

The rhetoric is on the wall: A multimodal study of the U.S. –  
Mexico border through image narratives

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### Abstract

This paper applied social semiotics and systemic functional theory to study visual narratives related to President Trump's border wall project and U.S. immigration policy. The images were selected by new articles posted by *The New York Times* using search parameters "border wall" and "undocumented immigration" between the dates of March 13 – April 13, 2018. Images were selected and categorized based on visual themes related to the border wall and policy enforcement. Of these categories, two images were selected for vertical perspective, vector patterns, and gestures to discover the narratives. Analysis of the images showed that social power and hierarchical clashes based on authoritative positions which were realized through vertical perspective. Upon examination of images depicting people for vector patterns and vertical perspective revealed correlations to authority. Additionally, vector shapes formed by social actors displayed patterns of visual collectivization based on clothing, race, and gender. This study concluded with the idea of adding intertextual analysis to further understand how images and text work together more closely.

*Keywords:* social semiotics, multimodality, undocumented immigration, border wall

## Introduction

The U.S. – Mexico border has seen its fair share of immigration crossings and border disputes since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Massey (2016) exclaimed that “in the American imagination, the border between Mexico and the United States is a symbolic boundary between the United States and a threatening world. It is not just *a* border, but *the* border” (pg. 160). The federal government initially formed the U.S. – Mexico border in 1848 upon the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which signaled the end of the U.S. – Mexico War. This treaty gave the United States a large swath of land which later formed the states of California, Texas, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Nevada which defined the current U.S. – Mexico border (“Mexican Immigration,” 2018). By 1917, there was a pressing need for immigrant labor on U.S. farms and manufacturing plants which led to exemption policies for Mexican immigrants entering the United States.

The Great Depression of the 1930s were trying times for Americans and immigrants due to job and food shortages throughout the entire country. Unemployment led to hostilities toward immigrant workers which led to federal government repatriation efforts to send Mexican workers back to Mexico. Throughout the 1930s, hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants were sent out of the country to include those who had been recruited a decade ago to work on farms across the United States (“Mexican Immigration,” 2018).

Immigration policy was reversed twice during the 1960s. First, President Johnson initially favored Mexican immigration into the U.S. by uniting cross-border Mexican families together as a sign of trust between the two countries in 1965. Later, President Nixon initiated Operation Intercept in 1969 which allowed the Border Patrol agents to perform surprise inspections on all U.S. – Mexico border crossings to detain illegal immigrants (Cromer, 2017).

The constant shift in stance regarding Mexican immigration by U.S. leaders ultimately became a metaphorical extension of the U.S. – Mexico border through policies and enforcement.

By 2016, President Donald Trump opted for the construction of a new border wall described as “[an] impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful, southern border wall” to replace the current fence system in service (“Donald Trump’s Mexico wall,” 2017). Currently, President Trump intends to build this wall up to 30ft high and stretch across 1,000 miles of the 1,900-mile U.S. – Mexico border. The creation of this wall could symbolically change the U.S. – Mexico border from just a border into *the* border (Massey, 2016, pg. 160).

Much of the mass media news coverage regarding President Trump’s proposed border wall include images of people such as U.S. leaders, policy enforcers, and immigrants who attempt to illegally cross the border. These people act as semiotic resources that could help us understand our political climate regarding immigration policy. News agencies such as *The New York Times* plays an ever-increasing role by providing photographs that could be used for semiotic analysis. Important semiotic details such as social distance, hand gestures, or even vertical perspective develop a multimodal experience for viewers by connoting ideas that may not be recognized through textual analysis. People such as President Trump have prominent social roles that allow *The New York Times* to establish visual narratives regarding the border wall project and immigration policy. These narratives allow viewers to understand how images depict undocumented immigration into the U.S. and Trump’s border wall project. Using systemic functional theory and social semiotics, this paper examines visual narratives from images taken by *The New York Times* to find deeper meanings related to the border wall project and immigration policy.

### **Theoretical foundations**

As our world continues to evolve through technology, our visual literacy must evolve too. Gone are the days when spoken language and written text were the primary means to build meaning within any culture. Our modern on-demand culture requires a combination of written text and visual elements to build a semiotic symbiont of meaning-making to communicate ideas of our world through imagery. This multimodal process of combining visual and textual elements becomes part of a larger concept known as visual literacy. This new visual literacy is “[an essentially] new communication ability” that we should harness to understand how we communicate our political values through imagery (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pg. 17). As with all forms of communication, images carry forth their own set of rules to build semiotic value.

