout, though his point is important to remember.

mouth, and pointed chins of characters in manga.² This “style” is so schematized that often characters’ faces cannot be distinguished from each other, leading to authors’ use of other features to allow readers to differentiate them (Rommens 2000; Natsume 1998), such as wildly varying hair color (Levi 1996:12).

This predominant manga “style” maintains *both* conventionality and iconicity, and represents patterns no less cognitive than any other linguistic form. The iconicity makes it accessible and easily decodable to individuals across the globe, while its conventionality reflects that its patterns are shared by many “visual speakers.” Some individuals use this visual vocabulary, while others have drawn from the perceived world as a template. Others have been inspired by alternative visual styles, like *Akira* creator Katsuhiro Ōtomo, who was influenced greatly by French artists (Schodt 1996:242). Indeed, many manga are drawn in diverse and varying styles, especially in the “artistic” or *gare* genre. While diversity clearly exists across all genres of manga and warrant interesting discussion, this piece will focus on the conventionalized manner of drawing.

A “language” begins as a cognitive system in an individual’s brain: a collection of mental patterns organizing the expression of concepts for expression in some sensorial modality. This system transforms into a “language” culturally, through the mutual intelligibility of various individuals’ cognitive patterns. Speakers of the Tokyo and Kyoto vernaculars remain intelligible enough that the broader patterns are labeled as “Japanese,” while the differences are thought of only as unique aspects of “dialects.” Like the way that Tokyo-ben is considered the “standard” dialect of spoken Japanese, this stereotypical “manga style” can be considered the “standard” dialect of Japanese Visual Language, since it uses a common model for drawing people shared by a broad range of “visual speakers.” This overarching schema in JVL is commonly attributed to Osamu Tezuka — himself greatly influenced by the drawing styles of Walt Disney and “Western” comics (Gravett 2004). So, just like most other languages in the world, JVL’s graphic vocabulary did not appear out of nowhere, but has been tempered and transmitted from other sources (the same way that spoken Japanese was influenced by Chinese).

² Several other patterned types of figures also exist in Standard JVL, depending on what type of person is being drawn. For instance, a stereotypical “big strong male” has a conventional style that is consistent yet different from the big-eyed, pointy chin pattern.

No matter what his own inspirations were, Tezuka's stylistic impact is hard to deny, though most manga today do not mimic the way that Tezuka himself drew. Like all languages, JVL changes over time. Since Tezuka's initial emergence, various graphic dialects have developed under both his influence and that of many others. Truly, at this point, people around the globe can easily identify Standard JVL unconnected to any particular author's manner of drawing. The "style" has transcended individuals in the visual vocabulary of JVL. However, proficient readers can easily tell the difference between the more rounded Shojo style or the more angular Shonen styles. Chibi styles are easily distinguished for their short and cute figures, while various other styles also play off the abstract schema of Standard JVL in a variety of ways.

To the extent that the representations from genres can be grouped into recognizable "styles," each constitute a type of "dialect" or "accent" of JVL, since their patterns reflect varying degrees of similarity amongst a group of authors. It should also be no surprise that these divisions fall into separate genres. Most often, spoken languages become segmented into dialects based on geographical location. However, visual languages are predominantly a print culture, so diversity of community isn't constrained by location, but established by the type of publication and its audience.

To some, the consistency of Japanese drawing styles may appear to stifle creators' innovativeness or individuality. From a VL perspective, creators each find their "visual voice" within the confines of the system they share. Focus shifts from *how* their drawings look to *what* they say with their drawings. Manga critic and theorist Fusanosuke Natsume (2001) even believes that overemphasis on images detracts from the story. As a language, using a consistent visual vocabulary allows readers the freedom to focus on the content of the expressions rather than on the expressions themselves.

Furthermore, the systematic and repetitive nature of the drawing style may be one of the many reasons manga's popularity has been growing so widespread across the world. This consistent visual vocabulary provides a systematic and easily accessible style for new readers to learn. If a child wanted to "draw like American comics," the follow up question would be "which one?" since American books feature such a diverse range of graphic dialects. In contrast, children can easily identify what it means to "draw manga," because JVL features a standard dialect across a wide range of authors. Copying this style

does not just mean imitating an individual, but entering into a community of visual language speakers who share a common graphic vocabulary — and through it, a social identity as a “visual speaker” of JVL.

