# Cartoons: Themes and lessons: A semiotic analysis

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**Abstract**

The current study is a part of the practical issues of an M.A. thesis entitled: A Semiotic Study of Cartoon Series Favored by Selected Iraqi Kindergarten Children. In spite of the significance of cartoons in forming the children's language and culture as they are steady audience of cartoons, the researchers noticed that there is a research gap in the studies concerning the language of cartoons. The current study which is qualitative and descriptive in nature aims at identifying the positivity and negativity of the verbal and visual-verbal signs, and deciphering the non-verbal signs in two of the selected episodes of "Tom and Jerry". The researchers adopted Peirce's theory in analysis categorizing signs into icons, indexes, and symbols. They depended on the universal six pillars of Character Counts as the criteria of positivity and negativity to tabulate the product of categorization. They found that the negativity is the dominant aspect in the two episodes.

*Keywords:* cartoons; cartoons and values; non-verbal signs; Tom and Jerry; verbal signs

## 1. Introduction

The term "catroon", according to Arko and Asif (2012) was used to refer to drawings painted on walls or pieces of glass; it was also intended to indicate humorous drawings in magazines as well as in newspapers since the 19th century. Recently, cartoonists have produced creative paintings of cartoons to indicate caricature, satire, or humor. At the beginning of the 20th century, the meaning of cartoons started to refer to television programs, comic strips, and animated films. Cartoons, which have the forms of drawings, symbols, or representations referring to humorous, witty, satirical or different situations, might have different kinds of interpretation.

Barth and Ciobanu (2017) stated that children imitate the language from the cartoon they watch, and they called this language "neutral". Cartoons produced for children are divided into two main categories. The first category is concerned in the educative aspect focusing on innovative products for children to evolve their cognition, such as Dora the explorer, Little Einsteins, and many others. The attitude of the second category is non-educational; the content of this type is of different aspects which may contain violence and inappropriate language, such as Anime, Dragon Ball Z, etc. They noticed that the children gain more vocabulary when they are exposed to watching cartoons at early age.

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The objectives of the current research are to study the nature of themes and lessons that are involved in one of the top viewed cartoons "Tom & Jerry" through first: identifying the positivity and negativity of the verbal and visual-verbal signs, and second deciphering the non-verbal signs in the selected episodes. The researchers adopted Peirce's theory in analysis depending on the universal six pillars of Character Counts as the criteria of positivity and negativity. The researchers noticed that there is a research gap in the studies concerning the language of cartoons in spite of its significance in forming the children's language and culture as they are the prime audience of cartoons.

## 1.1. Literature Review

İvrendi & Özdemir (2010) carried out a study whose objective was to record the mothers' opinions about the effects of cartoons on their kids at their early ages through a questionnaire distributed among them. The number of the target mothers was 223; they were the mothers of preschool and kindergarten kids in Turkey. The findings have shown that mothers who have a college degree thought that cartoons can enhance the educational levels of their children, which means that they have positive perceptions toward cartoons. On the contrary, the situation was with the mothers who do not complete their educational level. In fact, most of the parents did not find any relationship between the contents of cartoons, and their children's learning process. Thus, this study has shown the importance of the contribution of parent's viewpoints about what their kids watch.

Hassan & Daniyal (2013) conducted a study that aimed to trace the impact of watching cartoon programs on the behavior of children. The target age was between 6-13 years, and the sample was 300 children randomly selected from private and public schools. The researchers used a questionnaire to achieve the objective. They found that the cartoon network has a recognizable effect on the behavior of school going children through their way of selecting their own styles of dressing, and their ability in using the language; they do not only imitate their favorite cartoon characters, but they also force their parents to buy costumes and accessories similar to those used by their favorite cartoon characters.

Oyero & Oyesomi (2014) carried out a study in Nigeria aiming at tracing the impact of television cartoons on the children's social behavior in Nigeria from the perspective of parents and children. The collected data were composed of 100 pupils between the ages of 8 to 12 years from two schools, and 50 parents. The results of this study have revealed that children prefer to watch TV for a long time, thus such situation can have a considerable role in forming their social behavior. In addition, the study found that cartoons may have positive and negative impact depending on the type of cartoons that they watch. Among the responses, the researchers found that some of the children have learnt love, friendship, heroism, morals while others have learnt aggressiveness and fighting.

