

Multi-modal Discourse Analysis of Chinese Hit Film Poster the Battle at Lake Changjin

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Abstract: As an intuitive and effective way of cross-cultural communication, film poster is of great importance and has gained wide academic attention. As the science and technology develop rapidly, multi-modal discourse analysis has gradually become one of the hot topics in linguistic research. However, previous research had mostly focused on the text analysis of movies, thus there is a scanty of systematic research on movie poster from multi-modal perspective. Therefore, this paper chooses one hit film the battle lake at Changjin to explore how each symbol work together to construct its meaning in a movie poster. It is hoped that this paper could be helpful for the audience to appreciate the movie from new angles.

Keywords: Multi-modal Discourse Analysis; Poster; The battle lake at Changjin; Meaning construct

1. Introduction

Linguists and scholars in the field of linguistics have always focused on textual analysis or discourse analysis because they think language is only one of the tools for expressing and understanding meaning. However, a spurt of progress in science and technology make the traditional discourse analysis fail to meet the demand of the communicators and there is urgent need for multiple ways of conveying communicative meaning. In order to convey more meanings, people need other modalities, such as sounds, images, and colors to reinforce and complement language. At the same time, semiotic resources are playing an increasingly important role in language communication. Thus, the multi-modal discourse analysis came into being in the 1990s, attracting numerous interest of linguists.

Zhang (2009) defined multi-modal discourse is a communication phenomenon that uses multiple senses such as sight, hearing and touch and various symbolic resources such as language, images, sound and movement. This theory has attracted widespread attention and has also been applied to the studies of many fields, including textbook research, foreign language teaching, computer network discourse and film discourse. In recent years, linguists at home and abroad have carried out extensive research and exploration of multi-modal discourse analysis. But the application of case analysis is not widely enough because most are still limited to the discussion of pure text theory.

Movie posters is not only a promotional strategy, but also a typical multimodal discourse that integrates text and images. It can reflect the main content of the movie and attract audiences as well. Thus this paper chooses the multi-modal discourse analysis as the theory to study the poster of the Chinese hit film *The Battle of Lake Changjin* from three aspects, including representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. This paper aims to explore how the different meaning modalities in film poster work together to express the overall meaning, and provide richer perspectives to interpret the film.

2. Literature review

2.1 Previous studies abroad

The research direction of discourse analysis was first proposed by American linguist Harris in the early 1950s. Then lots of discourse analysts across the country began doing research in this field and they proposed various discourse analysis theories and research methods. These theories had always focused on grammatical patterns and discourse structure, including the relationship between sentences, curriculum design and planning in the process of language education and teaching. These provided

important theoretical basis and framework. Through extensive empirical analysis, linguistics researched the inherent regularity of discourse activities, and the relationship between discourse activities and cognitive patterns. However, most of the research took language systems as the research object, which only paid attention to the language system, semantics and the relationship between social culture and individual cognition. They ignored other forms like images, sounds, and colors could also express meaning. In this background, the theory of multi-modal discourse analysis came into being.

In foreign countries, the earliest systematic analysis of multi-modality was carried out by the famous French Scholar R. Barthes from semiotic perspective^[1]. In 1977, he published one article named *The Rhetoric of Images*, in which he explored the interplay and relationship between images and language in the meaning construction.

A spurt of science and technology changed the way people communicated. Images, sounds, colors and other non-verbal resources were everywhere in daily life and were widely used in areas such as advertisements, newspapers, promotional posters and textbooks. This suggested that meaning is constructed not only through a single modality but through many other symbolic resources, dynamic or static. It was in this social context that multi-modality was first born in the West in the 1990s. The main theoretical basis of multi-modal discourse analysis was the systemic functional linguistics proposed by Halliday. Therefore, systemic functional linguistics basically occupied this research field in the early stage. At the same time, cognitive linguistics had also begun to delve into this field. In 2013, the two enjoyed the equal position in the field of multi-modality discourse analysis. In addition, other theories were adopted to explore the use of multi-modal discourse. The reason for this phenomenon was that the central theory of systemic functional linguistics was about meaning, including interpersonal meaning, conceptual meaning, and textual meaning and other symbol systems could also manifest meanings rather than language.

