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Available online at: <https://eduj.uowasit.edu.iq>**Ban Asa'd Abood**

Assistant Lecturer at  
the General  
Directorate of  
Education, Wasit, Iraq

Prof. Hashim Aliwy  
Mohammed (Ph.D)

College of Education,  
Wasit University, Iraq.

**Email:**

baanassad@gmail.com

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## A Semiotic Analysis of British Royal's Christmas Cards in 2020 and 2021

### A B S T R A C T

Sending Christmas cards is a tradition in the Royal family for more than a century. Princes and princesses used to send black and white pictures of themselves with short messages. Recently, the receivers are not just the family members, friends or neighbors but it is an entire country. The main reason behind that is the social media. Therefore, the next generation of the Royals put their own touch on the honored tradition. They document their family moments with short phrases or messages. These cards are posted on the social media and are accessible to everyone. The aim of this study is to evaluate how each card has a hidden or deep meaning that the viewer can understand through the attached image or through words. In order to achieve this aim, The current study analyzes the Christmas cards of the British Royals in 2020 and 2021 on semiotic bases by adopting Rose's (2001) model. It has been found out that the viewer can understand the conveyed meaning of each card in addition to the surface meaning. Moreover, these cards are designed to have an effect on the viewer.

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## تحليل سيميائي لبطاقات عيد الميلاد في العائلة الملكية البريطانية في عام 2020 و 2021

أ. دهاشم عليوي محمد  
جامعة واسط، كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية  
alhili.usm@gmail.com

م.م. بان اسعد عبود  
المديرية العامة لتربية واسط  
baanassad@gmail.com

## المستخلص

يعد إرسال بطاقات عيد الميلاد تقليدًا في العائلة الملكية منذ أكثر من قرن. اعتاد الأمراء والأميرات على إرسال صورهم الشخصية بالأبيض والأسود مرفقة بعبارات قصيرة. وفي الأونة الأخيرة لا يقتصر المستلمون لهذه البطاقات على أفراد العائلة أو الأصدقاء أو الحيران فحسب ، بل هم بلد بأكمله. السبب الرئيسي وراء ذلك هو وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. لذلك قام الجيل الجديد من أفراد العائلة الملكية بوضع لمستهم الخاصة على التقاليد المتوارثة حيث يقومون بتوثيق لحظاتهم العائلية بعبارات او رسائل قصيرة .تنتشر هذه البطاقات في وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي وتكون في متناول الجميع. الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تقييم المعنى الخفي الذي يفهمه المشاهد من خلال الصور او الكلمات المرفقة لها. من أجل تحقيق هذا الهدف تحلل الدراسة الحالية بطاقات عيد الميلاد الخاصة بالعائلة الملكية البريطانية في عامي 2020 و 2021 على أسس سيميائية من خلال اعتماد نموذج (Rose 2001) . لقد تبين بأن المشاهد يمكنه فهم المعاني المنقولة لكل صورة إضافة الى المعنى الظاهر. وعلاوة على ذلك لقد تبين بأن البطاقات صممت ليكون لها تأثير على المشاهد.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** السيميائية، علامة، الدال، المدلول، المعنى المنقول

## 1. Introduction

Many linguists consider verbal language whether spoken or written as the centre of the communicative power of the person and the star of the show while other modes, like facial expressions and gestures, are neither essential nor central. Over the last quarter of the century, a new paradigm had been emerged to consider those other modes as functional resources that are part of the communicative competence of any person. Those modes are not subordinate to the language but they are displayed simultaneously with the linguistic production. Moreover, Liu (2013, p. 1259) states that the progress of technology makes a big change in human communication. Nonverbal resources and visual modes in general that were important only for clarification become as an important means of communication in any society.

Accordingly, language is not the only means of human communication. There are other means of communication such as audio and visual modes. Therefore, researchers try to deepen their understanding of how semiotic resources are employed to reach the intended meaning. The semiotic analysis aims at investigating how meaning is derived through the interaction of language with other resources such as images (O'Halloran, 2011).

