

## MULTIMODAL RESOURCES IN PROTEST PLACARDS AND VISUAL IMAGES: A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE 2024 ASUU NAU PROTEST

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### Abstract

This study investigates the use of multimodal resources in protest placards, focusing on those employed during the ASUU NAU protest march in July 2024. Previous research on multimodal resources in ASUU protests has largely focused on newspaper representations, online memes, and cartoons depicting the 2022 nationwide ASUU strike. Therefore, the present study shifts scholarly attention to the multimodal elements of protest placards used by a specific ASUU branch, aiming to fill a gap in knowledge and expand the scope of this emerging area of inquiry. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotic theory, the study analyzes fourteen protest placards embedded in five visual images. These images were collected through participant observation and form the basis of a qualitative analysis. Findings reveal that the placards and images are constructed using a range of semiotic and multimodal resources, including written text (capital letters), bold fonts, selective colours (e.g., red to signify danger or urgency, green to denote dignity), bodily gestures (such as raised fists), gaze (direct or averted), and spatial composition (e.g., crowds versus individuals). These resources are purposefully employed to communicate various messages. The study concludes that the protest placards construct meaning through an interplay of multimodal elements—written text, colour, composition, and embodied presence—which collectively convey urgency and legitimacy. Additionally, the protest images function as a strategic semiotic practice, effectively articulating the lecturers' grievances and aspirations to the public.

**Keywords:** multimodal discourse analysis, social semiotic theory, semiotic resources, protest placards, ASUU

### Introduction

From Aba women's riot of 1929, Occupy Nigeria of 2012, #BringBackOurGirls campaign of 2014, #ENDSARS protest of 2020, and #ENDBADGOVERNANCE of 2024, Nigerians have been known to register their displeasure with the government by taking to the streets to protest government policies, insecurity, police brutality, corruption or simply bad governance. Protest is a form of formal resistance done in the public sphere by a group of people to register their disapproval. It is also a solidarity march, because the protesters are united by a common cause; right to freedom, justice or change. Protests usually involve public demonstrations by the aggrieved party. It is the right of the citizenry in democratic societies. Although people of all ages have the right to protest, protests are usually orchestrated by the youth. A protest may be done digitally (#BringBackOurGirls, #Blacklivesmatter), could be a sit in protest (Sit-at-home in South East, Nigeria, ASUU strike) or have physical location(s) (#ENDSARS, #ENDBADGOVERNANCE). Notably, #BringBackOurGirls and #BlackLivesMatter were done physically and digitally. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) is not left out of these protests. It has been known to protest injustice and unfairness meted out to its members through its numerous strikes where federal universities are shutdown for a period of time.

In July, 2024, the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (NAU) branch of ASUU, within the school premises, registered their displeasure with the federal government over the government's non-implementation of its agreement with the union, through a protest. When a protest is physically carried out, the demonstrators typically show up in different locations carrying placards. These union members employed protest placards in their demonstration. These placards that are enriched with semiotic and multimodal resources were employed to communicate the union's grievances to the federal government. The placards are usually laden with semiotic resources, from the texts to their different font themes, colours and even the spatial arrangement of words in the placards. These semiotic resources align to send different messages to the government or even leaders in different institutions or establishments.

Semiotic resources refer to different materials that come together to make meaning. These resources are socially and culturally context-dependent. Their potentials to make meaning are enshrined in their long-term use in different societies over a period of time. The objective of the study is to identify the multimodal resources in the protest placards and interpret their meanings.