Kress & Van Leeuwen first systematically proposed the concept of visual grammar in the mid-1990s^[5]. They regarded images as social symbols, extended the meta-functions of systemic functional grammar to visual patterns, and ensured the representational meaning, interactive meaning, and composition meaning in the visual grammar corresponded to Halliday's conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning respectively. And they believed that there were four linguistic schools of multi-modal research in the 20th century. The first was the Prague School, which applied linguistic research to the non-linguistic aspects of visual art and drama areas in the 1930s-1940s. The second was the semiotics of the Paris School, which applied structuralism linguistics to the study of culture and mass media. The third was the research on oral and nonverbal communication by some American linguists in the 1960s and 1970s. And the fourth was the social semiotics school, originated from Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, which used the term "multi-modality" for the first time. O'Halloran (2011) believed that social semiotics, interactive sociolinguistics and cognitive linguistics were the three most active schools in the field of multi-modal discourse analysis^[7]. Jewitt (2016) thought that multi-modal discourse analysis mainly had three traditions: multi-modal discourse analysis in systemic functional linguistics, social semiotics and conversation analysis^[4]. Other scholars combined these three theories with other theories and derived five analysis methods, namely geosemiotics, multi-modal interaction analysis, multi-modal ethnography, multi-modal corpus analysis and multi-modal perceptual analysis.

2.2 Previous studies at home

In recent years, scholars in China have conducted extensive and in-depth research on multi-modal discourse analysis, presenting character of multi-disciplines and inter-disciplines.

It began with Social Semiotic Analysis of Multi-modal Discourse written by Li Zhanzi, which mentioned this concept for the first time and introduced visual grammar in detail. This article gained numerous scholars' attentions and discussions. Li (2003) also studied social semiotic resources in the guide of MDA, and used systemic functional linguistic theory to study MDA^[6]. In article *Multi-modalization in Social Semiotics Research*, Hu (2007) distinguished the difference between multi-modal semiotics and multimedia semiotics, introduced computational semiotics with character of media and modal, and pointed out that humanity has entered a new century of multi-modalization in social semiotics^[3]. Zhu (2007) discussed four issues closely related to MDA, which are the production of multi-modal discourse, the definition of multi-modal discourse, the nature and theoretical basis of MDA and the content, methods and meaning of MDA^[12]. Zhang (2009) attempted to establish a comprehensive framework for MDA based on systemic functional linguistic theory, pointing out that multi-modal discourse can be studied at multiple levels, including culture, context, discourse meaning, grammar, form and media^[11]. These studies had paved the way for theoretical foundations and research paths of MDA.

Also, *Studies on Multi-modality and Multimodal Discourse in Visual Surroundings* written by Wei Qinhong, the first monograph on MDA was published in 2009^[10]. Dai (2017) also explored the relationship between modalities and advocated for equal analysis of each modality to approach the essence of symbols^[2].

According to the CNKI, Chinese Academic Journals Online Publishing Library, it can be found that there are more than 1,000 multi-modal discourse analysis under the foreign language and literature, which basically shows a gradual increasing trend. Before 2003, there was no relevant paper in the major domestic academic journals.

In 2011, it reached more than 100. Since then, the output of more than 200 papers has been maintained almost every year. Pan and Li (2017) found that domestic MDA followed the pace of international research and achieved fruitful results, mainly in MDA based on the theory of systemic functional linguistics and social semiotics, multi-modal metaphor analysis, multi-modal corpus analysis and multi-modal interaction analysis^[8].