Indeed, Japanese children imitate Standard JVL in their figures in extremely high proportions (and increasingly outside of Japan), often leading to higher proficiency in graphic creation than children from other parts of the world (Wilson 2000; Cox et al. 2001) (example drawing in Figure 1.). Some work indicates that boys and girls influences differ as well, similar to the differences found in genres of boys’ shonen versus girls’ shojo manga (Toku 2002). Not only do Japanese children imitate this style, but they also appropriate methods for representing alternative viewpoints to the predominant lateral viewpoints, such as aerial and close-up views (Toku 2002, 2001).

Figure 1. Manga by a Japanese 7 year old (note the English text, used in a common language-learning script)



Contrary to the dogmatic claims that imitative drawing limits children’s creativity (e.g. Lowenfeld 1957; Arnheim 1978), research suggests that most children do actually learn by emulating other sources, and indeed that it leads to increased levels of drawing ability (Wilson and Wilson 1977). Truly, copying from manga may actually prevent a drop-off in drawing ability that seems to occur during puberty for children in most cultures *except* Japan (Toku 2001). Imitative drawing then not only establishes a community of “visual speakers” using a common visual vocabulary, but it also offers an efficient way of developing proficient graphic skills, consistent with imitative learning in other domains (Tomasello 2000). However, this should be unsurprising from a visual language perspective — Japanese children are simply treating JVL in manga as a language, learning it through exposure, imitation, and practice.

Graphic Meanings

Many graphic signs used in manga extend beyond iconic representations like those used for people, constituting what Natsume (1997) calls *Kei Yu* (形喩), which are used to represent invisible qualities such as emotions or motion. These can come in two forms, as highly conventional *graphic emblems*,³ like sweeping lines to show motion and bubbles encapsulating text to show speech, or as non-conventional visual symbols or metaphors.

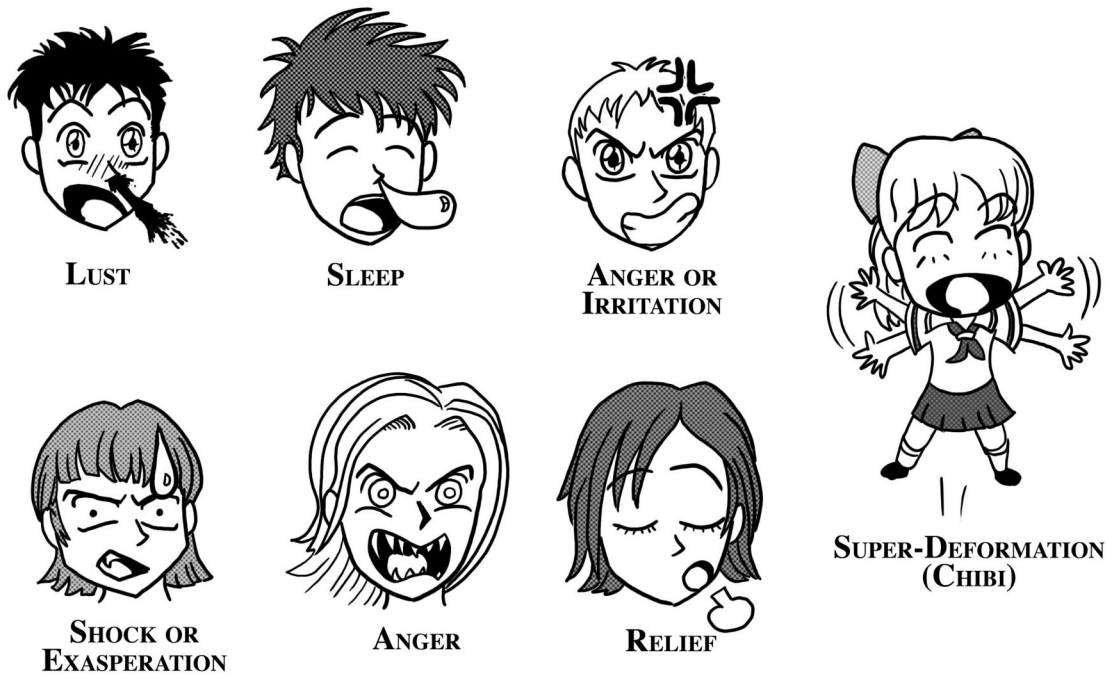
Non-conventional visual symbols and metaphors take many forms. Shojo manga often make emotional use of non-narrative signs in the backgrounds of their panels, using pastiches of flowers or sparkling lights to set a mood or hint at underlying symbolic meaning. Sex especially is often depicted through metaphoric crashing surf or blossoming flowers, or far more suggestively in erotic comics in lieu of the forbidden depiction of genitalia (Schodt 1983:101). Other creative uses of visual metaphor are more overt, such as a scene in Osamu Tezuka's *Buddha* where arrows pierce through the Buddha's belly to show the agonizing pain of being poisoned. A similar metaphor emerged in Rumiko Takahashi's *Maisson Ikkoku*, where an arrow shoots out of a word balloon of gossip to stab the heart of a character (Ceglia and Caldesi Valeri 2002). In most cases, symbols like these heighten the emotional impact of the representations, or creatively adapt them to better suit the graphic form.

