

# Stylistics in Comics

*How style can influence meaning in graphic narrative and visual communication*

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In literature, more specifically narratology, it is fairly common to pay attention to the general style of a story and identifying specific deviations from that. More often than not, a specific style of speech or writing within the story is linked to a specific character. Therefore, characters can be recognized by their speech (patterns) or their specific dialect. Genette dubbed this concept *Voice*, which he says “refers to a relation with the subject (and more generally with the instance) of the enunciation” (Genette, 31-2) and is concerned with who is speaking. Genette also uses the term *Mood*, that describes who’s point of view “Orients the narrative perspective” (Genette, 186). In broader terms: *Voice* lets us know who is speaking and *Mood* lets us know who is seeing.

These two concepts are connected to the narrative instance and focalizer, terms Bal used in *Narratology*. The Narrative instance (narrator) is concerned with who is telling the story and the focalizer is the character or narrator/narrative instance whose point of view is being conveyed in the story. Focalization colors the story, it implicitly or explicitly gives opinions about what is being narrated and provides the reader with details about that character (or narrator). Both narration and focalization can shift throughout the story – different characters can tell the story, or give their view to the reader. Specific styles in speech or a dialect or penchant for certain words act as an indication who is fulfilling that role at the moment.

Now, we can transpose this to Graphic Novels quite easily: there are many examples where characters have distinct voices or dialects that make it possible to identify them. In *Preacher*, Cassidy is always recognizable because in his speech [you] is consistently swapped out for [Yeh]. Similarly, in the Irish X-man Banshee’s speech, [of] is always presented as [o’]. So, even if the characters are speaking while out of frame, we can recognize them by the character-bound speech/dialect. Another example of this can be seen in Image 1: we can recognize Wolverine and Doop (X-men) from the contents of their speech balloons alone. The squiggly alien script in the image tells us this is Doop speaking. The addition of ‘Bub’ in the bottom balloon in this image tells us that the second character is Wolverine, since he is the only X-man who regularly uses this expression.

So, the style of speech can tell us something about the story, but since Comics are a medium of Words and Pictures, there is more going on here: the shape of the speech-balloon also tells us something about what is going on. Both characters are speaking normally. But, different shapes of speech balloons can indicate different modes of speech, such as a cloud-shaped balloon for thought, or a spikey balloon for Shouting (or an electronic voice). In Image 2, several forms of speech-balloon are depicted. Most of these balloons implicate a certain meaning, which the reader can discern from the style of balloon alone. Of course, there can be variations in meaning, depending on context – it’s not a strict system after all.

# WOLVERINE and the X-MEN

#17

MARVEL

AARON  
M. ALLRED  
L. ALLRED

גור פולק דוט דוק  
דוט דוק ג' אג' דוט דוק  
פד' דוק' דוק פולק דוק  
פד' דוק' דוק דוק דוק  
דוט דוק דוק דוק דוק

YOU  
SAID IT,  
BUB.

Image 1: Altered cover for Wolverine & The X-men 17 (2012)



designed by freepik

*Image 2: Different types of balloons*

The speech-balloon is a visual description of '(s)he says', or some other form of uttering. It is a universal indicator of who is speaking and in what manner they do so. The shape of the balloon tells us something about how something is spoken, while the root of the balloon shows us who is speaking.

Besides those indications, there can be specific elements added to speech-balloons to add extra meaning: Deadpool is always recognizable by his yellow-colored speechballoons. To take it a step further: segments of Deadpool have been recognizable for a while in his comics. Three different styles were used for Deadpool's dialogue and inner monologue: yellow for 'out loud' and inner voice, lined paper with script for his inner diary and a serif-font on a white background for the inner

voice Deadpool's inner voice argues with<sup>1</sup>. We not only know that Deadpool is speaking, but also which part of him is. Or which parts of his psyche are engaging each other.

Such a mechanism can also be seen in the depiction of The Maker: the Reed Richards of the Marvel Ultimate Universe, who has been crossed over to the main Marvel Universe in the Secret Wars Reboot of 2016. The Maker still speaks with a serif-font – something that has been pointed out in stories as well, where people have asked why The Maker sounded strange. Other characters that had their Origin in the Ultimate universe do not share this trait with the Maker, because they were transported to and assimilated in the Marvel universe through a cataclysmic event that merged all universes in the Marvel Multiverse into a single universe (*Secret Wars*, 2015). The origins of these characters was adapted to create a universe in which they have always been present. Because The Maker retains the font of the Ultimate Universe – and sounds 'off' to the rest of the characters – he must have found a way to circumvent the Big Merge, outside of the multiverse, re-entering it after everything was put together again (image 3)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This last voice later turned out to be the villain Madcap, who kept the specific form of his dialogue when separated from Deadpool in *Deadpool Annual 2013 #1*.