3. Multi-modal analysis of poster of The battle lake at Changjin

3.1 The brief introduction of film

The film *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is based on real history story--- the battle of Changjin Lake in 1951. 71 years ago, US fought against with the North Korea at somewhere near crossed over the Yalu river, which is the border between the North Korea and China. Knowing that, China had to fight against with the invasion of American. The People Republic of China was founded not long before, and the resources were few. Under such circumstance, the Chinese army kept fighting days and nights in the extremely cold and harsh environment. Finally, they turned the bad situation into the successful one and destroyed the enemy with their iron will and courageous fighting spirit.

Then, the meaning construction of movie poster will be analyzed from three perspectives: representational meaning, interactive meaning and composition meaning.

3.2 Representational meaning

Representative meaning refers to the relationship between an image and the audience, including narrative representation and conceptual representation. The difference between the two lies in whether the elements in the image have a vector crossing relationship. If there are vectors in the image, it is narrative reproduction; otherwise, it is conceptual reproduction. Narrative representation includes four types: behavioral process, reflective process, verbal process and psychological process. In the behavioral process, vectors mainly manifest as participants and their body movements. In the reflection process, the vector mainly manifests as the participant's gaze. In the speech and psychological processes, vectors are mainly manifested in the dialogue and inner activities of participants. And conceptual representation is divided into two major branches: relational process and existential process, which are constructed based on classification, analysis, and symbolic process.

Sun (2011) pointed out that promotional art, different from painting, requires simplicity and conciseness that people can easily see the things in core quickly or even far away from it^[9]. In this poster, the main characters occupy one-third of the space and are located in prominent positions. Six main characters sat on the tank, holding guns, wearing blackish green clothes, and showing victorious smile on their faces. The direction in which the soldiers hold a gun is also a vector, indicating that they are ready to launch this counterattack at any time. The soldiers in the upper left and lower right raised their guns, reflecting the joy of victory, which also showed the behavioral process in narrative representation. Looking close, we can see their shiny and firm eyes, which represented their attic belief and strong confidence in driving the invaders out of their own territory. It was also a reflection process in narrative reproduction.

The snowy mountains in the distance and the thick clothes they wore symbolized the severe cold weather and hardship of war, which are the conceptual representation. Changjin Lake is located in the northeast of North Korea, with an altitude of between 1000 meters and 2000 meters. The terrain is steep, and it is covered with snow all year round and extremely cold. The Chinese soldiers, in order to reach the Changjin Lake area before the US military, had no choice but to leave cotton clothes and other cold protection equipment placed. The winter of 1950 was the coldest in past 50 years in North Korea, where the temperature dropped to minus 40 degrees. But those soldiers did not retreat in the harsh combat

environment and united bravely to the battlefield for the next generation and the country, relying on frozen potatoes to satisfy their hunger.

3.3 Interactive meaning

Interactive meaning refers to establishing connections between participants, image producers, and viewers to show their psychological attitudes. It could be mainly manifested in four aspects: contact, distance, perspective, and modality.

Contact refers to the eye contact between participants and the audience, which includes demanding contact and offering contact. If participants look at viewers, demanding contact is formed. Otherwise, it is the offering contact, which refers to participants who do not make eye contact with the audience and only provide some information to the audience.

Distance here refers to the intimacy between image and the audience and it is related to the frame of lens. The distance of the lens represents the intimacy of the relationship. Also, different angle reflects the psychological attitude of participants towards the outside world. If the camera is horizontal, it implies equal status between the participants and the audience. If the camera is pointing downwards, it indicates a dismissive attitude. If the camera is pointing upwards, it indicates a respectful attitude.

Modality refers to the degree of truth, which is determined by color saturation and brightness. Colors with higher saturation can easily attract viewers. Modality, one element of interactive meaning, refers to the authenticity or credibility of people's statements about the world they are concerned about. The modality could be divided into three levels: high, medium, and low. People are good at using colors to express their emotions and reflect the various states of the world. In this sense, colors are also endowed with various meanings and values.