To understand how an image develops meaning, I draw upon systemic functional theory (SFT) which is part of the social semiotic landscape. Jewitt et al. (2016) noted that SFT “has been used, modified and extended to explore [how] spoken and written language and non-linguistic resources [such as images and gestures] create meaning” (pg. 33). Semiotic researchers Kress & van Leeuwen utilized SFT to develop their framework which studies how imagery and art use semiotics for communication (Jewitt et al., 2016, pg. 33). Kress & van Leeuwen refer to this communication through imagery as visual grammar which follows a ruleset different from verbal or textual grammar. Understanding visual grammar allows a viewer to see narratives unfold within an image that was previously coded. This paper focuses on three aspects of visual grammar to study image narratives: perspective angle, vector patterns, and gestures.

Perspective camera angles build the relationship between the viewer and the actors within an image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pg. 140). More importantly, vertical angles may create perceptions of power based on camera positioning. For example, a low perspective angle may communicate an actor's superiority over the viewer. A high angle perspective may signify an actor's inferiority in relation to the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pg. 140). Machin (2016) also noted how horizontal angles may indicate the photographer's involvement with an image (Ch.6, Horizontal and Oblique Angles). Using a side, front, or behind angle shot along a horizontal plane can change the meaning of an image based on involvement or detachment of the photographer from the people within the image (Machin, 2016, Ch. 6, Horizontal and Oblique Angles).

Perspective angles can also establish vector patterns using two specific semiotic resources: actors and objects. In comparison, a vector pattern is the action verb of a sentence. In other words, it's an interaction that "[does] something to or for each other" such as pointing a finger toward another person or object (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pg. 59). The use of social semiotic theory associates vector patterns to image narratives because they form a travel direction to read an image through the actions of an image actor. Sometimes, vector patterns originate from an actor's gesture. Typically, body parts such as arms, legs, or held objects such as hand tools can form vector patterns that could help establish the narrative of the image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pg. 59). An example would be an actor pointing their finger at another actor. The finger pointing gesture forms a vector line to the other actor who becomes the goal of the action. However, not all images use gestures that end in a goal. In a close-up image of an actor's face, there are no gestures present such as finger pointing. This lack of a vector is referred to as a non-transactional process because there is no goal. An analogy to a non-

transactional process is an intransitive verb or a verb that doesn't need an object to complete the meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pg. 63). As a result, a non-transactional process may leave the viewer wondering to whom the recipient of the communicative act is. By applying these concepts of SFT to my images, the role of narratives form two questions: What visual narratives does *The New York Times* share? How do the image narratives relate to President Trump's border wall project?

### **Methodology**

This research paper focused on how *The New York Times* used social semiotics to produce photographic narratives as part of their news articles between March 13 and April 13, 2018. I chose to study photographs taken by *The New York Times* because their images provided a wealth of semiotic resources within the images. For 167 years, *The New York Times* created newspapers in the United States and championed 125 Pulitzer Prize winners which is far more than any other news organization ("Pulitzer Prizes," 2018). Recently, *The New York Times* was named "Best Designed Newspaper in Print and Digital" by the Society for News Design ("The New York Times," 2018). The judges noted that "reading the Times is like taking a masterclass in visual storytelling" ("The New York Times," 2018). This visual storytelling ability denotes that *The New York Times* is a strong source to study how social semiotics establishes a narrative. The research was conducted using *The New York Times* search parameters "undocumented immigration" and "border wall." Over the data collection period, five types of images were visible: people related to immigration policy makers, policy enforcers, protestors, those who were deported, and those who migrated through the border. These image categories created salience through the news stories regarding the border wall, immigrant deportations, border apprehensions, and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals protests.

This paper focused on images related to those who created policy and those who enforced it. These images were placed into two categories to conduct a semiotic analysis. The first category emphasized how perspective angles created social power structures by studying images of the border wall prototypes and President Trump in the same context. The second category examined images related to border enforcement which included the Texas National Guard and the U.S. Border Patrol who policed the Southwestern border. This image category further reflected and thus extended the idea of social power structures, the concept of inferiority, and hierarchical structures through perspective angles. Although the remaining categories are important in relation to people impacted and reflected by *The New York Times* coverage, this study focused only on images related to policy makers and policy enforcement.