### Statement of the Problem

A budding scholarly interest in the use of multimodal resources in protest materials and art has been evidenced in past research. Fifebola and Unuabonah (2025) selected cartoons related to the 2022 ASUU strike and investigated

the meaning-making resources used to conceptualise the strike. Abdurrahman, Nwabudike, and Aliyu (2025) explored the discursive power inherent in ASUU strike-themed online cartoons, drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory. Omolabi and Adedayo (2024) identified social media memes on the ASUU strike and conducted a pragmatic analysis of them. Makinde (2023) conducted a semiotic analysis of ASUU strike-based cartoons in Nigerian newspapers. Kanu and Chukwueloka (2024) analysed #EndSARS protest banners and placards using multimodal analysis. Notably, the previous studies on the ASUU strike focused on newspaper cartoons and social media memes that depicted the 2022 strike, while the study on protest placards centred on the 2020 #EndSARS protest. The present study expands this emerging research area by shifting scholarly attention to the protest placards used during the 2024 ASUU NAU protest in Awka, which was held in response to the Federal Government's non-implementation of its agreement with the union. In doing so, this study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Multimodality**

Traditionally, spoken and written discourses achieved dominance over visual communication. Monomodality sufficed in traditional communication. This single mode (language) of communication was the norm in language use. For this reason, other forms of communication like gestures, body language and facial expressions are termed paralinguistic, extralinguistic or non-verbal forms of communication. This orientation perpetuates the view of language as unimodal, positioning other communicative channels as supplementary modes that surface only when speech is impaired or inaccessible (Cohn & Schilperoord 2024). This perception reflects what Cohn and Schilperoord (2024) describe as the amodal view of language—a conception of language as detached from any particular mode. In contemporary communication, these other modes of communication are duly recognised for their potentials to significantly contribute to meaning. Each medium also has its own strengths and limits. Each mode serves a distinct purpose: images convey what would take too long to describe in words, while writing identifies what is hard to depict visually. Colour functions to emphasize and draw attention to key parts of the message. Without this shared distribution of roles, the sign would fail to communicate effectively. Writing labels, images illustrate, and colour highlights—each working to its fullest advantage. (Kress, 2010)

Some things can be expressed in words but not in images, while others can be shown visually but not easily captured in language (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). These different modes are not conflicting, but they come together to effect meaning in communication, hence the introduction of multimodality.

Multimodality or multimodal discourse analysis studies how multiple modes (language, pictures, emojis, sound, music, colours, and spatial arrangement) interact to construct meaning in communication. These modes can be categorised as vocal modality, bodily modality and graphic modality (Cohn & Schilperoord 2024). Multimodality is a form of discourse that extends beyond spoken language, incorporating additional communicative features such as voice quality, gestures, facial expressions, and elements of self-presentation (van Leeuwen 2015). This is evidenced in contemporary communication like social media, advertorials, content creation, websites and webpage where writing and other modes like colour, pictures, emojis, font theme and spatial arrangement combine to convey meaning. It incorporates the paralingual aspect of language into the meaning potential aspect of communication.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic Theory, which builds on the traditional framework of semiotics: the study of signs and how meaning is constructed through the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Social semiotics is concerned with the systematic investigation of semiotic resources and modes, focusing on the ways in which they function as meaningful multimodal constructs across a range of social and cultural contexts (Bezemer & Cowan, 2020). Notably, visual language is socially and culturally bound. Essentially, a social semiotic or multimodal perspective examines how diverse modes of representation and communication are utilized within and across texts to serve semiotic functions and advance ideological aims (Serafini 2023). Social semiotic theory focuses on the interplay between text and images to make meaning. Whether in print or online discourse, most modern texts, from adverts and PR materials to informational pieces, bring together words, images, and sometimes sound. The layout organizes these parts into clear, unified designs that people usually notice visually before they read the words (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006).

Social semiotics theory draws on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics as a model. Kress & Van Leeuwen adopted Halliday's three 'metafunction' (ideational, interpersonal and textual) to show that visual communication, like other forms of communication, serves different representational and communication functions.

### **The ideational metafunction**

The ideational metafunction holds that every semiotic mode must be capable of representing aspects of the world as they are perceived by humans. In other words, it needs to depict objects and the relationships between them in

a reality that exists beyond the representational system itself (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). Semiotic modes offer different choices of relationships between objects and how they can be represented.