Ghilzai, Alam, Ahmad, Shaukat & Noor (2017) conducted, in the city of Islamabad, a study whose objective was to analyze the effects of cartoons on both language and behavior of children. The selected children were between the ages of 5-12 years. The results have shown that one of the positive impacts of cartoons is that the children's improvement in the ability of learning language acquisition while the negative aspect is that they acquire aggressive behavior with their friends in addition to some of the anti- social behavior.

## 1.2. Research Questions

The study intends to answer the question:

-     Which type (positive or negative) of verbal and non-verbal signs is dominant in the selected episodes of Tom and Jerry?

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Introduction to cartoon

Pryor and Elizabeth (2004) pointed out that cartoon is one of different types of communication used to transform stories and messages. Cartoons in their aboriginal forms can be traced back since 1300 BC. Rehman (2018) mentioned that cartoons were firstly appeared in 1840s which was mainly portraits and satire. Recently according to the qualifications of sound and the emergence of color film technologies, studios found new ways to simplify the process of depicting stories through using cartoons. Walt Disney Company was a pioneer in using such techniques.

Cartoons have been classified into the following four types in respect to the types of content and the target audience:

- **Editorial cartoons:** Ziglis (cited in Mushohwe, 2012) defined editorial cartoons as they are consist of two essential elements which are graphics and commentaries. This definition is broad enough to include comics and illustrations of advertisements. Lodhi, Ibrar, Shamim and Naz, (2018) mentioned that this kind of cartoon is used for political purposes using symbols.

- **Gag cartoon:** Lodhi et al., (2018) stated that this kind of cartoons is used to show the political conflict in a single drawing to be displayed in newspapers and magazines.

- **Comic strips:** It is also known as strip cartoon. They introduce stories alone or in series to continue in magazines and newspapers weekly or daily. In his book Understanding Comics, McCloud (1994) described in details the various parietals that were found on the sides of the Egyptian pyramids portraying stories.

- **Illustrative and advertising cartoons:** The meaning in this type of cartoon is direct and clear because the aim is to attract the attention to what is displayed in the advertisement (Rodhi et al., 2018).

- **Animated cartoons:** Rehman (2018) depicted animated cartoons as they consist of successive drawings to serve educational, commercial, or personal objectives being displayed through different media means.

### 2.2 Introduction to semiotics

The general definition of semiotics according to the available literature is that it is the study of signs. For Saussure (cited in Mehawesh, 2014) "semiology" referring to semiotics is "a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life" while for Peirce (2014), it is the "quasi-necessary, or formal doctrine of signs", in which he meant that signs are realized as they are known. According to Eco (1976), "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. Chandler (2007) mentioned that semiotics is not only used in the study of signs, but also for anything which 'stands for' something else. In the concept of semiotics, signs can be words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. According to Jakobson (cited in Chandler, 2007, p. 4) the field of semiotics:

Deals with those general principles which underlie the structure of all signs whatever and with the character of their utilization within messages, as well as with the specifics of the various sign systems and of the diverse messages using those different kinds of signs.

Barthes (cited in Akande, 2002, p. 34) described semiotics as it "will not teach us what meaning must be definitively attributed to a work, it will not provide or even discover a meaning, but will describe the logic according to which meanings are engendered".

Semiotics, as Kristeva (1969, cited in Akande, 2002) inferred, is the process of signifying to analyze a text; hence, she called semiotics the "science of the text". She considered the process of

analysis a generative activity since the nature of meaning in texts is polyphonic; for this reason, the text might have different types of interpretation; thus, the analysis is a never-ending process.