On the other hand, conventional graphic emblems in manga vary in their transparency of meaning. In conventional depictions of rage or anger, characters grow sharp fangs and pointy claws while fire erupts behind them. This representation's meaning requires little decoding and seems to have conceptual underpinnings similar to other depictions of anger in comics (Forceville 2005), though using very different cultural conventions. Other emblems are far more opaque to those who have not learned their symbolic meaning, such as gigantic sweat drops conveying embarrassment or

³ The term "emblem" for this context comes from gesture research, classifying conventional signs that are consciously used and understood. Examples include the "peace" sign with the index and middle finger outstretched and the others folded, or the middle finger as an expletive (McNeill 1992).

nervousness (Natsume and Takekuma 1995), bloody noses depicting lust (McCloud 1993), or the lengthening of the area between the nose and lips to indicate sexual thoughts (Schodt 1983). Even more unusual, some characters will suddenly become “super-deformed” — taking on a hyper-cartoony or “deformed” style — to show a spontaneous general lack of seriousness. A small sampling of these emblems and their meanings are depicted in Figure 2. As one would expect from a visual language, many of the emblems from manga extend out to other aspects of Japanese visual culture, surfacing not only in manga, but a variety of other places like animation, street signs, and even in *kaomoji* — “emoticons” used graphically to represent non-verbal emotions and expressions in online, cell phone texting, and other written discourse (Katsuno and Yano 2002).

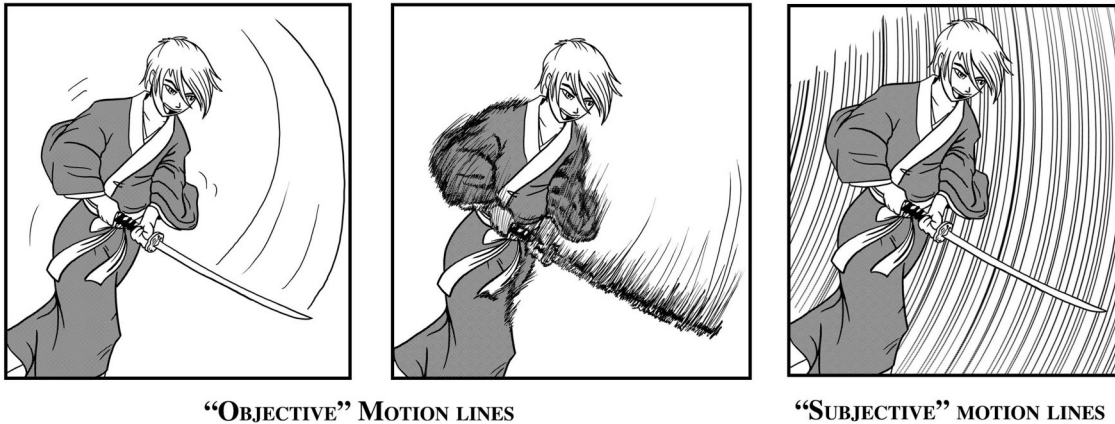
Figure 2. A small sample of graphic emblems from JVL



