

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of News On Intangible Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

This paper compiles news items on intangible cultural heritage from China Daily. Using the visual grammar of MDA and the theory of systemic functional grammar, it attempts to analyze and illustrate the meta-functions of news discourse and the representational or interactive meaning of news images. This analysis can help readers to develop a comprehensive understanding of the theory and to explore the intentions behind the news.

KEYWORDS

Intangible cultural heritage; Multimodal discourse analysis; Systemic functional grammar

1 Introduction

China's intangible cultural heritage embodies the living essence of its 5,000-year-old civilization. It encompasses practices, performances, knowledge systems and artistic expressions that have been passed down through generations. Recognized globally for its diversity, this heritage includes over 43 items, ranging from the grandeur of Peking Opera and the rhythmic movements of Chinese martial arts to the intricate craftsmanship of paper cutting and the time-honoured rituals of the Dragon Boat Festival. These heritage elements are not mere relics of the past, but rather dynamic carriers of Chinese values, aesthetics and communal identity.

2 A brief introduction of multimodal discourse analysis

Multimodal discourse analysis emerged in the Western world in the 1990s. This field of study can be divided into four schools. These are the school of social semiotics, the school of systematic functional grammar, the school of behavioral theory and the school of cognitive linguistics. In the course of their studies, scholars in the MDA field integrated Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar with SFG. MDA was introduced to China by Li Zhan-zi in 2003, and since then, many scholars have studied it from different perspectives. Qi Wenjin conducted a comprehensive analysis of the visual semiotic resources of the five types of tourism from the official Beijing Tourism website ^[1]. Chen Shujun and Wei Zaijiang constructed a harmonious multimodal framing framework for constructive news, exploring its discourse features ^[2]. Li Mengjie, Feng Dezheng and Deng Yi provide a systematic review of international multimodal discourse research from 2014 to 2023 ^[3].

3 Basic notions of multimodal discourse analysis

Multimodal discourse analysis fulfills three meta-functions: the representational, interactive and compositional functions. Representational meaning shows that, like language, visual images can depict objects and relationships between people. This can be further divided into narrative and conceptual representation. Narrative representation means that "when participants are connected by a vector, they are represented as doing something to or for each other" ^[4].

The narrative representation is characterized by three processes: action process, reactional process, speech and mental process. The action process involves an actor, a vector and a goal, and is defined as the process of doing something. If there are two participants connected by the vector, the action process can be regarded as transactional. Otherwise, the action process is non-transactional if there is only one participant. Unlike the action process, the reactional process is characterized by a vector formed by an eyeline. In the reactional process, the participants are reactors and phenomena. This means that the reactor is observing the phenomenon.

There are two kinds of participants involved in visual images: represented participants and interactive participants. Represented participants are the people, places and things illustrated in the images, while interactive participants are the producers and viewers of visual images. Interactive meaning is represented by four elements: contact, social distance, perspective and modality.

The contact is established when represented participants look at the viewer in the visual images. The vector connects

the represented participants and the viewers. This type of image is known as a “demand” because the gaze of the represented participant appears to demand something from the viewer. In the demand act, the producers use images to encourage viewers to take action. Other images represent the relation as an offer when they provide information to the viewers. In these visual images, the represented participants don’t look at the viewers directly or there are no humans or animal participants looking directly at the viewers.

Another dimension to the interactive meanings of images is the social distance which represent different relations between represented participants and viewers. It is determined by close, medium or long shot. If the head or shoulders are shown in the image, it expresses a close personal distance. If the represented participant is shown in the image from the knees up, it expresses a farther personal distance. If the whole human figure with the space around it is shown in the image, it expresses a far social distance.

The perspective means the angle or point of view that illustrates the subjective attitudes of producers towards the participants in the images. The perspective can be further divided into horizontal and vertical perspective. The horizontal perspective consists of the frontal angle and the oblique angle. They reflect the relations of involvement and detachment.