**Figure 1.** An example of a fence on the U.S. – Mexico border. Taken from: Balli, C. (2018, February 5). Two Cities, Two Countries, Common Ground. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/05/travel/nogales-arizona-mexico-border.html>

### **A Wall Versus a Fence**

There is a misconception that the U.S. – Mexico border already contains a wall, but in reality, it's an interconnecting fence system. There are major constructional differences between a wall and a fence when situated on an international border. First, I will explain the purpose, construction, and origin of the U.S. – Mexico border fence to compare with a wall. The current border fence (Figure 1) consists of chain links or vertical iron bars which prevents pedestrian crossings along the border. Some sections contain barbed wire that travels along the top of the fence which deters climbing. The border also contains anti-vehicle fencing made of protruding steel beams which stops any vehicles from crossing the border. This fence system was started in 1993 when President Bill Clinton signed an executive order that initiated the construction of a 13-mile border fence between San Diego and Tijuana that originated in the Pacific Ocean and ran eastward along the border between the two cities. The San Diego border fence is a mix of sheet metal panels, barbed wire chain linked fencing, and 30ft high steel beams that divide the beach. Clinton's fence construction during the 1990s was only the start of securing the U.S. – Mexico border from undocumented immigrant crossings.

In 2006, President George Bush signed the "Secure Fence Act" which added 700 miles of fencing across the entire border while adding detention facilities and checkpoints to the current infrastructure ("President Bush Signs Secure Fence Act," 2006). The "Secure Fence Act" was completed in 2015 and saw improvements to the border infrastructure along the southwest corridor of the United States. The project extended the fence beyond the original 13-mile fence initiated by President Clinton. By 2011, the Department of Homeland security reported that they had completed nearly 700 miles of fencing which included 299 miles of vehicle barriers and 350 miles of pedestrian fence. The fence stretched along the border from the original San Diego

fence through El Paso, TX with a smaller section completed in Brownsville, TX. Some areas of the San Diego and El Paso fence use 30ft high steel beams and aluminum posts to prevent foot crossings along the border. This interlinking fence system led to an 82 percent drop in illegal crossings since 2000 (Almukhtar & Williams, 2018). The unfenced areas of the U.S. border contain natural barriers such as the Rio Grande River, mountainous terrain, and open desert which form a natural deterrence to crossing the border. Despite the success of controlling undocumented immigration through the 'Secure Fence Act,' President Trump pushed for the creation of a border wall to replace the current fence system.

With this shift from the fence to a wall, the meaning of a border wall changes. A typical outdoor wall is a structure that consists of concrete, stone, or brick used for protection, shelter, or marking property boundaries. The Berlin Wall (Figure 2), built by the East German government, was an example of a concrete structure that divided East and West Berlin from 1961 – 1989 (History.com Staff, 2009). The concrete design along with barbed wire running across the top of the wall made it nearly impossible to climb. The Berlin Wall was a historical example of territorial division by placing a concrete wall that separated East and West Berlin. Building a 30ft wall along the U.S. – Mexico border does draw a historical connection to the Berlin Wall because it could create a visible southern divide from Mexico. While this border wall would further deny illegal crossings, stricter immigration policies would keep immigrants from walking through the gate.



**Figure 2.** The Berlin Wall. Taken from: Barsky, J. (2017). (Un)Happy Birthday Berlin Wall! Retrieved from <https://jackbarsky.com/unhappy-birthday-berlin-wall/>

Since 2015, President Trump insisted that the United States needs a southwestern border wall for two specific reasons. First, the new wall is expected to curb undocumented immigration along 1,000 miles of the U.S. – Mexico border. Building this wall would open more jobs based on Trump’s perception that undocumented immigrants take many jobs from U.S. citizens (Preston, 2016). Trump maintained his stance that if we cannot fix our immigration system, then the wall would fix it instead. Next, the wall is expected to stop the flow of crime into the country. Trump was hard-pressed that undocumented immigration drove crime numbers up across the country and sanctuary cities provided havens for these people to live (Flagg, 2018). Building a wall would prevent more undocumented immigrants from crossing the border and seek haven in sanctuary cities. These key problems help a viewer understand the reasons behind Trump’s proposal to build the new border wall in the Southwestern United States. The design of the wall became a central point to contend with some of these perceived problems.