<sup>2</sup> How this happened hasn't been told yet in the current continuity of the Marvel Universe. At the end of *Secret Wars*, when The Maker tried to kill Reed Richards, he was turned into pepperoni pizzas by Molecule Man. He later re-emerged in the Marvel Universe to form the scientific terrorist organization W.H.I.S.P.E.R.



Image 3: The Maker meeting Eddie Brock (Venom #7)

So, from something seemingly inconsequential and primarily the result of an aesthetic choice - the style of font and the manner of capitalization - we can tell there is more to the backstory of this character, even if there is nothing known about that backstory.

But to return to Deadpool: Even if his mental problems and inner arguing have been reduced, he still is highly recognizable, due to the color of his speech-balloons. This can give the reader an advantage over (some of) the characters in the story. When Taskmaster and Deadpool team up against the Thunderbolts<sup>3</sup> and Taskmaster puts on Deadpool's Uniform, the Thunderbolts have no way of knowing which one is which, but the reader is 'in on the plan', since we recognize Taskmaster and Deadpool by the color of their speech-balloons (image 4) – just as we could recognize Kraven as Spider-Man (in Kraven's Last Hunt) because of the lack of quipping and wise-cracks – even when we discount the difference in physical appearance between Kraven and Spider-Man.



Image 4: Taskmaster posing as Deadpool

These uses of style aren't limited to speech-balloons. What I have just posed also holds true for captions, since they can act as disembodied speech-balloons, when representing dialogue by a recognizable character. Style can also be used in the panels as a whole, to indicate something, such as focalization.

In Dr. Strange #1 (Aaron, Bachalo & Townsend, 2015), there is a difference between the representation of the 'real' world and the world as Strange sees it, populated not only by humans and animals, but also by magical beings (image 5). When Strange uses the Eye of Agamotto to see all the magic around him, the 'normal' world is represented in line drawings, while the magical creatures are depicted in full color. The panels also lack a frame, which opens them up, literally less restricted by what is considered 'normal' and open to other possibilities. Using this style of drawing is then linked to Strange looking at the magical side of things: when it is first presented, Strange is seen with his third eye open, on his forehead. The next time such an image is presented, we know that it is Strange looking at something using the Eye of Agamotto and seeing things nobody else can see.

When a magical creature is represented in a panel in which the normal world is also colorful, we then know that the creature has manifested itself in the real world. There no longer is a difference in the plain of existence where the creature lives and that of the normal world; the creature is visible

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<sup>3</sup> Thunderbolts 131

for everyone, not only to Strange. And (naturally) poses a real danger to the world, where the creatures that only Strange sees are not a direct threat to the world.