The study starts with theoretical information about semiotics to understand what is the importance of semiotics, what is the relationship between semiotics and linguistics and what are the key concepts in semiotics. The researchers select and analyze the Christmas cards of three couples in the British Royals by using Rose's (2001) model in order to investigate how these cards are designed to create a hidden meaning that can be conveyed by the viewer.

## 2.Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Semiotics

Meanings are made everywhere and messages are generated when looking at pictures. One way of thinking of meaning is known as **semiotics** which is derived from the Greek word *semeion*, meaning sign. Saussure and Peirce are considered as the fathers of semiotics. The term **semiology** has been used alternatively (Chandler, 2007, p. 3). Nöth (1990, p. 14) mentions that **semiology** and **semiotics** are used differently by the scholars because they deal with two traditions. According to him, the former refers to Saussure's linguistic tradition while the later refers to Peirce's philosophical tradition. Gradually, the two terms have been widely used as synonyms.

Halliday and Hasan (1985, p. 4) say that culture is "as a set of semiotic systems, a sets of systems of meaning, all of which interrelate". According to Sebeok and Danesi (2000, p. 1), the general definition of semiotics is "the science of signs". It is a way of looking for meanings by analyzing signs such as images or words because they contain a lot of meanings. Recently, images are regarded as an important means of communication in the society because of the social media. Its importance lies in "its applicability to the much wider field of meaning-making which includes, for instance, fashion, theatre, dance, literature, architecture, etc." (Bignell, 2002, p.1).

Linguistically, de Saussure (1959, p. 16) states that the science which deals with "the life of signs within society" is **semiology**. Copley (2010, p. 317- 8) points out that de Saussure does not consider semiology as a general science of all types of signs but it is concerned with the signs that are controlled by the individuals and their decisions. Therefore, natural signs like storm, clouds and blushing are not taken in consideration. It is only restricted to "the study of public institutional signs, particularly those in which the relation between form and meaning was 'arbitrary': of these Saussure regarded linguistic signs as constituting the most important class" (Copley, 2010: 318).

Barthes (1967, p. 9) points out that semiology deals with all signs. Seiter (1992, p. 23) argues that semiotics is "the study of everything that can be used for communication: words, images, traffic signs, flowers, music, medical symptoms, and much more". Charles Peirce defines semiotics as a formal doctrine of signs because it is a science that has its own theories and findings and because the word 'doctrine' means a system of principles (Sebeok, 2001, p. 5 & Hawkes, 2003: 100).

Accordingly, semiotics is a science that aims "to answer the following question: What does X mean? where X can be anything from a single word or gesture, to an entire musical composition or film" (Danesi, 2004, p. 3).

### 2.2 The Importance of Semiotics

Atkin (2010) says that Pierce considers every science as a study of semiotics. Allen (2000, p. 5) states that semiotics is important because it focuses on the person's attention and

it helps him to describe the interrelationships of symbol systems and their effects on how he understands the physical and social worlds in which he lives. Leeds-Hurwitz (1993, p. 12) suggests that semiotics helps the person to understand the meaning and how it is made and conveyed. Moreover, it has a significant role in communication.

### 2.3 The Relationship Between Semiotics and Linguistics

There are two different views concerning the relation between semiotics and linguistics. One the one hand, Nöth (1990, p. 229) mentions that some linguists such as Guiraud and Mounin consider semiotics and linguistics as two mutually exclusive disciplines. On the other hand, linguists such as de Saussure (1959, p. 16) and Carnap (1942, p.13) consider linguistics as a part of semiotics.

Morris considers linguistics as a branch of semiotics (Elicker, 1997, p. 5) while Barthes suggests a contrary view because according to him semiology is a part of linguistics (Culler, 1983: 59). Barthes explains that the linguistic model is the most suitable one because the ways in which the signs work are explained through it. Therefore, semiology cannot get away from linguistics (Allen, 2003, p. 46). Semiological systems use language even if that use includes a caption. Benveniste (1969, p. 239- 41) as cited in Nöth (1990, p. 230) states that signs, linguistic or non-linguistic, cannot be interpreted without language.