Building this southern border wall would require a construction design different from the Berlin Wall. According to Steckelberg et al. (2018), the design of President Trump’s proposed wall along the U.S. – Mexico border in San Diego will include several key features. First, the wall must be a minimum height of 18ft with an ideal height of 30ft. The wall should also consist of concrete or metal. Next, the ideal wall must include anti-climbing features. Any exposed fixtures such as mounting hardware must be placed on the U.S. side to prevent people from tampering with the wall. Additionally, the lower end of the wall must blend in with the surroundings to be visually pleasing. Also, proposed wall designs must be cost-effective to maintain and repair. Finally, the design must prevent tunneling and accommodate water drainage (Steckelberg et al., 2018). The estimated cost to build this entire wall project to span

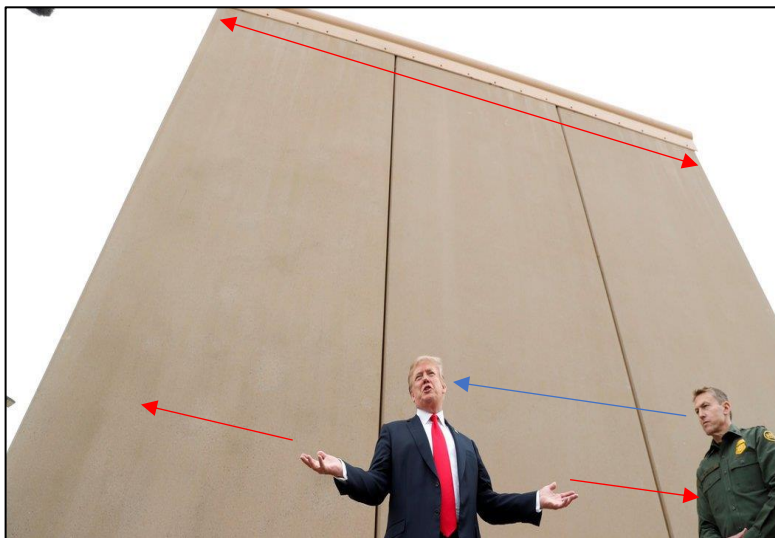
1,000 miles is approximately \$18 billion (Almukhtar & Williams, 2018). These elements of President Trump's proposal outline the basic design for his project.

### **The Border Wall Narrative**

This image category consisted of images related to the border wall prototypes. The first image (Figure 3) was a thumbnail for a video news report. In this video, *The New York Times* reported that President Trump didn't have enough federal funding and political support to build the border wall. Trump also noted that Mexico will pay for this wall. While waiting on funding for the wall, Trump deployed the National Guard along the Southwestern border to assist the Border Patrol with additional surveillance. During the video, Trump claimed that the wall was in the process of being built. However, *The New York Times* countered this claim by exclaiming that the construction projects were directed toward maintaining the current fence structure (Acosta, 2018). Upon examination of the video, it was noted how vertical perspective played a role in sharing the narrative. Throughout the video, the perspective angle shifted between high and low during the border wall prototype and the border fence segments. Some parts of the video used high angles to view the border fence but shifted to low angles in other segments. These shifts in perspective could also affect how a viewer saw the border wall prototypes.

This thumbnail image (Figure 3) denoted how the border wall prototypes and actors formed narratives that focused on social power relationships through vectors patterns and perspective angles. On a hazy day, President Trump visited the wall prototypes in San Diego. In the background, a beige 30 ft wall prototype towers above Trump and a Border Patrol agent. The top of the wall contained an anti-scaling device that prevented anyone from climbing over the wall. The center of the image has President Trump standing with open arms and palms while

facing the viewer. On the right edge, a Border Patrol agent faces toward Trump while listening to him speak.



