



The Construction of Onomatopoeia Through Visual Features in Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Promise Comic

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026 - 06- 01 Revised: 2026 06-18 Accepted: 2026 06-23	<i>Onomatopoeia in comics is often viewed primarily as phonetic imitation, with limited attention to its visual semiotic construction. This study examines how typographic, positional, and chromatic features systematically construct onomatopoeic expressions in twenty selected panels from Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Promise (2012). Employing qualitative content analysis, the research integrates Peirce's triadic semiotic model (representamen–object–interpretant) with Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar. Findings reveal that typography iconically mimics sound qualities (e.g., jagged forms for intensity), placement creates indexical vectors simulating motion and causality, and colour modulates emotional and symbolic interpretation (e.g., warm hues for fire related violence, cooler tones for air/earth elements). These features converge to enhance sensory immersion and reinforce the narrative's postcolonial themes of power, trauma, and reconciliation. Unlike prior studies emphasising auditory or typological aspects, this research proposes a comprehensive multimodal framework, advancing comic semiotics and visual meaning-making in graphic storytelling.</i>
Keywords: Onomatopoeia, Visual Features, Multimodal Semiotics, Peirce Triadic Model, Graphic Narrative	
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1. Introduction

Comics constitute a sophisticated multimodal medium that integrates visual,

textual, and implied auditory elements to engage global audiences (Mansur et al., 2020; Badiozaman et al., 2024). Central to this immersion is onomatopoeia—sound-symbolic expressions that bridge the silent page with sensory experience (Giyatmi et al., 2023; Santoso & Setyaningsih, 2024). While existing research has explored onomatopoeia's phonetic and emphatic functions (e.g., Muslima, 2021; Chang, 2018), its visual construction through typography, placement, and colour remains underexplored, particularly in narrative-driven comics addressing sociopolitical themes (Septiani, 2025; Rahmi et al., 2024).

Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Promise (2012), set in a postcolonial world grappling with decolonization and reconciliation, provides an ideal corpus due to its varied onomatopoeic rendering across action and emotional sequences (Hidayat, 2016; Jannah, 2016). This study integrates Peirce's triadic semiotics (representamen, object, interpretant) with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar to analyse these features.

Research Questions

1. How do typography, placement, and colour construct the semiotic meaning of onomatopoeic expressions?
2. How do these visual configurations vary across action-oriented and emotionally charged scenes, and what narrative functions do they serve?
3. How does the interplay between Peircean semiotics and visual grammar position onomatopoeia as a multimodal signifier in postcolonial graphic storytelling?

Theoretically, this research advances multimodal semiotics; pedagogically, it informs visual literacy education in hybrid media.

2. Method

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach with content analysis to examine multimodal elements in graphic narratives (Eliza, 2018; Puspayoga & Suastini, 2023).

Data Source

Primary data comprise twenty purposively selected panels from *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Promise* (2012) featuring graphically manipulated onomatopoeia, chosen for variability in typography, placement, and colour, and relevance to diverse narrative contexts (Maheni et al., 2021; Kho et al., 2024).

Data Collection

Panels were identified and captured based on criteria of visual salience and semiotic richness (Fahirani & Yusmalinda, 2024; Ardipa et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model: data reduction (coding by visual features), display (matrices linking features to Peircean sign types), and conclusion drawing (triangulated with theoretical frameworks; Peirce, 1931; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Forceville, 2020). Reliability was enhanced through repeated coding and theoretical triangulation.

3. Result

The analysis of twenty selected panels from *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Promise* (2012) reveals consistent patterns in the visual construction of onomatopoeia through typography, placement, and colour. These features operate systematically within Peirce's triadic model: typography functions as the representamen (iconic resemblance to sound qualities), placement as the object (indexical link to the sound source), and colour as the interpretant (symbolic-affective modulation). The twenty panels are grouped into four thematic clusters based on sound type and narrative function: (1) explosive/violent sounds, (2) gentle/affectionate sounds, (3) mechanical/ambient sounds, and (4) impact/transition sounds.