## 2.3 Peirce's Semiotic Theory

According to Atkin (2006), Peirce's theory is still distinctive and innovative although of the many of sign theories through history. Peirce directed the attention to the importance of signs saying that without using them, he could not study any of these sciences: mathematics, metaphysics, ethics, gravitation, chemistry, thermodynamics, comparative anatomy, optics, astronomy, psychology, phonetics, economics, metrology, history, wine, whist, men and women. According to his theory, each sign is an icon, index, and symbol, all of which depend on the sign relation – icon refers to the relation of similarity between the sign and image, index refers to the relation of causality (effect caused by a sign), and symbol refers to the relation of convention (continuity by the society), hence, the interpretation would be effected by the different cultures. Peirce's diagram of triangles shows that each interpretation relies on the one before. Please see (Figure 1)
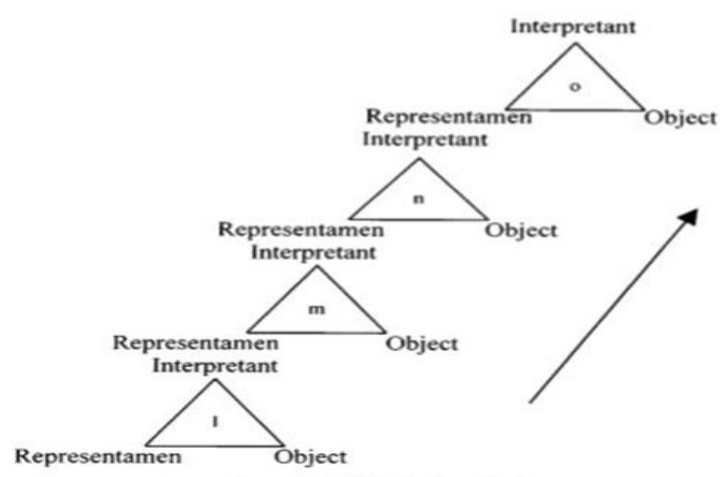


**Figure 1.** Peirce's triangles

## 2.4 Verbal and Non-verbal language

Verbal language, as Leonard (2012) pointed out, is significant to convey and express thoughts about observations, feelings, and needs. For this respect, knowing the specific vocabulary words helps to choose the best in order to achieve successful spoken and written communication. Lambert (2008) confirmed that when people talk without words, it means that they use the language of body. Hence, the body language can talk exactly just like words and may be better. For this reason, the word "communication" does not refer to "speeches", "presentations" and "words" only; it also refers to using the body language without articulating any words.

Prabasari, Savitri and Dewi (2018) maintained that language involves signs that could be visual or verbal. Signs are images, gestures, objects or texts. People who share the same feelings, opinions and ideas usually use the system of signs to communicate with each other effectively. In other words, there is an agreed system of signs among those people; this system is divided into verbal and non- verbal. The verbal signs are concerned with words and texts while the non-verbal signs are generally used to refer to pictures.

## 2.5 The Universal Six Pillars

To determine the positive and negative verbal expressions, and non-verbal concepts in analysis, the researcher has adopted "Character Counts" universal set of values as a standard to distinguish between the positive and negative values; these values are trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Josephson, 2002). Each one of the six pillars encompasses another set of values as it is shown in the followings:

### 2.5.1 Trustworthiness
Being honest, not deceiving, reliable, doing the right thing, having a good reputation, being loyal, and keeping the promise.

### 2.5.2 Respect
Respecting others, being permissive and accepting the differences, using good manner and language, considering others' feelings, being not threatening, and resolving conflicts peacefully.

### 2.5.3 Responsibility
Doing what is necessary to do, planning ahead, being hardworking, doing the best, self-controlled, self-disciplined, being accountable for manners, words, and actions, being typical, choosing a positive attitude, and making healthy choices.

### 2.5.4 Fairness
Adopting rules, sharing, and taking turns, listening to others, not exploiting others, not blaming others carelessly, and treating all people softly.

### 2.5.5 Caring
Being kind, compassionate, showing care, empathy, gratitude, forgiveness, mercy, helping others, being charitable, and altruistic.

### 2.5.6 Citizenship
Doing for a better world, cooperating, being involved in community affairs, acquainted, elector, a good neighbor, obeying laws and rules, respecting the authority, protecting the environment, and volunteering.

## 3. Method

The current study is qualitative-descriptive in order to gain insights into the positive and negative values displayed in two selected episodes of Tom and Jerry. This study is a part of an M.A. thesis entitled "A Semiotic Study of Cartoon Series Favored by Selected Iraqi Kindergarten Children". The episodes are of different themes collected from well-known YouTube channels dedicated to Tom & Jerry cartoon.