Kinetic lines that show motion are another graphic emblem that has historically differed between American and Japanese visual languages. Comic author and theorist Scott McCloud observed that there is the potential for many different types of these motion lines (McCloud 1993), and that Japanese authors used a very different strategy than those in America in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Rather than showing lines

trailing the moving object, manga often show the moving object statically with lines streaming behind it. The result makes the reader feel as though they are moving at the same speed as the object, and is one of numerous techniques that McCloud claims manga use to give a more *subjective* viewpoint. Indeed, the use of motion lines as a whole appears different in manga than in older American comics. Lines commonly substitute for the object itself to show a blurred motion, or surround an object in a flurry of lines (as in Figure 3). These distinctly different strategies for depicting motion were amongst the first characteristics appropriated by English-speaking comic authors as manga increased in readership in America throughout the 1980s and 90s (McCloud 1996).

Figure 3. Various strategies of motions lines



This transmission of emblems from Japanese to American authors illustrates how “language contact” can initiate changes in a system graphically the same way it can verbally. Languages only remain bound by any borders that limit their transmission. Since manga have transcended their geographic borders to a dramatic extent in the past decades, it should be unsurprising that JVL has influenced drawers in America and Europe (Rommons 2000; Horn 1996). This influence manifests in a variety of ways. The appropriation of graphic emblems like kinetic lines appear among the smallest instances of this influence — akin to how English has borrowed the words *tycoon* and *karaoke* from Japanese with no overarching change to English grammar. Most significantly, in recent years drawers use the JVL dialects and emblems *en masse*, and in publication are often referred to as Original English Language (OEL) manga or Manga Influenced

Comics (MIC) (Cha and Reid 2005; Arrant 2006). The degree to which the grammar of OEL manga truly reflects that of native Japanese manga or is merely the JVL vocabulary painted over the grammar of American Visual Language has yet to be studied. However, this influence provides a good example of the conflation of the social construct of “manga” and the visual language they are written in, and represents a prime example of how languages can transcend their culture of origins as a cognitive capacity.

JVL Grammar

Although individual images can convey a great deal of information, the real power of language comes from its sequence — combining multiple units to create a cohesive meaning greater than the parts alone. The system that accomplishes this is the *grammar* of language, and visual languages draw on their sequence as much as verbal ones do. Most readers should be aware that the pages in Japanese manga are read from right-to-left — the opposite of American comics. While this is an aspect of sequence, it plays a negligible role in the creation of meaning. Rather, the visual grammar is concerned with how meaning is conveyed to the reader in the content of sequential images, whether that sequence is organized right-to-left or the opposite.

The first major approach to VL grammar was popularized by McCloud, who hypothesized that sequential meaning could be derived from the linear relationships between panels, accomplished through various types of “panel transitions.” His types of transitions included (1993:70-72):

1. *Moment-to-moment* – show a short amount of time passing
2. *Action-to-action* – show a whole action occurring
3. *Subject-to-subject* – show a shift from character to character
4. *Scene-to-scene* – shift between two different environments
5. *Aspect-to-aspect* – step outside of time to show aspects of the environment
6. *Non-sequitur* – have no logical relationship between panels

With these categories established, McCloud then analyzed a variety of works to find out what types of transitions they were using and uncovered some interesting results. While American comic books consistently used a high degree of Action, Subject, and Scene transitions, Japanese books introduced some Moment transitions and high numbers of Aspect transitions that were otherwise absent in American comics. His proportions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of McCloud’s transitions cross-culturally (McCloud 1993:75-80)⁴

	American	Japanese
Moment-to-moment	0	~ 5%
Action-to-action	≥ 65%	~ 50%
Subject-to-subject	~ 20%	~ 25%
Scene-to-scene	~ 15%	~ 5%
Aspect-to-aspect	0	~15%
Non-sequitur	0	0

To account for these differences, McCloud offered two explanations. In contrast to the small pamphlet-style monthly comics in America, he hypothesized that manga’s anthology and tankōbon formats allowed for authors to devote more panels to drawing out scenes and focusing on the setting or mood, a sentiment also echoed by Rommens (2000). More radically, McCloud proposed that Asian culture is less “goal-oriented” than Western culture, and that “Japanese comics...often emphasize *being there* over *getting there*” (McCloud 1993:81).