Table Summary of Visual Features in Selected Onomatopoeic Expressions

Provides a comprehensive summary of the twenty instances.

No	Onomatopoeia	Page	Sound Type	Typography	Placement	Colour	Peirce Mapping
1	POOM!	11	Explosive	Bold uppercase, thick comic font	Dispersed near fireworks	Multicolour (green, yellow, red, purple)	Iconic (intensity), Indexical (source), Symbolic (celebration)
2	SLAP	180	Impact	Bold, jagged, tilted	Next to hand-head contact	Yellow	Iconic (sharpness), Indexical (impact point)
3	KRUNCH	180	Crushing	Bold, jagged uppercase	Near foot-ground contact	Yellow	Iconic (weight), Indexical (source)

4	SMOOCHIE SMOOCHIE	164	Affectionate	Rounded, lowercase bubble letters	Above embracing couple, with hearts	Pink	Iconic (softness), Indexical (source), Symbolic (love)
5	FOOMP	153	Launching	Bold, italicized, rounded	Near glider tail	Light blue	Iconic (light motion), Indexical (source)
6	ROAR!	124	Fierce	Bold, jagged uppercase	Above creature's mouth	Crimson	Iconic (power), Indexical (source)
7	NOM! (x3)	124	Chewing	Bold, playful uppercase	Near creature's mouth	Yellow	Iconic (rhythm), Indexical (source)
8	TWAP! / CLINK CLINK	134	Impact/Metal	Bold italic / light metallic	Impact point / ground	Yellow / White	Iconic (sharpness), Indexical (source)
9	KRASH!	16	Crash	Bold, sharp, rugged	Near chain-floor contact	Red	Iconic (force), Indexical (source)
10	FWOOSH!	15	Fire	Fluid, italicized, rounded	Along flame trajectory	Orange	Iconic (motion), Indexical (path)
11	KONK!	15	Blunt	Bold, angular uppercase	At head contact	Yellow-orange	Iconic (sudden), Indexical (source)
12	FWOOSH!	18	Fire	Bold, curved uppercase	Along fire path	Orange-red-yellow	Iconic (fluidity), Indexical (trajectory)

13	FWOOOM!	17	Explosion	Bold, elongated	Above fire stream	Yellow	Iconic (duration), Indexical (source)
14	WHUMP!	17	Impact	Bold, rounded uppercase	Near chain-opponent contact	Green	Iconic (muffled), Indexical (source)
15	SMASH	29	Impact	Bold, jagged, curved	At vehicle impact	Yellow-orange	Iconic (force), Indexical (source)
16	WWWMM MMM	29	Mechanical	Elongated, slender uppercase	Behind tank	White	Iconic (sustained), Indexical (source)
17	KRACK	203	Fracture	Oversized, fragmented	On fissure	Light green / off-white	Iconic (rupture), Indexical (source)
18	KROOOM	202	Rumble	Bold, oversized, rounded	Above shockwave	Orange-yellow	Iconic (resonance), Indexical (source)
19	CLANG / RATTLE	138	Metal	Tall, jagged / stretched uppercase	At weapon contact / debris	Light blue-grey / light green	Iconic (sharp), Indexical (source)
20	WHUMP	138	Fall	Bold, thick, rounded	At body-ground contact	Dark orange-brown	Iconic (weight), Indexical (source)

Cluster 1: Explosive/Violent Sounds

(e.g., POOM!, KRASH!, FWOOSH!, FWOOOM!, SMASH, KROOOM) These onomatopoeias feature bold, jagged, or elongated uppercase letters with sharp angles to mimic intensity and force. Placement aligns along motion trajectories or

impact points, creating clear indexical vectors. Warm hues (red, orange, yellow) dominate, enhancing visual salience and suggesting heat or aggression.