In order to achieve the two objectives, the researchers adopted the following steps to analyze the verbal, visual-verbal, and non-verbal signs:

-     downloading the episode, and dividing the signs into two categories: verbal (including visual-verbal), and non-verbal;
-     matching the verbal, and non-verbal signs with images that are thematically linked;
-     identifying the verbal, and non-verbal signs used as icons, indexes, and symbols, and categorizing them into positive and negative;
-     tabulating the product according to the universal six pillars, and highlighting the concepts that best describe the scene theme related.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 3.1  Episode 1

The first release of episode one was in 1940; Tom was named Jasper at that time. (https://tomandjerry.fandom.com/wiki/Puss_Gets_the_Boot).

**Abstract:** The episode starts with Jerry escaping fearfully, and Jasper catches him exercising different kinds of terror, and laughing at him. Jerry tries to escape, but it is of no use. Then, Tom accidentally breaks some of the house's properties; the housekeeper, Mammy, shouts at Jasper telling him that he would be out if this action occurred again.

The following script is Mammy's speech addressed to Jasper (Tom).

Jasper! Jasper!

That no-good cat.

Just a minute,

you good-for-nothing,

cheap fur coat!

Now, would you just look?

Just look at that mess you made!

Now, understand this, Jasper,

if you break one more thing...

...you is **going out**. O-W-T, out!

That's clear, ain't it?

One more breaking,

and you're going out.

Now **get out of my sight**

before I get mad!

Retrieved 18/8/2020 (script)



**Figure 2.** Thematic images of positive verbal and visual-verbal signs of Episode 1

**Table 1.** Thematic images of  positive verbal and visual-verbal signs of Episode 1

| Criteria | Positive | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Icon | Index | Symbol |
| Trustworthiness | | | 23-25 |
| Responsibility | 23-25 | 23-25 | 23-25 |
| Caring | | | 23-25 |
| Citizenship | 26 | 26 | 23-26 |

In this episode, only Mammy is speaking; as a housekeeper, she seems trustworthy, and loyal standing by the family she is working with, defending the house, and protecting their interests; she is threatening Jasper to throw him out if he causes any more damage saying "You is going out/ You are going out/ Get out of my sight"; all of which shows her responsibility, caring and citizenship. The visual-verbal expression "Home/ Sweet Home" gives the sense of belonging. The researchers do not consider Mammy's speech in the images 23-25 as icons or indexes for the values of trustworthiness, caring, and citizenship because they are not enough to convey the message without a conventional background, but it is so for the value of responsibility. Please see (Figure No. 2, & Table No. 1).

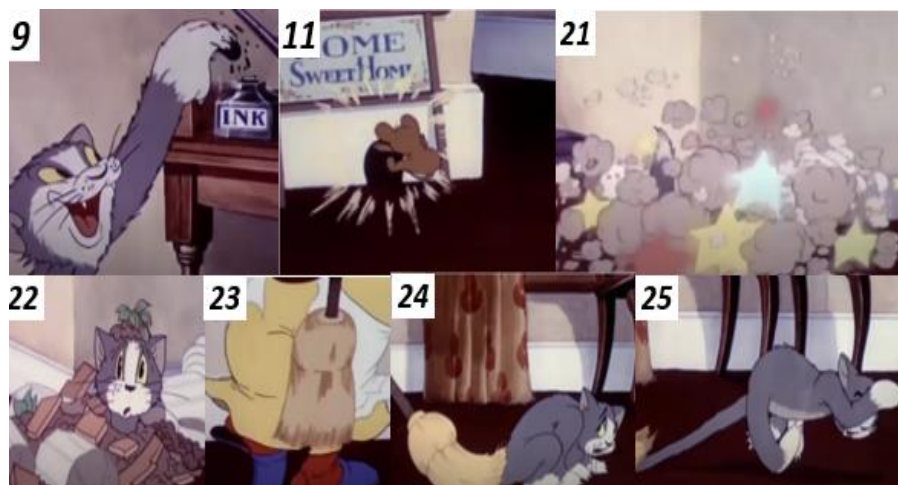*Negative verbal and visual-verbal language*