### 2.4 Key Concepts in Semiotics

The key concepts in semiotics are very important because they are used in understanding the meaning of any image. The first one of these concepts is *sign* which can be a sound, word, image, and the like. Saussure explains that the sign has two components which are the *signifier* and *signified* (Martin and Ringham, 2006, p.185). Concerning the difference between the *signifier* and *signified*, Fowles (1992, p. 66) cited in Nöth (1997, p. 311) suggests that *signifier* refers to the elements of the image while *signified* denotes the concept of that image. Kim (1996, p. 6) explains an example of a rose in order to clarify these two terms. He says that the rose is known as a sign of love. The *signifier* is the rose itself while love is denoted as the *signified*.

According to Peirce, Rose (2001, p. 78) states that he classifies the signs into three types depending on the relation between the *signifier* and *signified*. These three types are *iconic* when the *signifier* resembles the *signified*, *indexical* when there is an existential relationship between the *signifier* and *signified* and *symbolic* when the *signifier* and *signified* are linked in a conventional way.

In semiotics, there are other key concepts such as the *denotative* and *connotative* meanings. The *denotative* and *connotative* meanings of the sign are determined by the context of that sign. Therefore, the context of the sign is very important. Concerning the *denotative* meaning, it represents the literal meaning of the sign whereas the *connotative* meaning is the additional meanings of that sign which is beyond the literal meaning (Dyer, 1982, p. 101).

## 3. Data Collection and Analysis

### **3.1 The Methodology and the Model for Analysis**

Dyer's (1982) semiotic analytical model focuses on both the denotative and connotative analysis. He tries to analyse the relation between the visual description and the socio-cultural values that exist in the society. Dyer's (1982) makes a checklist to analyze images of advertisements. The checklist is made to analyze and understand the meanings that are conveyed. Rose (2001, p. 75-78) states that this checklist can be used to analyze images in any context. The checklist contains questions that focus on three dimensions. The first dimension is concerned with the representations of bodies like the age, race, hair, body, gender, size and looks. The second one deals with representations of manner such as facial expressions, eye contact and pose. As for the last dimension, it focuses on representations of activity like touch, body movement, positional communication, props and settings.

This study follows explanatory qualitative procedure in analyzing the selected data that is based on the features drawn from the theory of semiotics. Therefore, it falls into the qualitative paradigm of research. The images that are analyzed in this study are iconic because they are photographs of humans. Rose's (2001) model is going to be adopted in this study. According to him, several steps are followed in the semiotic analysis of an image. The first step is determining the signs of the image. The second step is determining what those signs signify. Concerning the last step, it focuses on knowing the relations between those signs and their relations to other signs in the same image and also in other images.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

The study focuses on Christmas cards of three couples in the British Royal. The first one is Charles, Prince of Wales, and Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall. The second one is Prince William and Catherine, Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. The last couple is Prince Harry and Meghan, Duke and Duchess of Sussex. Lara (2021) offers a number of Christmas cards of the British Royals with a brief explanation in her article *See the Royal's Holiday Cards throughout the Years* in People. The study applies Rose's (2001) model to the images that appear in the cards of the three couples that are taken from that article in 2020 and 2021. Since the current study is qualitative one, the size of the sample depends on the researchers (Sargeant, 2012, p. 2). Six Christmas cards are chosen because they are sufficient and selecting more cards will add nothing to the study which is called data saturation (Saunders & Townsend, 2018, p. 488-9).

## **4. Data Analysis**

### **Prince Charles and Duchess Camilla in 2020**



This image is the official Christmas card of Prince Charles and his wife Camilla in 2020. It was taken by one of the royal staff. The image displays Prince Charles and the Duchess in the garden of Brikhall which is their home in Scotland. They appear, with semiformal clothes, relaxing in the candid snap in the charming garden. Once looking at the image, the viewer's attention will be focused on the love in the image because everything in the image signifies love. The image itself is charming. The view of the beautiful flowers in the beautiful garden of their home is very pleasant. The weather is sunny because it was taken at the beginning of autumn. They sit very close to each other with the Prince's arm around Camilla. They share a beautiful smile that indicates happiness and satisfaction. Thus, everything in the image tells the viewer that the couple is very happy. The viewer may remember The Prince's pictures with late Diana and notice the differences. He used to not smile and stood away from her. Moreover, Diana used to be very sad with him and they seemed to be not satisfied.