In contrast to McCloud’s views, an alternative approach argues that linear relationships are not sufficient for describing how sequences of images communicate (Cohn 2003). Rather, visual language grammar works in a similar way as any other language, complete with visual “parts of speech.” Following modern linguistic analysis (for instance, see Chomsky 1965; Jackendoff 2002), instead of looking at the limited

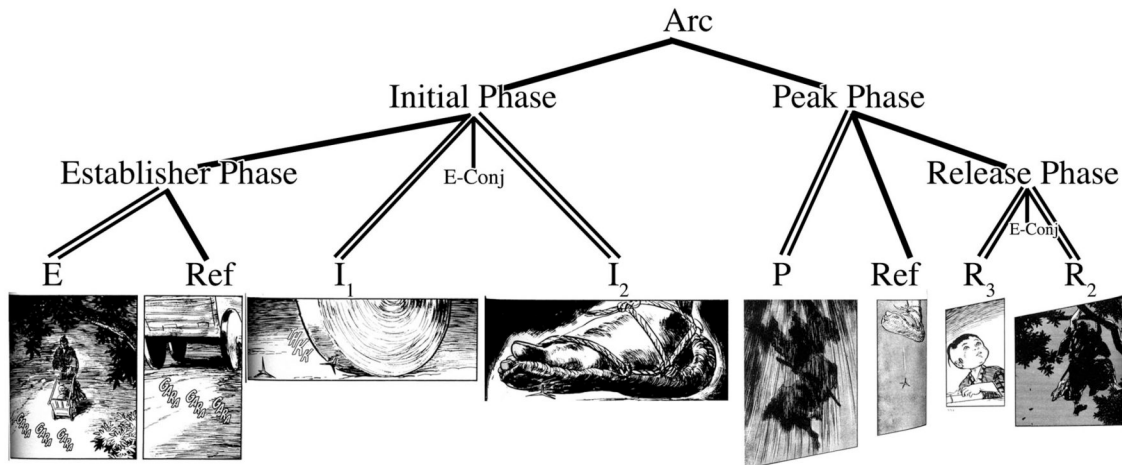
⁴ McCloud does not explicitly state percentages. The numbers cited are approximations from his illustrated graphs.

range of one panel's immediate linear juxtapositions, panels can combine to form larger structures in hierarchic embeddings. Several categories factor into this visual grammar, depicting various "narrative phases" within a broader "Arc" (Cohn 2007; In prep.). These phases largely reflect various states in relation to a predicate — the depiction of an event or situation. An abbreviated list of VL grammatical categories includes:

1. *Establisher (E)* – set up an interaction without acting upon it
2. *Initial (I)* – depict the nascent starting point of an event or action
3. *Peak (P)* – show the maximal point of tension of an event or action
4. *Release (R)* – releases the tension of an event or action
5. *Refiners (Ref)* – act as modifiers by honing in on information contained in one of the core categories

In addition to these formatives, various processes can expand the repertoire of expression by repeating the same category several times. For these purposes, the most important example is when various panels show different characters at the same narrative state, united by a process of *Environmental-Conjunction (E-Conj)*. An example of this approach applied to a manga sequence is provided in Figure 4 (double lines indicate main categories, modifiers indicated by single lines).

Figure 4. Visual language grammar in a Japanese manga (Koike and Kojima 1995:223-224).