In the poster, the six actors have a demanding contact, aiming to seek emotional resonance from the audience, make them feel the cruelty of war and the preciousness of the victory, and let them feel the determination and strength of the soldiers. The camera is the horizontal level, showing the equal roles of the audience and the participants, and bringing the audience closer to the characters. From the perspective of color saturation and coordination, this poster uses three colors: black, white, and red. The color discrimination and contrast are relatively high, giving the poster a strong visual impact. The stark contrast between the snow-capped mountains and the black flames of war shows the harm impact of war. The designer highlighted the leading actors' name in red in order to improve more attention. Red is also the color of our national flag as well as the color of blood, thus the red words could represent the heavy price paid by our predecessors for the victory of the war.

3.4 Composition meaning

The composition meaning refers to the position occupied by various elements in the overall view of a multi-modal discourse, which is closely related to information value, saliency, and framing. The information value is reflected in the position of the information, which is divided into three categories: left and right, up and down, center, and edge. On the horizontal axis, known information is often located on the left side of the image, while unknown information is located on the right side of the image. On the vertical axis, ideal information is generally located above the image, while true information is generally located at the bottom of the image. In terms of overall layout, key information is generally located in the middle of the image, and other information is located at the edge of the image. Saliency refers to the degree of prominence of elements in an image, which mainly depends on factors such as position, color, size, angle, etc. to attract the attention of the audience. The saliency of elements is usually proportional to their importance. Framing refers to the line segment in which the image is divided and arranged to show the position distribution of each component in the image.

In general, this poster can be generally divided into three parts: upper, middle, and lower. The images and text account for half of the poster. The images locate in the middle and the words are situated in the upper and lower parts of the words. This arrangement is consistent with the audience's reading path and in line with people's perception habits. The Chinese text placed above the poster represents the ideal information and core information of the movie. This could attract readers' attention and interest. Then, the image is used to intuitively introduce the theme and content of the movie. The text "祖国没有忘记" is to emphasize the theme and have resonance with the audience. In addition, at the bottom of the poster are basic information about the producer, director, actors, etc., all of which are actual information.

From macroscopically, the center of the poster is Wu Qianli, the leading character, which belongs to

the dominant message. In the movie, Wu Qianli was the commander of the Seventh Company, leading other soldiers on the battlefield. Microscopically, he played an important role in the narration of the film. Brother Wu Baili sacrificed heroically, and his little brother Wu Wanli was influenced and decided to join the army. Wu Wanli was a wild child and then quickly grew up on the battlefield to become a sharpshooter.

4. Conclusion

With the development of information technology and new media, language is no longer the only ideographic tool. And a variety of modals combine together to convey the meaning of discourse. The poster of The battle lake at *Changjin*, one hit Chinese movie, integrates language, image, text, color, and layout design to jointly construct multi-modal discourse meaning. This strengthens viewers' emotional identification and promotes the work.

4.1 Main findings

A variety of symbolic resources, rather than single mode, work together to construct the overall meaning. In this movie poster, the words “长津湖” are prominently marked in bold at the top, which reflect the theme of this movie and the importance of this battle. At the same time, the images and the language are complementary. The combination of language and images here greatly enhances the expressive power and achieves the ideal promotional effect. At the bottom, the red words “祖国不会忘记” represent the color of blood, the gratitude of the Chinese people for the soldiers, and the cherish of peaceful life in the present. On the one hand, the language and text in the poster are an extension of the image and also the result of the images' intended meaning. On the other hand, images are the visual evidence, making the theme of the poster much clearer. These two complement and reinforce each other to achieve the meaning construction.

4.2 Limitation

Under the perspective of multi-modal discourse analysis, this paper analyses the poster of the film the battle at lake Changjin. However, there are some limitations still due to the limited time and effort. To some extent, the examples in this paper are all selected subjectively and maybe there are something remaining to be analyzed. In order to improve its practical and academic value of the paper, the author will keep improving it.

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