### **Prince Charles and Duchess Camilla in 2021**



This image was released by Charles, Prince of Wales, and Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, as their Christmas card in at Royal Ascot in 2021 with the following caption "As the countdown to Christmas begins, today we're sharing this year's official Christmas card from The Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall". It was taken by Samir Hussein in the summer. The image focuses only on the couple with blurring background. They appear wearing formal clothes with face masks. The main message of the image is not only encouraging safe practices but also the urging to vaccinate against covid-19 because they previously release a message to get vaccinated in UK. Again, the viewer will notice love and care between the couple. Prince Charles is standing near Camilla and helping her to wear her mask. In this image, the viewer will also notice the differences with the pictures of Prince Charles and Princess Diana that show sadness and carelessness because of their sad facial expressions.

### **Prince William and Kate 2020**



This image was released by Prince William and Kate, Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, as their Christmas card in 2020. It was taken in Norfolk and shared on social media by the Palace with these words: "The Duke and Duchess are delighted to share a new image of their family, which features on their Christmas card this year".

In this image, the viewer can see all the members of this family. The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge appear with their son Prince George, their daughter princess Charlotte and their son prince Louis wearing casual clothes, sweaters and jeans. The viewer can notice the relaxing smile on their faces, the closeness and intimacy of the family. Everything in this image, including the warm colors in the image, signifies the balanced family atmosphere and happiness. However, rationality dominates the image. Thus, the viewer concludes that the Duke and Duchess try to appear in a perfect way and they are suitable to be the future King and Queen of the Kingdom.

**Prince William and Kate in 2021**



This image was released as the Christmas card of Prince William and Kate, Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, in 2021. It was taken in Jordan during their private family trip. They share this image on Instagram with these words: "Delighted to share a new image of the family, which features on this year's Christmas card".

The viewer can see Prince William and Kate with their son Prince George, their daughter Princess Charlotte and their son Prince Louis in an intimate family picture. All of them are sitting in front of stone wearing casual clothes because they were in a family trip in Jordan. Their smile and their happy facial expression signify happiness. The colors that control the image are warm colors that are similar to their Christmas card of the last year. The viewer can notice that every year this royal family shows happiness and family intimacy in a rational way that suits them as a royal family.

**Prince Harry and Meghan in 2020**

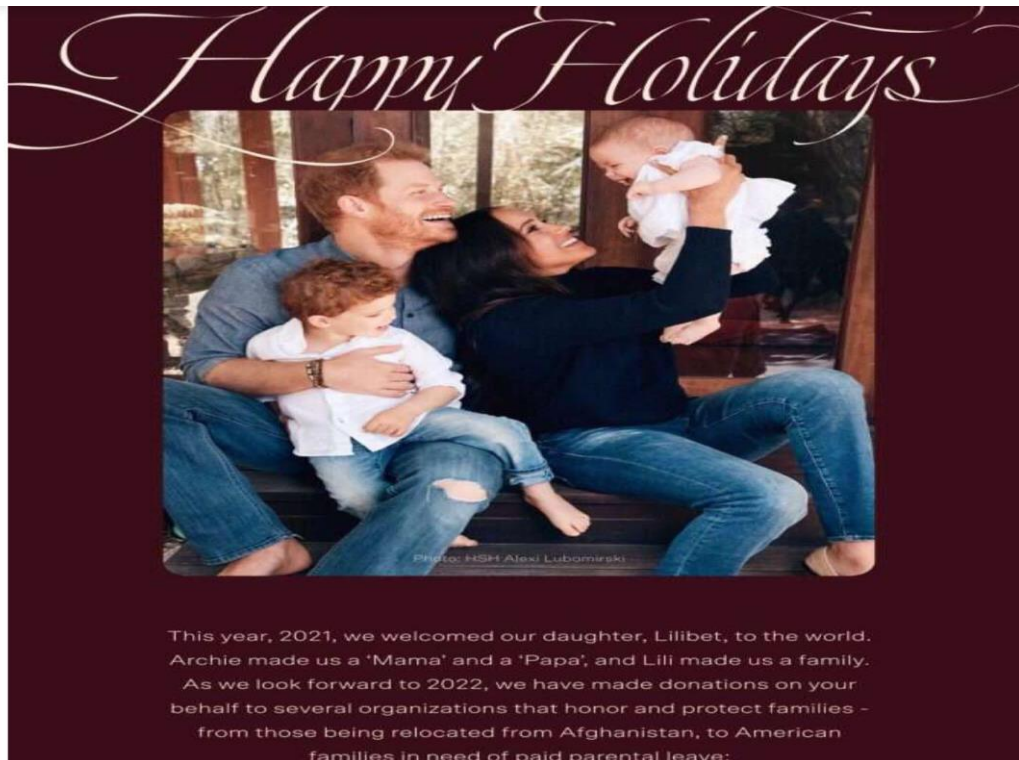
WISHING YOU  
A VERY  
*Merry Christmas*  
AND A  
HAPPY NEW YEAR