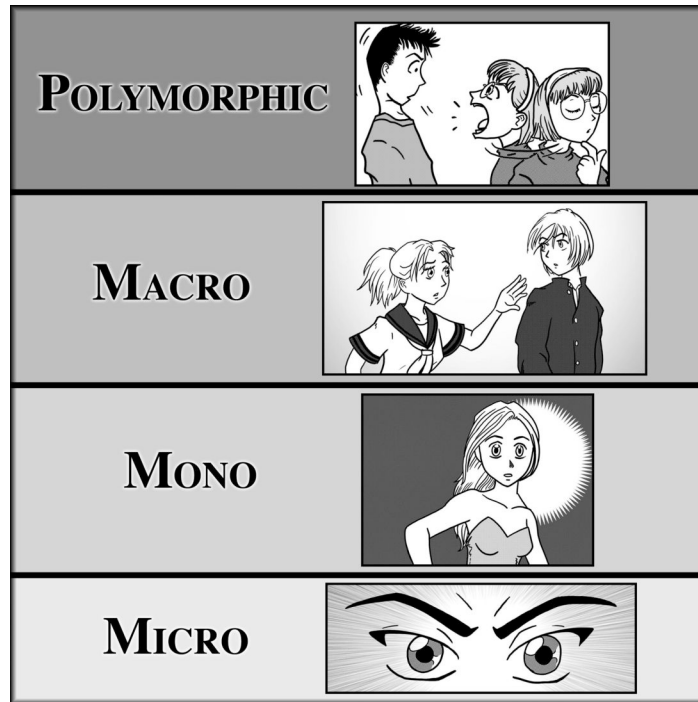


This example from the manga *Kozure Okami [Lone Wolf and Cub]* opens with an Establisher setting up the situation, with the Refiner in the second panel showing more detail on the first. The third and fourth panels show close up views of different aspects of the start of the event in the Initial Phase — the wheel and foot both stepping on *makibishi* nails — united by E-Conjunction (various characters denoted by subscripts). The event of jumping occurs in the Peak, again with a Refiner to show the spike dropping out of the foot while in mid-air. It concludes with Releases, as the child looks up at his father hanging from a branch, united again by E-Conjunction.

From this framework, McCloud's transitional categories appear only as a "surface" structure in contrast to the deeper hierarchies of visual language grammar. How then can we account for the differences McCloud found between Japanese manga and American comics? Do they exist at all, or can they be explained in an alternative way? Panel transitions describe the relations between images. By thinking in terms of broader hierarchic structures, the understanding of sequences becomes far richer, though it shifts the focus away from what happens "between" the individual panels, over to how the content of panels fits into a larger cognitive architecture.

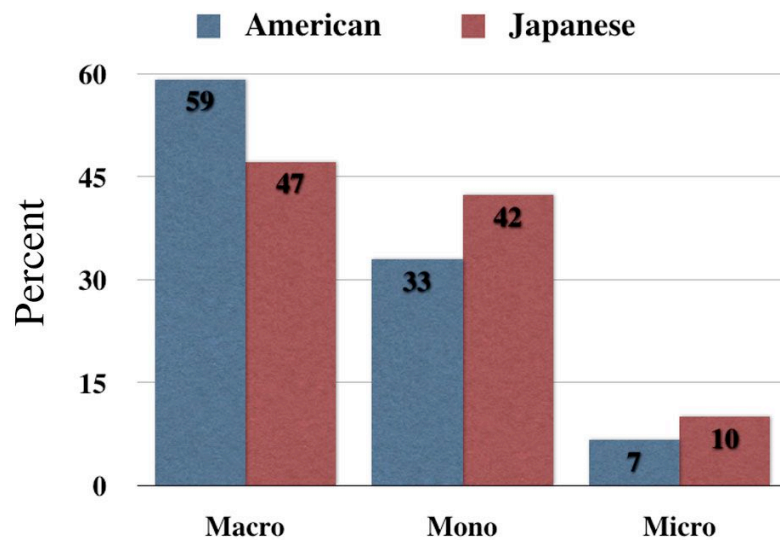
Since "Aspect transitions" largely refer to how panels focus on parts of a scene, these elements could potentially be captured by what is shown in actual manga panels. In addition to forming parts of a sequence, panels can serve to "window the attention" of a reader onto different parts of a narrative representation (Cohn 2007:64). Panels can be categorized into varying types based on how much information they contain. *Macros* are panels that show multiple characters or a whole scene, while *Monos* show only individual entities. *Micros* contain less than a whole entity, such as in a close-up of a character where only part of the person is shown at a time. Finally, *Polymorphic* panels depict whole actions through the repetition of individual characters at various points in that event. These types of panels can be organized from actions to scenes to individual characters to less than a character and are graphed in the *Lexical Representational Matrix* (LRM), shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. The Lexical Representational Matrix