**Figure 3.** President Trump's border wall concept in San Diego. The second image notes vector patterns (red) and distance (blue). Thumbnail taken from: Acosta, D. (2018, April 13). Where Does Trump's Border Wall Stand Today? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000005833630/where-does-trumps-border-wall-stand-today.html>

Upon first glance, the photographer chose a low angle shot which emphasized Trump and the Border Patrol agent as the main actors. Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) asserted that this vertical angle provided “[an] impression of superiority, exaltation, and triumph” when applied to the actors in the shot (pg. 140). In this image, Trump and the border agent were placed in positions of superiority over the viewer. The photographer centered Trump in the shot and used a low perspective angle to frame his authoritative position as President of the United States. The same low perspective angle also placed the Border Patrol agent in a position of superiority over the viewer. Since 1924, the US. Border Patrol’s primary responsibility is “to detect and prevent the illegal entry of aliens into the United States” (“Border Patrol Overview,” 2018). As a policing-style agency, Border Patrol agents are placed in an authoritative position to stop those who illegally cross any U.S. border. In this image, the photographer displayed the border agent’s authority through the use of a vertical perspective.

While vertical perspectives are typically used to establish the social power relationships, it can also be used on some objects such as the wall prototype. Using the same low angle perspective, a viewer can see the wall as a superior object in comparison to the actors. To understand the wall prototype’s superiority, a viewer can use Trump as a resource for size comparison. While situated in the background, the wall prototype’s top, left, and right sides were clearly defined with the help of the white haze in the sky. Using Trump as a reference point, a viewer can estimate the length and height of the wall prototype to gain a sense of depth. This sense of depth allows the viewer to see the wall as an authoritative object that towers over the actors.

Patterns of distance also contribute toward the position of power and authority. Upon initial analysis, a horizontal vector was noticed between the Border Patrol agent and President

Trump via line of sight. This eyesight vector developed two distinctive ideas. First, the line illustrated the distance between the agent and Trump. The spatial distance signifies the agent's respect for Trump's position as President of the United States (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pg. 126). Coupling this horizontal vector with a low perspective angle signifies that these actors in their positions of power have respect toward each other. Next, the same horizontal vector highlighted that the agent was staring directly at Trump as he spoke. The agent's rigid stance along with his line of sight suggested that he was listening to Trump's speech. Upon further analysis, the agent's stance and line of sight may also suggest that he has a generalized interest in Trump's words.

As a central figure in the image, Trump added semiotic value to the narrative through the use of a vector. Starting with Trump, it was noted that Trump's arm and hand gesture created a horizontal vector pattern. Coincidentally, the top of the wall also formed a horizontal vector that ran parallel to Trump's gesture. This parallel vector allows the viewer to see the world how Trump views it (Machin, 2016, Ch. 6, Horizontal and Oblique Angles). Trump's open palm and extended arm gesture suggest that he could be making a grand statement to the viewer regarding the wall prototype. By studying the gesture and wall prototype vectors together, Trump may be signaling that this is what an impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful, southern border wall should look like.

This next image (Figure 4) indicates how perspective angles and vector patterns established an alternative narrative. Here, five border wall prototypes consisting of concrete and metal form a line starting from the far right of the frame and travels into the hillside located in the background. Further analysis revealed a section of the U.S. – Mexico border fence located in the distant background that travels into the hillside. In the left-center frame, five actors surround

President Trump who appear to be in the conversation. One actor held a document as Trump spoke to him while using a single hand gesture. Behind the actors, two black vehicles are parked with the closest vehicle to the group containing two small flags on its hood. Surrounding the vehicles were U.S. Secret Service agents who are focused away from the group of people.



**Figure 4.** President Trump discussing the border wall concepts in San Diego. Taken from: Nixon R. (2018, March 22). What Border Agents Say They Want (It's Not a Wall). *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/22/us/politics/border-patrol-wall-immigration-trump-senate-democrats.html>

A simplified visual representation of Figure 4 through a sketch from a bird's eye view (Figure 5) illustrates how a vertical and horizontal perspective were found in the image. This sketch outlines how the photographer (orange dot) photographed Trump (red dot) and the group of people (gray dots) with the border wall prototypes (blue rectangles) and how the oblique perspective (red lines) was achieved based on the camera angle (purple lines). In this sketch, the wall prototypes formed an oblique pattern while the actors created far frontal perspective with a horizontal vector pattern. Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) argued that oblique angles create detachment. In contrast, far frontal angles create involvement between the photographer, the actors, and the wall prototypes (pg. 136). To illustrate detachment from an oblique perspective, the viewers should first focus on the five wall prototypes. Then, a line can be drawn along the baseline of each wall prototype and intersect the horizontal plane formed under the actors' feet. This angle tells the viewer that "what you see here is *not* part of our world; it is *their* world,



established oblique angle that follows the wall prototypes within the image frame. As Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) noted, objects or people that follow an oblique line may not be considered as part of our world (pg. 136). Instead of constructing a border wall, the photographer could agree that those who create immigration policy should focus on other ways to remedy the problem.