### The interpersonal metafunction

Interpersonal metafunction shows the relationship between the image and the viewer. A semiotic mode ought to have the ability to show the social relationship between the producer, the viewer and whatever object it represents. Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) asserts the need for a semiotic mode to show the connection between the person who produces a (complex) sign and the one who receives or reproduces it. The gaze (direct or diverted) of the depicted person in an image comes to play in the interpersonal metafunction.

### The textual metafunction

The textual metafunction holds that semiotic mode should have the potential to produce texts. There should also be meaningful connections with the contexts in which they were produced.

### Methodology

The research is a qualitative research. Five visual images that comprise fourteen (14) protest placards that were captured during the 2024 ASUU NAU protest march formed the data for the study. Data were purposively collected through participant observation and analysed using the theory for the study.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

#### Data 1



Data 1 shows a visual image of ASUU NAU branch members holding protest placards. The texts in the placards say “LECTURERS’ **WELFARE** MATTERS!” “**STOP** SUFFOCATING UNIVERSITY LECTURERS!”. The ideational meaning depicts a narrative process where the lecturers are actively protesting, making visible their demands for improved welfare and working conditions. The visual metaphor of *suffocating* symbolizes oppression or of ASUU members by the federal government. The interpersonal meaning is evident in the use of capital letters and the employment of bold red and black font which creates urgency and demands attention. The placards employ the direct imperative “STOP” which addresses the federal government with force. The protest placards function as semiotic resources of resistance and solidarity. The textual meaning is domiciled in the upper section of the placards which frames the institutional identity of the protesters as ASUU NAU members. The central portion, written in capital letters, conveys the main message of the protest and the contrasting colors (red for urgency, black for seriousness) highlights the gravity of the lecturers’ demands. STOP in red and capital letters is visually dominant. The group of lecturers is framed as being visually united and it emphasizes collective struggle and solidarity. This is also shown in the similarity of the placards which produces a cohesive and coordinated visual discourse.

The protest communicates a discourse of resistance and advocacy: lecturers position themselves as marginalized actors demanding recognition. The multimodal resources in the placards are text, typography, gesture, colour, group positioning and all of them interact to construct an identity of lecturers as victims of neglect. As a show of power dynamics, the placards linguistically and visually confront and resist authority, and challenges the government’s perceived suffocation of academics.

The placards show how multimodal elements (text, colour, gesture, composition) work together to create a strong, urgent message of protest. The lecturers’ welfare is foregrounded as a vital issue, while the design of the placards and collective action visually communicate solidarity, resistance, and demands for justice and equity.

## Data 2



Ideational meaning of the protest placards is entrenched in the image of university lecturers participating in a demonstration. Their placards read: "PAY US FAIRLY, ALLOW LECTURERS BREATHE. Their raised fists in the image symbolise resistance, power, and solidarity, hence the narrative behind the picture is that of lecturers that are demanding their rights. Interpersonal meaning (relation to the viewer) is that of academics confronting the federal government and demanding attention and response. Their raised fists also function as struggles for freedom and a movement for social justice.

The textual aspect and topography of the placards say PAY US FAIRLY, and it is clearly written in the green uppercase making it visually loud and overt. The text also says ALLOW LECTURERS BREATHE. This statement is drawn from the text of the #BlackLivesmatter protest; I Can't breathe, and its use here depicts intertextuality. This positions the lecturers as suffocated victims seeking relief. These interactive elements establish urgency.

Placards that highlight the lecturers' key demands highlight the compositional meaning in the protest placards. The picture background also situates the protest in an academic setting. The use of colour green in PAY US FAIRLY and blue in ALLOW LECTURERS BREATHE adds contrast, and ensures that the slogans stand out against the ASUU NAU dark-coloured uniform. The lecturers' uniform reinforces a shared identity and collective struggle. The lecturers move as a group to depict visual unity and emphasise collective voice over individual voices. The image builds a discourse of resistance, injustice, and solidarity.