**Figure 3.** Thematic images of the negative verbal and visual-verbal signs of episode 1

**Table 2.** The negative verbal and visual-verbal signs of Episode 1

| Criteria | Negative | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Icon | Index | Symbol |
| Trustworthiness | 9, 11 | 9, 11 | 9, 11 |
| Respect | | | 21-25 |

Although of the feeling of trustiworthiness of the visual-verbal expressions "INK" in image 9 which is an icon, and index of literacy, and "Home/ Sweet Home" in image 11 which is an icon and index of peace and belonging, they are used for deception in this scene. Mammy's speech in the images 21-25 "You is going out/ You are going out/ Get out of my sight" represents symbols of disrespect and being inconsiderate of the feelings others. Please see (Figure No. 3, & Table No. 2).

*3.1.2 The second objective*
The researchers have deciphered the signs of each image according to the themes linked to.

*Positive non-verbal signs*

**Figure 4.** Thematic images of the positive non-verbal signs of episode 1

**Table 3.** The positive non-verbal signs of Episode 1

| Criteria | Positive | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Icon | Index | Symbol |
| Trustworthiness | 26 | 26 | 18, 26 |
| Responsibility | | | 18, 23-25 |
| Citizenship | 26-27 | 26-27 | 26-27 |

Image No. 18 is a symbol of doing the right thing, selfdefence; it is also a symbol of accountability of oneself. The images 23-25 are symbols of a loyal housekeeper who is standing by the family she is working with. The researchers see that the images 18, 23-25 cannot be recognized as icons or indexes because they have more than one interpretation. Images No. 26 and 27 refer to a good reputation showing Jerry standing peacefully and happily. Please see (Figure No. 4, & Table No. 3).
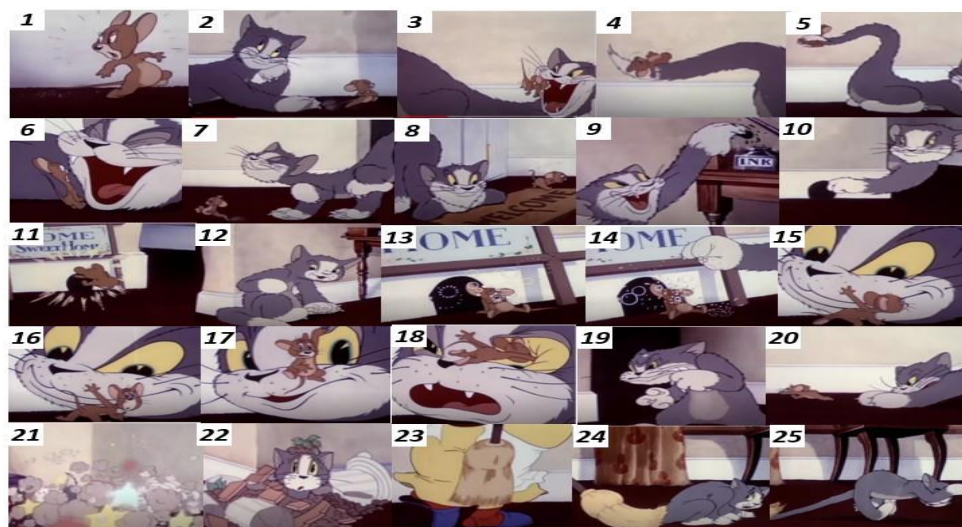
*Negative non-verbal signs*



**Figure 5.** Thematic images of negative non-verbal signs

**Table 4.** The negative non-verbal signs

| Criteria | Negative | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Icon | Index | Symbol |
| Trustworthiness | 1-20 | 1-20 | 1-20 |
| Respect | 1-20, 23-25 | 1-20, 23-25 | 1-20, 23-25 |
| Responsibility | | | 21-22 |
| Citizenship | | | 21-22 |

Regarding the non-verbal signs, the whole images of episode 1 refer to raising fear, horror, using deception, and violence through gestures and facial features overlooking the feelings of others, and causing mess; all of which are against the six pillars of the universal ethics. The table focus is on four of the values referring to that the images show contrasting values to the mentioned ones. Please see (Figure No. 5, & Table No. 4).