Using the LRM categories as a guide, a study examined the panels in various American comics and Japanese manga to see what types of panels they were using. The results revealed significant differences; percentages are summarized in Table 2. (Cohn 2005):

Table 2. Percentages of types of panels in American comics versus Japanese manga



	Polymorphic	Macro	Mono	Micro
Japanese (N=12)	0.2 (SD= 0.3)	47.3 (SD= 8.5)	42.4 (SD= 5.3)	10.1 (SD= 5.2)
American (N=12)	0.4 (SD= 0.7)	59.3 (SD= 14.1)	33 (SD= 8.3)	6.7 (SD= 6.5)

With higher usage of Micros and Monos, JVL seems focus on individual *parts* of environments more often than on larger scenes that show the environment outright (Macros), which is essentially what McCloud’s approach said as well! These findings tell us that JVL tends to focus attention on individual characters almost as often as it does whole scenes.

Not only do these findings tell us about the patterns of single panels, they can also indicate possible trends in visual grammatical structures. High quantities of Monos mean that their grammar likely uses a fair amount of Environmental-Conjunction. If this implication is true, then Japanese manga focus on varying parts of a scene more frequently than American comics do, carrying the necessary grammatical structures. Similarly, the larger number of Micros insinuates a greater use of Refiners as well. As can be seen quite well in the example in Figure 4, Refiners and E-Conjunction both show various parts of an event at a single narrative state without placing all the information into the contents of a single panel.

This expansion of information across several panels echoes McCloud and Rommen’s observations that manga draw out the representations of events instead of simply showing the actions in the setting outright. It should be important to note that neither strategy is inherently “better” or “worse” than the other. More compact representations likely require less cognitive processing than those with extensive use of modifiers. On the other hand, increased panels place meaning more firmly in the graphic domain than the verbal.

Indeed, Japanese manga seem to use less text than American comics, placing more of the communicative focus on the visuals (Rommens 2000). While the appeal of a greater length in publishing format might be one explanation for this expansion of scenes, it rings a bit hollow without empirical verification. Just because manga authors have more pages at their disposal does not insinuate that they use it to “decompress” their

scenes. They could just as easily fill that space with compact event representation and even *more* plot. An alternative viewpoint might say that they use the visual system *as a language* — allowing the visuals to express meaning through their own capacities and thus requiring more length to do so. In fact, Gravett (2004:26) recounts that in the opening sequence of Osamu Tezuka's first hit, *Shin-Takarajima [New Treasure Island]*, his intended 31 panel sequence was *shortened* to only four panels, despite launching a new, longer format of manga. However, both the published and unpublished versions rely almost solely on visual information. Placing the focus on the visuals at the expense of the verbal is consistent with other research in multimodality, which suggest that the less the verbal form dominates meaning, the more complex the nature of other modalities becomes (e.g. Wilkins 1997; Goldin-Meadow 2006).

Like any language, studies indicate that sequences of images also require degrees of fluency (Nakazawa 2005). In psychology experiments, subjects were asked to reconstruct four panels of a scrambled manga strip or to fill in the blank of the contents a missing panel. Results showed that performance improved with age from kindergarten through adulthood, attributed to experience with manga reading (Nakazawa and Nakazawa 1993; Nakazawa 2004). Another study compared the eye-movements of manga reading between a child who reads manga frequently versus one who hardly read manga at all (Nakazawa 2002). The expert child's eyes moved more smoothly and focused more on the information in the images, while the non-expert spent more time reading the words with erratic eye-movements between panels on the page.