### **The Enforcement Narrative**

This image category analyzed the role of social power relationships through vectors and perspective angles by studying the Border Patrol agents and National Guard as actors to achieve a visual narrative. Upon analyzing these images, I found a clash of hierarchical structure between the National Guard and the Border Patrol while vector patterns noted personal connections through shapes. To understand these findings, a viewer may require additional background details regarding the image category.

This image (Figure 6) was part of a news article which noted that President Trump initiated new legislation to crack down on illegal immigration and make it more difficult to obtain refugee status in the United States (Davis, 2018). According to Davis (2018), there was no evidence of an overall increase in illegal border crossings. However, President Trump exclaimed that his immigration policies are the main reason why there is a downward trend in border activity. Davis (2018) also contented that Trump was fulfilling his campaign promises to stop illegal immigration and the \$1.3 trillion spending bill did not include any funding for the border wall project. In response to the lack of congressional action, Trump shared his views on Twitter about the “dangerous caravans” of migrants heading to the United States from Central America (Davis, 2018).

In another news story, the Department of Homeland Security noted that more than 37,000 undocumented immigrants were detained in South Texas during the month of March 2018 (Fernandez, 2018). In response, President Trump deployed 250 Texas National Guard soldiers to supplement the U.S. Border Patrol. Their mission was to observe and report any illegal crossings to the U.S. Border Patrol. According to the Department of Defense, the National Guard will not enforce the law or interact with any undocumented detainees without approval from the Secretary of Defense. Additionally, Texas Gov. Gregg Abbott and Gov. Jerry Brown of California also announced that they will deploy additional troops to the Mexican border as a “gap filler” while the state awaits the completion of the border wall (Fernandez, 2018). Together, these stories formed a contextual timeline for a viewer to understand the image category.

Situated in the center of the frame (Figure 6), a Border Patrol agent and a National Guard soldier are speaking to each other at the end of a dirt road. The agent is wearing a work uniform that consists of dark green colors, black boots, a ball cap, work gloves, and a handgun attached to his belt. The soldier is wearing a light brown and patterned camouflage uniform with a boonie hat and possesses a black rifle situated against his chest. In the foreground, the dirt road sits above the Rio Grande while the plant brush divides the river from the dirt road. The background consists of tall green trees that follow along the river starting from the right side and ending near the center of the frame. Facing right, the Border Patrol agent points with his right hand toward something not in the image. Similarly, the National Guard soldier looks in the same direction as if the Border Patrol agent is showing him something important. In the foreground sits a parked green military vehicle situated to the left of the actors which was possibly used for transportation

to the location. Behind the vehicle, there are five sets of feet were which notes that there are more Border Agents or National Guardsmen present but cannot be identified.



**Figure 6.** The Texas National Guard working with the Border Patrol. The second image shows the vertical perspective (yellow) and vector patterns (red). Taken from: Fernandez, M. (2018, April 11). On the Border with the National Guard: An ‘Extra Pair of Eyes and Ears.’ *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/11/us/texas-national-guard.htm>

In this image category, the U.S. Border Patrol and the National Guard were further analyzed for perspective angles and vector patterns to assess how their positions of power extend beyond the creation of the border wall prototypes. Upon analysis of Figure 6, it was noted how the photographer used a low camera angle which can establish an authoritative hierarchy in the eye of the viewer along the Southwest border. While viewing from a low perspective, the photographer emphasized the Border Patrol agent through salience and position which created a hierarchical power structure within the image. This hierarchy was realized through the use of a vector emerging from the agent's finger pointing gesture. In this photograph, the agent pointed toward an unknown goal that is not seen by the viewer. Simultaneously, the soldier looks in the same direction as if the agent wants to show him something. This finger pointing gesture may indicate that the agent is ordering the soldier to do something. While the viewer may feel that power is shared between the two actors, the hierarchical chain placed the Border Patrol agent as the primary authoritative figure due to positioning regarding border security.