*Episode 10*

This episode is related to the same season of the previous one; the first release was in 1943.

**Abstract:** The episode starts with a scene in which Tom is snoring, and Jerry throws a vase at him in order to break, and cause him to be fired from the house. Then later on, Jerry feels that he is missing Tom, and needs him to play together, so he goes to him, and they agree to deceive Mammy letting her think that Tom is defending her in order to return home.

*3.2.1 The first objective*

In order to achieve this objective which is showing the positive and negative verbal and visual-verbal signs used, the researchers categorized them as they are linked to the concepts of their images shown in figures No. (6 & 7), and then tabulated them into two tables (5 & 6), positive and negative. The following is the script of episode 10, in which three characters appear, Tom, Jerry, and Mammy, the housekeeper.

[SNORING]

Thomas! **You no-good cat!**

That's sabotage!

**Out you go!**

[HOLLERING]

Jerry talking to himself:

**You never thought you'd miss**

**that cat**, did you?

**Feeling kind of lonesome?**

**Look at him.**

**You can't live with him,**

**but there's no fun without him.**

You know **you could get that guy**

**back in here,** though...

...if you really wanted to, couldn't you?

[WHISTLING]

Hey. **You wanna get back in the house**,

don't you?

- Yeah.

- Okay, then. **I'll go**...

- Uh-huh.

- And **you come around**...

- Oh.

- **Then we'll both... That's a lulu!**

[SINGING "HOW ABOUT YOU?"]

**Mammy:** Ow! Timber!

[CRASHING]

**Mammy:**

**Thomas! Get in here and save me**!

[WHISTLES]

Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!

[WOMAN YELPING]

**Mammy:**

Ah! Oh! Ow! Ouch! Ah!

Hey. **We're still kidding**, ain't we?

- **Sure**.

Hold him down, Thomas!

- Okay, then.

Mammy:

Chase him in here, Thomas!

Don't let him get away!

Did I get him?

Oh! Oh! Oh!

[SNIFFLING]

[WOMAN CHUCKLING]

Mammy: Yes, Thomas, you are a hero.

Here's a reward for getting rid of

that mouse.

Jerry:

Boy, you sure are a mouse catcher.

Why, that dirty, double-crossing,

good-f or-nothing, two-timing...

**(**Retrieved on 27August, 2020)

*Positive verbal and visual-verbal signs*



**Figure 6.** Thematic images of positive verbal and visual-verbal signs of Episode 10

**Table 5.** Thematic images of positive verbal and visual-verbal signs of Episode 10

| Criteria | Positive | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Icon | Index | Symbol |
| Trustworthiness | 7, 11, 13-14 | 7, 11, 13-14 | 7, 11, 13-14 |
| Respect | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| Responsibility | 13-14 | 13-14 | 13-14 |
| Caring | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| Citizenship | 11, 13, 14, 30 | 11, 13,14, 30 | 11, 13, 14, 30 |

The visual-verbal sign in image No. 7 gives a hint that Jerry feels reassured, and he is no longer in need of his house, so he offers it to rent. Generally speaking, the verbal and visual-verbal language in all the images 7, 11, 13-14, and 30 show positive language as icons, indexes and symbols of feeling safe, friendship, trust, caring,  citizenship, and bearing the responsibility. Yet, with the existence of these values, the researchers do not consider any of the speech positive because they think that it is only apparently positive when they are separate from the whole images of the episode, the whole context. Please see (Figure No.6, & Table No. 5).

*Negative verbal and visual-verbal signs*

**Figure 7.** Thematic images of the negative verbal and visual-verbal signs of episode 10

**Table 6.** Negative verbal and visual-verbal signs of Episode10

| Criteria | Negative | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Icon | Index | Symbol |
| Trustworthiness | | | 13-17 |
| Respect | 3-4, | 3-4, | 3-4, 30 |
| Responsibility | | | 3-4 |
| Fairness | | | 3-4 |
| Caring | 3-4 | 3-4 | 3-4, 30 |
| Citizenship | | | 13-29 |

Mammy in images No. 3-4 is shouting, and insulting Tom "You no good cat/ Out you go"; this bad speech is an icon showing how Mammy could not deal peacefully with anger indexing disrespect, and carelessness for the feelings of others; it is a symbol of inconsiderate people. Basing on Peirces's traingle, due to Mammy's bad language and behavior with Tom, he agrees to Jerry's plan in images 13 and 14 to deceive the housekeeper in order to return home. All the following images show how they deceive her "We're still kidding". In image No. 30, the poor housekeeper does not know that she was deceived; she is thanking and rewarding Tom for deceiving her. Please see (Figure No. 7, & Table No. 6).