This image was released by Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, who were the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, as their Christmas card in 2020. It was shared by them with these words "Wishing you a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year". This image was taken by Doria Ragland, Meghan's mother.

The viewer can see Harry and Meghan in the image with their son, Archie, and their two dogs, Pula and Guy, in the backyard of their home in Montecito, California. The viewer can also notice that the star of the image is Archie how is about 19 months old standing near his playhouse. Meghan is sitting cross-legged on the ground while Harry is squatting to be near his son. The viewer can realize that the message of the image is love and family setting because of the place of the image and the way in which they surround their son. Moreover, the message of the image is taking care of animals like dogs and cats because Meghan is the patron of Mayhew, animal welfare organization in the United Kingdom, and also she made a donation to them and to other charities. Thus, the main focus of this couple is their happiness away from the palace with the family and charities.

**Prince Harry and Meghan in 2021**



Prince Harry and his wife Meghan shared this image as their Christmas card in 2021. It was taken by Alexi Lubomirski at their home in Santa Barbara. They shared it with the following message on it "This year, 2021, we welcomed our daughter, Lilibet, to the world. Archie made us a 'Mama' and a 'Papa', and Lili made us a family. As we look forward to 2022, we have made donations on your behalf to several organizations that honor and protect families – from those being relocated from Afghanistan, to American families in need of paid parental leave."

The viewer can see Harry and Meghan with their son Archie and the first photo of their daughter Lilibet Diana. Harry is barefoot and he wears torn jeans with dark shirt and accessories in his hand. Archie is sitting in his father's lap wearing blue jeans and white shirt and he is also barefoot. Meghan wears blue jeans and dark sweater holding Lilibet who wears white dress and is also barefoot. All of them wear jeans which is not preferred in the royal family. Moreover, barefoot is also not preferred. The viewer may believe that barefoot and jeans signify their independence from the rules of the royal family. Furthermore, the message of the card shows the couple's main attention is their family and charities. The way they sit and look at their children shows that they are happy and their only concern is the happiness of their children.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of six Christmas cards of three branches in the British royal family has come up with the following conclusions:

1. In addition to the words attached to some Christmas card, each one has a message beyond it. This message can be conveyed by the viewer either by image itself or by other images and texts.
2. Although mask encourages safe practices it can be used as a reminder to take the Covid-19 vaccine.
3. Rationality in the way of sitting and dressing suggests following the royal rules.
4. Dogs are reminders of helping animals and supporting animal organizations.
5. Barefoot and torn jeans signify personal freedom and they may suggest the independence of the royal rules.
6. Closeness represents care and love. Care is also represented by helping the partner.
7. Smile and happy facial expression always signify happiness.

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