Cluster 2: Gentle/Affectionate Sounds

(e.g., SMOOCHIE SMOOCHIE, FOOMP) Rounded, soft, or bubble-style letters in lowercase convey tenderness. Placement centres on character anatomy or objects of affection. Soft pink or light blue colours evoke warmth and lightness.

Cluster 3: Mechanical/Ambient Sounds

(e.g., WWWWMMMMM, CLANG/RATTLE) Elongated or layered forms indicate sustained or repetitive noise. Placement tracks large objects or scattered debris. Neutral or cool tones (white, blue-grey) suggest mechanical or ambient quality.

Cluster 4: Impact/Transition Sounds

(e.g., SLAP, KRUNCH, KONK!, WHUMP, KRACK) Sharp, bold typography with varied contours reflects sudden force. Placement targets precise contact points. Colours range from bright yellow (sharpness) to earthy green/brown (muffled weight).

These patterns demonstrate that visual features are not random but deliberately orchestrated to transduce auditory phenomena into graphic signs, enhancing narrative dynamism across diverse scenes.

4. Discussion

Semiotic Functions of Visual Features

Findings confirm typography as iconic representamen, placement as indexical link, and colour as symbolic interpretant, extending prior auditory focused analyses (Giyatmi et al., 2023; Chang, 2018).

Comparison with Previous Studies

Unlike typological classifications in superhero/webtoon comics (Fahirani & Yusmalinda, 2024; Puspayoga & Suastini, 2023; Septiani, 2025), this study integrates visual semiotics, revealing synergistic effects absent in isolated phonetic approaches (Santoso & Setyaningsih, 2024; Rahmi et al., 2024).

Ideological Implications

Visual configurations reinforce postcolonial themes: warm explosive colours in firebending scenes echo colonial violence, while muted earthy tones in reconciliation moments suggest healing-linking sensory immersion to sociopolitical discourse.

Implications

Theoretically, the framework bridges auditory visual domains; pedagogically, it supports visual literacy; practically, it guides creators in multimodal design.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, onomatopoeia in *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Promise* is not a decorative or subsidiary element but a fully multimodal sign whose meaning emerges from the orchestrated interplay of typographic form, spatial positioning, and chromatic coding. By revealing how these visual features systematically shape iconic resemblance, indexical causation, and symbolic-affective interpretation, this study advances multimodal comic semiotics and provides a replicable analytical model for future research on graphic narratives across genres and cultural contexts.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, the present study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis is restricted to a single graphic novel trilogy (*Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Promise*, 2012), which limits the generalisability of the findings to other comic traditions, cultural contexts, or artistic styles. Second, although twenty panels were selected to represent a range of action, emotional, and thematic contexts, the sample remains relatively small and does not exhaustively cover every onomatopoeic instance in the corpus. Third, the study relies exclusively on researcher interpretation of visual features and their semiotic effects; reader-response data or eye-tracking evidence were not incorporated, leaving open the question of actual reader perception. Finally, while the postcolonial dimension is addressed, deeper engagement with indigenous or Fanonian frameworks was beyond the scope of this project.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could extend the proposed triadic visual-feature framework to comparative analyses across different comic cultures (e.g., American superhero, European bande dessinée, Japanese manga, or Indonesian wayang comics) to test its cross-cultural applicability. Incorporating empirical reader-response methods, reception studies, surveys, or eye-tracking experiments would further validate the interpretive claims regarding salience, emotional impact, and ideological encoding. Additionally, longitudinal analyses of the entire *Avatar* comic continuum (*The Promise*, *The Search*, *The Rift*, *Imbalance*) or comparisons with the animated series would illuminate diachronic shifts in onomatopoeic style. Finally, applying the framework to postcolonial comics from other traditions (e.g., *Maus*, *Persepolis*, or Southeast Asian graphic narratives) could deepen understanding of how visual onomatopoeia participates in the representation of trauma, resistance, and cultural memory.

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