*3.2.2 The second objective*

The researchers have deciphered the signs of each image according to the themes linked to.

*Positive non-verbal signs*



**Figure 8.** Thaematic images of the positive non-verbal signs of episode 10

**Table 7.** Positive non-verbal signs of Episode 10

| Criteria | Positive | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Icon | Index | Symbol |
| Trustworthiness | 7-10, 12-14, 18-26 | 7-10, 12-14, 18-26 | 7-10, 12-14, 18-26 |
| Respect | 12-14, 30 | 12-14, 30 | 12-14, 30 |
| Fairness | 12-14 | 12-14 | 12-14 |
| Caring | 12-14, 21, 30 | 12-14, 21, 30 | 12-14, 21,30 |
| Citizenship | 12-14, 18, 21-24, 30 | 12-14, 18, 21-24, 30 | 12-14, 18, 21-24, 30 |

The images No. 7-10 create a good reputation showing Jerry's happiness, and freedom, and a peaceful place. He raises the white flag in image No. 12 as it is an icon, index, and symbol of peace. The images No. 12-14 show how Jerry standing by his friend, and helping him as he is in need. The images No. 18-26 show that Jerry has kept the promise to let Tom return home, and they also show the close relationship between the two friends using good manners towards each other. Image No. 30 shows Mammy's gratitude to Tom offering him food for his cooperation. Please see (Figure No. 8, & Table No. 7).

*Negative non-verbal signs*



**Figure 9.** Thematic images of the negative non-verbal signs of episode 10

**Table 8.** Negative non-verbal signs of Episode10

| Criteria | Negative | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Icon | Index | Symbol |
| Trustworthiness | 1-4, 8-10, 15-17, 23-24 | 1-4, 8-10, 15-17, 23-24 | 1-4, 8-10,15-17, 23-24 |
| Respect | 1-4, 15-17, 23-24, 31-33 | 1-4, 15-17, 23-24, 31-33 | 1-4, 15-17, 23-24, 31-33 |
| Responsibility | 1-4, 8-10, 15-33 | 1-4, 8-10, 15-33 | 1-4, 8-10, 15-33 |
| Fairness | 15-30 | 15-30 | 15-30 |
| Caring | 15-29 | 15-29 | 15-29 |
| Citizenship | 1-4, 8-10, 15-29 | 1-4, 8-10, 15-29 | 1-4, 8-10, 15-29 |

The sequence of the events in the images No. 1-4 shows Jerry's bad manner with Tom, and how he was the reason of being fired from the home. The next images show Jerry's selfishness and happiness because Tom has been fired from the house. Starting from image No. 15 to the end, there are all kinds

of abuse, violence, deception, lying, disrespect, and sabotage; all of which are against of values in general, and the six pillars in particular. Please see (Figure No. 9, & Table No. 8).

## 5. Conclusion

First of all, the researchers depended in their categorizing the images into icons, according to the well-known similarity between the image and reality; when the image may have more than one interpretation, the researchers did not consider it an icon, they considered it a symbol. A simple look at the tables of the two episodes to weigh the values, one can immediately recognize that the negative side is heavier than the positive one. These two episodes nearly do not have positive values; the images which are referred to as positive values are separate from their contexts. For this reason, most of the images, which are exist in the table of the positive values, appear again in the table of the negative values. Since this cartoon is supposed to be directed to children, the researchers attract the attention to the necessity of monitoring the speech directed to children through cartoons in general, and Tom and Jerry in particular as cartoons are considered the main media among children, and children cannot distinguish between the positive and negative. This is the educators' responsibility. .

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