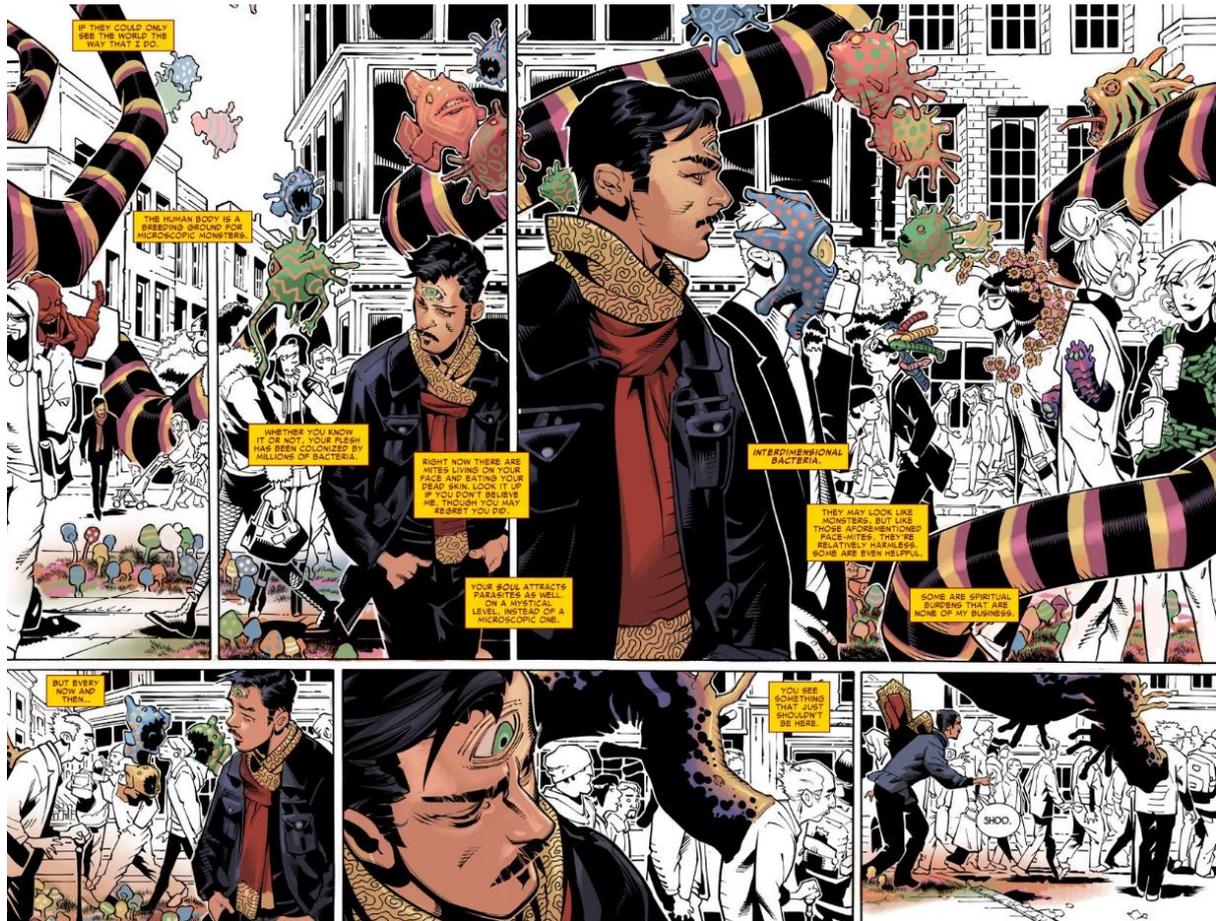


Image 5: Dr. Strange looking at the world

As a last example of the influence of style on the narrative, I would like to present you a page from Jeff Lemire's *The Nobody*. *The Nobody* tells the story of John Griffin, a scientist who drank an experimental invisibility potion and has since been stuck in his invisibility. On this page, Griffin is trying to produce a serum that will reverse his condition of being invisible. It is a 5 panel page, horizontally aligned. They switch between the current attempt at a reversal of the invisibility and the original experiment in which Griffin became invisible.



Image 6: *The Nobody*

The flashback shows him wholly visible, preparing the invisibility-serum, while in the present he is covered in bandages<sup>4</sup>, preparing his cure. Furthermore, the different panels combine into a single portrait. Past and present become one and combine into a single event. The invisible man is trying to replicate the original experiment, in order to undo it. So, preparing the serum reminds him of taking the original formula, as it also mirrors every other attempt at finding a cure.

The intersection of the images in this way creates an iterative sequence. It does not matter which attempt this is, they all are the same, and they all have the same result: invisibility. This is possible because of the way the actions are presented: the combination of the 5 panels into a single portrait shows the different depicted moments are essentially the same, are interchangeable. Yet, the use of different color-schemes for the different times does show there are differences. Similarly, the juxtaposition of the panels, the present intersecting the past, also shows there are different

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<sup>4</sup> As befitting an Invisible Man

attempts. But, the similarities between the different moments are emphasized. The Invisible Man in the present acts exactly the same way as he did in the past. Thus, for him, the experience is exactly the same. While the images are depictions of different moments in time, the transitions between these times stays undefined, while the action depicted stays the same.

Essentially, all we know for sure is that Panel 1 shows the present preparation of a formula, while Panel 2 shows the first. Panel 3 then, show another attempt, which probably is the current, but may be an earlier one. This also holds true for panels 4 and 5. So, a textual 'translation' of this sequence could be given as: "Preparing the serum took him back to the day he became invisible, just as it did every time he prepared another formula." The different Narrators can be seen at work in this image. While the Narrator of Content shows two different scenes (First and current), these two scenes intersect and interact through their composition. By juxtaposing the two scenes in this way, the iterative sequence comes to be. Should the composition be different – the experiments in reverse order, side by side, for example – the first experiment (shown last) would have been a flashback, or at least would be easily viewed as a flashback by the reader.

So, to conclude and recap: the use of style in Comics can be used as a narrative device, telling the reader who is speaking, what manner of speech is used or who is focalizing a particular sequence or who is narrating a sequence. It can also be used to indicate the time in which something takes place, and add to the narrative by using the intersection of times or discord between several used styles to add to the story – in many more ways than discussed in this paper.

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