Different from horizontal perspective, the vertical perspective represents the power relationship between the viewer and the represented participants in the images. There are three vertical angles, namely a high angle, a low angle and the eye level. A high angle makes the subject look small and insignificant. It means that the viewers have more power over the represented participants. A low angle shows more power from the participants in the images while the eye level represents a sense of equality.

3 Basic notions of systemic functional grammar

Halliday's systemic functional grammar has been recognized as a useful interpretive framework for language research. According to SFG, clause structures play three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal and textual functions^[5]. Ideational meanings are related to the representation of reality in language. Ideational meaning has two components: logical and experiential meaning^[6]. Experiential meaning is expressed through transitivity or processes. These processes can be categorized as material, mental, behavioral, verbal, existential or relational. The interpersonal meaning of clauses reflects the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Some structural elements are linked to interpersonal meaning, such as mood structure and modality.

4 An analysis of the intangible cultural heritage news from the perspective of MDA

The news items in this paper were collected from China Daily's culture column. The paper attempts to determine the representational and interactive meanings constructed in news images.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1 illustrates the inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage of cloisonne. In figure 1, the action process is characterized by the actor, vector and a goal. The actor in the image is a craftswoman working on a piece of Jingtailan artwork. The enameling tool is the vector. The goal is a vase adorned with lotus flowers and mandarin ducks. Aside from the action process, the first image is also characterized by a reactional process where the vector is the eyeline connecting the young craftswoman and the vase. In this process, the craftswoman is the reactor and the vase is the phenomenon. The image shows that an increasing number of young people are keen to embrace their cultural heritage.

Figure 2 illustrates the inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage of Zanhua. Figure 2 shows two action processes. The first process involves an actor (a photographer), a vector (a camera) and a goal (a tourist wearing Zanhua, a colourful floral headdress). The second process involves the tourist as the actor, her hand as the vector and a fresh flower as the goal. Figure 2 is also characterized by a reactional process involving an eyeline connecting the tourist and the camera. The image shows that wearing Zanhua and taking pictures has become popular among young travelers nationwide.

Both of these two figures are characterized by an offer act. In these two figures, the young craftswoman and the tourist wearing Zanhua are represented participants. They do not make eye contact with the viewer. The producer of the images

wants to convey to viewers that traditional crafts have experienced a broader revival thanks to the enthusiasm and acceptance of young people.

According to the MDA theory, an intimate relationship is reflected by a close shot of the head and shoulders. A medium shot of the upper body depicts a familiar social relationship. An impersonal relationship is represented by a long shot of the whole body. The figure 1 is characterized by a vase and the hand and face of a young craftswoman. It is captured by a close shot. Readers can observe the artist's concentrated expression and meticulous technique, as well as the exquisite patterns adorning the vase. A close-up shot makes the participants in the image seem as if they are involved with the viewers. They are depicted in a personal way, establishing an intimate relationship with the viewers.

Figure 2 shows the tourist in a long shot, while the photographer is depicted in a medium shot. A long shot increases the distance between the tourist wearing Zanhua and the viewers whereas a medium shot decreases the distance between the photographer and the viewers. This composition effectively immerses readers in the photographer's role, creating a sense of presence. Additionally, the long shot incorporates more background information into the news image, such as traditional architecture, red lanterns, and couplets. Therefore, images taken with a long shot are objective and impersonal. It provides comprehensive information about Zanhua.

The perspective refers to the subjective attitudes of the producers towards the participants in the images. Figure 2 is characterized by a frontal angle meaning the producer belongs to the world of represented participants. This shows that the producer is also captivated by Zanhua's beauty. The figure 1 is characterized by a frontal and an oblique angle. The young craftswoman is depicted from an oblique angle whereas the vase is depicted from a frontal angle as the producer wishes to showcase the exquisite craftsmanship of the Jingtailan artwork. Unlike the horizontal perspective, the vertical perspective reveals the power relationships. Both of these two images are taken from an eye to eye angle suggesting that viewers and the represented participants share the equal status and power. This implies that the inheritors of intangible cultural heritage are admirable.