The multimodal resources found in the placards are text, gesture, gaze, dress, and composition, and they produce a visual narrative of lecturers as victims of structural neglect and oppression. The use of PAY US and ALLOW reflects the lecturers' power to demand change from the government, rather than plead. This reiterates the union's slogan "together we stand, divided we beg". The lecturers position themselves as a marginalized but united professional group struggling for recognition, fairness, and survival. Generally, the picture communicates resistance by combining verbal (placards), visual (color, dress), and gestural (fists, gaze) modes. The lecturers' demands are made visually conspicuous, constructing them as a community under pressure but actively negotiating their identity and rights.

## Data 3



Ideational meaning of the protest placards in the image above shows a large group of university lecturers in active protest. Their Placards communicate the union's clear demands and accusations: (a) FG, STOP DECEIVING NIGERIANS, this narrative frames the federal government as deceptive and untrustworthy. (b) Quality Education Deserves Better Pay, this sentence suggests that lecturers' welfare is directly proportional to the national educational quality. The image of protesters in march formation shows unity, solidarity, and mass resistance. Here, the lecturers are represented as truth-tellers that expose systemic deception.

Interpersonal meaning is occasioned in the march that depicts movement, and determination. Gestures are shown in the fists up. The fist up gesture demonstrates struggle, resistance, and power. The language of the placards comprises the imperatives STOP which is a direct command to the federal government. It also holds the declarative; Quality Education Deserves Better Pay.

Textual meaning is depicted in the use of bold fonts (FG STOP DECEIVING NIGERIANS) to heighten urgency. Colours red, green, and black add contrast and emotional weight to the message. The group and aligned placards create a sense of unity and solidarity underscoring the union's common struggle. The discourse here is not just about salary struggles; lecturers are positioned as moral actors fighting for educational justice. Through text, colour, gesture, and collective organization, this image multimodally constructs lecturers as a unified body of resistance. Unlike the other visual images (which emphasize suffocation and fairness), this one foregrounds government's dishonesty and frames the protest as a struggle for truth, facts and quality education.

#### Data 4



What is depicted in the image shows a group of ASUU NAU members holding placards with texts in the upper case demanding better welfare, fair pay, and an end to POVERTY-LEVEL SALARIES. Verbal text forms the main mode of the placards and has very strong lexical choices such as WELFARE MATTERS, END POVERTY-LEVEL SALARIES, and PAY US FAIRLY which clearly communicate grievance and urgency. The ideational metafunction is shown in the representational structure of the placards which emphasizes action and demand, showing a social practice of protest and advocacy for rights.

The interpersonal metafunction shows in the frontal angle of the image, and it suggests direct engagement, because the placards face the camera, which means they are also directed at the viewer, demanding attention and participation. The medium social distance (not too close, not too far) positions viewers as observers that are drawn into the issue without being completely detached. The protesters' gaze is not on the camera, and the placards are the main focus. This makes the protest about a united message rather than individual faces, and gives more power to the words rather than to personal identity of the union members.

In the textual metafunction, information value of the placards occupy the top of the frame, and symbolizes what should be aspired to; justice, fairness, welfare. The people occupy the lower part, showing the demands of the lecturers in lived experiences. The use of bold capital letters in colour red (**WELFARE, POVERTY-LEVEL**) makes the lecturers' grievances highly visible and emotionally-laden. The contrast of black, red, and white colours of the placards draws the viewer's eye immediately to the key issues of the protest.

The image functions as a semiotic material which combines written text, colour, positioning, and bodily presence to construct a strong narrative of resistance and demand for justice. Through these semiotic resources, the protesters communicate urgency, solidarity, and legitimacy, making their socio-political stance visible and hard to ignore.

#### DATA 5



The image depicts a protest by members of ASUU NAU branch. The protest placards carry messages such as BLAME FG FOR ANOTHER LONG STRIKE, SUPPORT QUALITY EDUCATION, and WE TEACH, WE CARE, WE DESERVE FAIR PAY. These texts construct a clear narrative: lecturers are attributing responsibility for strikes to the Federal Government while framing themselves as stakeholders of education who deserve better treatment from the government. This is the ideational metafunction of the image.