This hierarchical structure also indicated that an authoritative clash existed between the Border Patrol and the National Guard agencies based on the presence of the military vehicle commonly known as a Humvee by civilians. Currently, the Humvee is used by all U.S. military services to transport people and cargo during times of war. These vehicles are heavily armored and uses a desert tan or dark green color scheme for concealment. In contrast to a Humvee, the U.S. Border Patrol uses a standard 4-door SUV (Figure 7) such as a Chevrolet Tahoe to conduct their duties along the border. These non-combat vehicles are also used for ground transportation of personnel and cargo. The presence of the Humvee and the National Guard soldier within the image might indicate that the U.S. could be militarizing the border to defend against a possible threat from Mexico.



**Figure 7.** An example of a U.S. Border Patrol vehicle. Taken from: Santos, F. (2017). No Environmental Impact Study? No Border Wall, Lawsuit Says. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/us/no-environmental-impact-study-no-border-wall-lawsuit-says.html>

Additionally, viewers may also see other aspects of the hierarchical clash through the weapons carried and the uniforms worn. In this image, the soldier is carrying a military rifle against his chest versus the agent's pistol located on his hip. The rifle is also bigger than the pistol and much more visible within the frame. The difference in weaponry size and model may indicate who is ready for action along the border. Viewers may also compare the uniforms of both people to gain clarity toward the hierarchical structure. According to Machin (2016), shades of color are used to express ideas. For instance, the soldier's brown and patterned uniform could connote the military (Ch. 4, Communicative Functions of Color). Also, the Border Patrol uses a shade of green with their uniforms which could connote the forest and might

be confused with other people who wear green shades for work. While the agent appears to be taller than the soldier and thus commands more authority based on vertical perspective, the rifle along with the soldier's uniform challenges this concept. Using the Humvee, the rifle, and the military uniform as semiotic resources, viewers could believe that the soldier has more power and authority over the agent.

The next image (Figure 8) shifted away from hierarchical power and refocused on the use of authority to apprehend people by the Border Patrol. Using a high angle perspective, the frame consists of tall green plants at the bottom and muddy terrain with water puddles located toward the top. The presence of mud and water may indicate that it recently rained, or water irrigation was used on the land. A large and tightly stranded blue hose assembly divides the green plant area from the muddy terrain. There are multiple tire tracks that run through the muddy terrain which may denote that this could be a farming scene or an access road for vehicles. In this scene, four members of the Border Patrol apprehended ten undocumented immigrants who crossed the border illegally. The agents and a tracking dog are standing in a semi-circle around the undocumented immigrants who are sitting on the ground.



**Figure 8.** The U.S. Border Patrol apprehend undocumented immigrants crossing from Mexico. The second image denotes an oval and semi-circle patterns along with a line division. Taken from: Davis Hirschfeld, J. (2018, April 2). Trump's Immigration Tweets Followed by Policy Plans to Match. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/02/us/politics/trump-immigration-mexico-daca.html>

Upon further analysis, a high vertical perspective established that the agents, the tracking dog, and the undocumented immigrants are far from the viewer and are situated at ground level. Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) contended that if a high angle was used in an image, then the photographer, viewer, and actors are depicted as one in which the viewer has power over the actors within the image (pg. 140). In this image, the viewer was subjected to a high angle perspective which placed all of the actors in a position that was beneath the viewer. Further analysis suggested that a viewer may be imaginarily involved in a specific role while looking at these actors from a high angle. For instance, a viewer could assume the role of a supervisor who oversaw the capture of these undocumented immigrants through a drone camera. This assumption would give the viewer more power based on vertical perspective by taking on this imagined supervisory role.

As a high angle perspective connotes ideas of power, vector patterns form shapes that contain additional details about social distance and visual collectivization (Figure 8). In this shot, the viewer may see that the undocumented immigrants were apprehended by the Border Patrol. Using the high angle perspective as a reference point, viewers may also notice a semi-circle pattern that was formed by the four agents who enclosed the captured immigrants from escaping. This semi-circle pattern builds upon two ideas regarding social distance. First, the pattern developed social distances between the agents within the image (Machin, 2016, Ch. 6, Distance). Here, each Border Patrol agent is evenly spaced apart from each other. This evenly spaced pattern indicates that the agents could be in an impersonal relationship with each other. This impersonal relationship could signify that the agents are work acquaintances based on their association with the Border Patrol (Machin, 2016, Ch. 6, Distance). This association is also based on the similarity of uniforms which also relates to their impersonal relationship based on

their job. Next, this semi-circle pattern also suggests a “rounding up” type of action in which the agents are preventing the captured immigrants from escaping. This action through a semi-circle pattern allows the agents to create another impersonal relationship with the undocumented immigrants.