5 An analysis of the intangible cultural heritage news from the perspective of SFG

The paper employs the theory of SFG to reveal how news discourses enhance communication by realizing ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings.

Ideational meaning is how we express reality in language. This is realized through six processes. The analysis reveals that four of these processes are employed in the discourse. Of all the processes, the material process is the most dominant because it accounts for 72% of the total. The second most prevalent process is the relational process, accounting for 16% of the total. The remaining two processes are the mental process (1%) and the verbal process (11%). This distribution reflects the characteristics of news: stating facts and maintaining objectivity.

The interpersonal meaning of news discourse is realized through mood structure and modality. After analyzing the news articles, the paper concludes that the declarative mood is the only mood structure employed in news. This distribution pattern is consistent with the characteristics of news discourses. Clauses in the declarative mood are used to convey information, which is the function of news. In addition to the mood system, modal operators are adopted in the news to express degrees of probability, frequency, inclination, and obligation. The analysis shows that modal operators in the news express a high degree of frequency. Some examples are analyzed below.

(1) "Cloisonne has always been about adaptation," said Zhong Liansheng, chief craft artist at the factory. Born in 1962, Zhong has watched this transformation unfold before his eyes.

(2) With ingenious designs, superb craftsmanship and auspicious symbolism, cloisonne artworks bridge tradition and modern aesthetics, gaining popularity among consumers both at home and abroad.

In the first example, "has been" represents the relational process. The carrier is "cloisonne" which is a traditional Chinese craft. The attribute is "adaptation". This relational process illustrates the established relationship between two entities. It is used to illustrate the abstract concepts. By employing this process, the writer conveys that, due to this characteristic, cloisonne can adapt to modern societal developments and changes in aesthetics. Additionally, the modal operator "always" indicates a high degree of frequency. This further highlights the characteristics of cloisonne. Aside from the relational process, example 1 also employs verbal and mental processes. In the verbal process, the sayer is "Zhong Liansheng" and the receiver is the news reporter. The verbiage is the content of speech: "Cloisonne has always been about adaptation". By employing a verbal process, the writer demonstrates the credibility and authority of the report. The mental process is expressed by the word "watched". The senser in the clause is "Zhong Liansheng" and the phenomenon is "transformation". By employing the mental process, the writer conveys that cloisonne has been adapting to changing times.

In the second example, the material processes are represented by the words "bridge" and "gain". The material processes are processes of action or doing something. They are used to convey information or introduce an experience. In the first material process, the actor is "cloisonne artworks" and the goal is "tradition and modern aesthetics". In the

second material process, the actor is “cloisonne artworks” and the goal is “popularity”. The circumstances are the elements of “among consumers both at home and abroad”. This indicates that cloisonne originated hundreds of years ago and that the craftsmanship has been passed down to the present day. In modern society, cloisonne has actively sought change and demonstrated its powerful vitality.

From the perspective of textual meaning, the second example is characterized by a marked theme. An unmarked theme conflates with the subject whereas a marked theme conflates with the circumstances. In example 2, the theme is “with ingenious designs, superb craftsmanship and auspicious symbolism”. The subject, “cloisonne artworks”, does not coincide with the theme. By using a marked theme, the writer is indicating that the craftsmanship and innovation of cloisonne art works satisfy modern people’s pursuit of fashion and individuality.

6 Conclusion

This paper analyzes news about intangible cultural heritage from the perspectives of MDA and SFG. Through the use of processes and modal operators of a high degree, the news conveys the idea that intangible cultural heritage techniques have demonstrated remarkable vitality in the new era. Furthermore, the construction of representational and interactive meanings in news images proves that intangible cultural heritage is not merely a static museum exhibit, but a cultural symbol that can be integrated into daily life and evoke emotional resonance.

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