The interpersonal metafunction shows that the frontal shot of both placards and faces create a sense of direct confrontation and engagement with the viewer. The viewer is positioned as someone being addressed by the lecturers' grievances. The facial expressions of the protesters, serious and not smiling, reinforce the urgency and gravity of the situation. The placards' direct address ("Blame FG", "We deserve") constructs an implied dialogue between protesters and viewers, making the viewer consider their stance on the incessant and prolonged ASUU strikes. The lack of direct gaze at the camera by the protesters shifts the communicative power from personal identity to the collective voice expressed through the written signs.

The placards are highly raised to occupy the upper part of the frame, which implies that the demands (supporting education, fair treatment, fair salaries) are values to be aspired to. The protesters themselves are in the lower part, grounding the messages in lived realities and living conditions of these lecturers. Red highlights show salience (**QUALITY EDUCATION**) and draw the eye immediately to their critical demands. Red is used to signal danger in the Nigerian culture, therefore highlighting QUALITY EDUCATION in red depicts the fallen standard of education in Nigerian universities. Red signals danger, urgency and importance. Bold capital letters are equally used to amplify voices, emphasis and authority, ensuring the messages of the placards cannot be ignored. In framing, the physical proximity of protesters reinforces solidarity.

The image uses multimodal resources, language, colour, framing, positioning, and facial expression, to project protest as a legitimate social and civil practice. The ideational metafunction foregrounds grievances (poor conditions, strike, demand for quality education and fair pay). The interpersonal metafunction builds direct engagement with the viewer, demanding attention and moral evaluation, while the textual metafunction organizes the elements so that the written demands dominate, while the protesters' presence provides authenticity and urgency. Together, the multimodal resources communicate struggle, resistance, and the pursuit of justice in higher education.

#### Findings of the Research

The research finds textual, visual and gestural modes of communication in the visual images and protest placards. Findings reveal that visual images that bear different protest placards dominate the frame, and the placards have dominance over the faces of their bearers. This is an indicator of the urgency of the collective message which takes precedence over personal identity of the lecturers. Notably, this collective message is constructed using multimodal resources such as written text (capital letters), bold fonts, selective colours (red for danger and urgency, green for dignity), bodily gestures (raised fists), gaze (direct or diverted), and spatial composition (crowds versus individuals). These resources are intentionally used to communicate different messages.

Bold typography in red and black signals urgency and danger, and direct gazes and raised fists invite solidarity and active engagement from the viewer. The colours are strategically employed to create salience. These semiotic resources heighten the visibility of key terms of the protest. The images show that protests are not only verbal but multimodal events, combining text, colour, gestures, positioning, gaze, and body presence to create meaning. The semiotic resources convey urgency (through imperatives), solidarity (through collective framing), and legitimacy (through appeals to dignity and fairness).

## Conclusion

The study concludes that the protest placards construct meaning through the use of different multimodal resources where written text, colour, composition, and bodily presence work together to communicate urgency and legitimacy. The lecturers' protest emphasizes collective identity over individuality, as the placards take visual precedence over faces, signaling a unified voice rather than personal grievances.

The research demonstrates that (ASUU) protests employ a strategic and intentional use of multimodal resources—textual inscriptions, colour contrasts, bodily gestures, gaze, and compositional arrangements—to communicate variegated meanings. Importantly, the multimodal choices reposition the audience across the images: first as witnesses of oppression, then as participants in solidarity, and finally as observers of a collective struggle. The shifting representational strategies emphasize that ASUU protests should not be viewed solely as financial disputes but as broader socio-political engagements that tie lecturers' welfare to their concern for educational justice in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the compositional arrangement, where placards dominate the ideal upper space and protesters occupy the real lower space, ties the lived experiences of lecturers to broader aspirational values. This semiotic structure reinforces the legitimacy of their demands by situating them both in material reality and in ethical ideals. The research concludes that the protest images function as strategic semiotic practice, effectively communicating the lecturers' grievances and aspirations to the public.

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