Manga reading seems to have a positive effect on education as well. Higher proficiency in manga comprehension in Japanese students correlated with achievement in language arts (Nakazawa and Nakazawa 1993) as well as heightened interest in language arts and social studies, but not "art" classes (Nakazawa 2002). Perhaps this should be expected if we think of manga as being written in a visual language. It is just another form of writing, only in graphic form.

Just as Japanese children seem to imitate manga in their drawing styles, it also seems to have had an effect on Japanese children's creation of sequences of images. One cross-cultural study showed that two-thirds of Egyptian children, who have little exposure to comics, could not create narratives where the contents of one frame related to

the next frame. In contrast, nearly all Japanese children studied were able to create coherent narratives, often using sophisticated “cinematic” techniques (Wilson and Wilson 1987).

Again, the influence manga show on children’s drawings demonstrate that JVL extends beyond just a print culture or industry. Japanese children spend time reading and drawing manga, leading to fluency that is acquired informally and spontaneously through voluntary action (Nakazawa 2005). This activity does not have to be tied to the contexts of the manga industry or otaku culture. Rather, in most cases, it is simply children drawing — actively participating in their society’s visual language.

Conclusion

Finally, visual language theory can lend insight into some of the more pervasive “creation myths” surrounding manga. For many years, the origins of manga have been connected to narrative scrolls (*emaki*) from the 10th and 11th centuries and other aspects of Japanese “art” history (e.g. Schodt 1983; Ito 2005). However, the similarities between modern manga and these ancient arts are fairly superficial in terms of their graphic features, and it was only through the influence of American comics that Japan began to engage in conventions like multiple panels (Gravett 2004; Kinsella 2000).

Indeed, structurally, the dialects of JVL in manga hardly resemble the graphic *ukiyo*e tradition of the 1800s — despite woodblock artist Hokusai’s coining of the term “manga” (Schodt 1983) — much less to the scrolls of almost a millennia ago. As Natsume (2003:3) succinctly observed, “there are inherent dangers in claiming manga as an outgrowth of native Japanese culture.” Truly, the graphic system used by modern speakers of JVL has perhaps less connection to the graphic system depicted in *emaki* as modern spoken Japanese has with ancient Japanese. However, while the structural relationship of JVL to the graphic systems that preceded it may be remote, the cultural influence provided by historical graphic systems may have set the stage for how widespread manga has become (Gravett 2004:18-23). While there may be a historical tradition of Japanese pictorial representation using sequences of images and text-image

relations, it does not mean that they reflect similar cognitive patterns or the same system of expression. Indeed, with this in mind, older graphic works in Japan should be considered their own types of visual languages, bound within specific temporal and geographic constraints.

Similarly, it is also popular to argue that the “pictorial” nature of the Japanese writing system’s *kanji*, paired with the sound-based *kana*, have attenuated the culture towards pairing words and images together throughout Japan’s graphic history (Schodt 1983; Natsume 1998, 2003). While claims like this may have some feasibility,⁵ it is hard to find evidence proving it. Indeed, visual language considered on its own terms need not rely on writing at all for gaining cultural influence, as it carries its own cognitive weight inherently. If the popularity of manga abroad is any indication, visual languages can develop widely and pervasively without needing a template from written language to set the stage. Truly, the global spread of Japanese popular culture in the past decades is quickly turning JVL into the most dominant form of visual language in the world, no matter which written language it is translated into. While “manga” may be its carrier, JVL extends beyond publishing and industry — both in Japan and across the globe. Those that engage with manga often become more than just readers and fans. They grow into “visual speakers,” capable of participating in a rich graphic system, treating it like the language it truly is.

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⁵ For instance, the dual structure of the Japanese writing system may have contributed towards a unified-yet-split concept of “writing/drawing” (Cohn 2005). The spoken verb *kaku* can mean both “writing” and “drawing,” though the two senses are distinguished visually by separate *kanji* (書 and 描 respectively). This dual *conception* of graphic creation could have contributed towards rich balances of text and image *usage* throughout Japanese history. Though, as stated, proof of such a claim may be hard to find.

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