Further analysis revealed an oval pattern that was formed by the ten undocumented immigrants sitting on the ground. Here, a viewer notices that these people sit closely to each other which often resembles a gathering of friends, family, or both. Viewers may assume that these people could be family members traveling together over the border. Also, these people may be sitting close together because they were “rounded up” by the agents when they were captured. While this oval pattern connotes interconnectedness through social distance, it is different from the semi-circle pattern formed by the agents. It may be conceived that oval patterns share values of closeness and family while semi-circle patterns connote loose relationships or a “work first” priority.

Additionally, viewers may notice a blue dividing line that runs between the Border Patrol agents and the undocumented immigrants. In this image, a series of blue hoses form a line vector that splits the agents from the undocumented immigrants sitting down. This division forms a visual collectivization in which a viewer may “focus on the generic features of a group of people so that they are turned into types” (Machin, 2016, Ch. 6, Kinds of Participants). In Figure 8, a viewer could categorize these people into two groups based on clothing, race, and gender. Here, all of the Border Patrol agents seem to be white males who are wearing dark green uniforms, tan shirts, utility belts, and boots. Their clothing attire denotes an affiliation with the Border Patrol. On the other hand, the captured immigrants seem to be mostly male and Mexican, Central American, or possibly South American in origin. These people are wearing dark colored

street clothing such as sports jerseys, sweaters, jeans, and short sleeved shirts. In studying visual collectivization, a viewer may notice that an “us versus them” mentality was formed. This mentality connotes that it’s the Border Patrol’s responsibility to apprehend those who illegally cross the border. Looking at how visual collectivization works in conjunction with this line vector denotes how race and authority may play a role in securing the U.S. – Mexico border.

### **Final Thoughts**

As users of various forms of communication, we primarily share our information through textual and visual modes with people over the internet. We have seen a shift from “the dominance of the mode of writing to the mode of image” which impacts how we communicate with each other (Kress, 2010, pg. 6). While imagery continues to gain speed as a form of communication, writing will remain a fundamental form of communication. However, our evolving communicative practices rely on more than just writing to convey a message. We must also consider the use of visual imagery to assist with the transmission of ideas to people. Adding a visual element to a textual story allows the creation of new meaning. News agencies such as *The New York Times* combine these two elements to build multimodal narratives that relate to political discussion concerning the border wall project or undocumented immigration. It is through the study of image narratives that I propose the incorporation of intertextual analysis along with a multimodal framework to study immigration policy more in depth.

During this study, I developed an image category related to the Central American caravan who traveled to the United States to apply for asylum. While this image category didn’t make it into the study, the pictures did create a counter-narrative that challenged the narratives that were found related to power and authority. In studying this counter-narrative, it was noted in *The New York Times* news story that President Trump reacted to the Central American caravan as

dangerous people and responded with more border security and pressure to build the wall (Davis, 2018). The images in this counter-narrative denoted that this caravan consisted of regular people who wanted to get away from their problems back home and possibly posed no danger. These visuals created sympathetic narratives toward the people traveling as a caravan. On the other hand, the textual narratives indicated that these caravan travelers are bad people and should not be granted asylum. While reviewing these images, I developed empathy and compassion for these people who were hoping to start a new life away from home. These feelings of empathy and compassion cannot be realized by just reading a news story. It can only be realized through visual imagery where a viewer may be subjected to actions such as crying or even finger pointing gestures that may reveal the emotions of these migrants. Analyzing images and text in dual context may allow us to be more informed about what we are being told visually. While this paper did not look at the interrelationship of images and text, there is still much value to be placed by using intertextualization. The goal of this paper was to focus only on visuals and how we might understand the meaning potentials that these images create. Given more time and opportunity, this study would benefit from adding intertextualization into the work to understand how the text and images work together.

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