

A Multimodal Discoursal Approach to the Intersemiotic Complementarity as Strategy in Sinology Comics Translation

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ABSTRACT

Based on the intersemiotic complementary framework, this paper studies Tsai Chih Chung's comics from three aspects: text, image, and image-text, and summarizes a translation strategy that combines three dimensions of intersemiotic complementarity at the conceptual meaning level, intersemiotic dissonance at the interpersonal meaning level, and intersemiotic complementarity at the compositional meaning level. Such a study means to offers a new perspective for the translation of sinology comics and multimodal discourse analysis.

KEYWORDS

Intersemiotic complementarity; Systemic functional grammar, multimodal visual grammar; Sinology comics

1 Introduction

Chinese traditional classics constitute a vital part of global cultural heritage, yet their translation and dissemination face persistent challenges in achieving equitable cross-cultural exchange. Historical imbalances since 1860 have created a translation deficit where Western works in Chinese outnumber Chinese classics in foreign languages by 50-100 times (Wang, 1997). This disparity stems from three key barriers: (1) limited commercial viability for classical translations, (2) inherent difficulties in conveying culturally nuanced meanings, and (3) the predominance of Western-centric cultural flows. The emergence of sinology comics—exemplified by Tsai Chih-chung's internationally successful Classical Chinese Culture Series translated into over 20 languages—offers an innovative solution through multimodal adaptation that synergizes visual storytelling with classical texts.

Despite their demonstrated effectiveness in popularizing Chinese philosophy (e.g., *Zhuangzi Speaks* being adopted as a Japanese school textbook), academic research has disproportionately focused on aesthetic appreciation rather than investigating the translation mechanisms that enable these comics to overcome cultural barriers. This oversight reflects a broader gap in multimodal discourse studies, where applications have flourished in advertising and film analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) but remain underdeveloped for classical text adaptations. Specifically, little attention has been paid to how visual-textual synergies reconstruct philosophical concepts—such as Zhuangzi's metaphors—through contemporary visual grammar while preserving their semantic essence.

2 Intersemiotic complementarity

The concept of "intersemiotic complementarity", which mainly proposed by Royce, was first appeared in his 2007 article "Intersemiotic complementarity: a framework for multimedia discourse analysis". He proposes a very detailed intersemiotic complementary framework for multimodal discourse analysis, which is based on Systemic Functional Linguistics and Visual Grammar. According to Royce (1998:236), string analysis used in discourse articulation studies can also be used to study the relationship between visual mode and verbal mode. Royce (1998: 27) argues that there exists "a synergistic relationship between the two codes". Royce puts out that "the interpretation of the visual-verbal multimodal texts involves the simultaneous interplay of three elements which correlate with Halliday's three meta-functions: the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual meta-functions." (Royce, 2007: 66).

The relationship between visual semiotic and verbal semiotic is mainly reflected in three levels, representational meaning of image-text relations, interpersonal meaning of image-text relations, and composition meaning of image-text. There is an intersemiotic interface in the meaning expression of visual semiotic system, which shares a common semantic space.

The definitions given by domestic scholars are basically the summary and generalization of Royce's theory: 1) Intersemiotic complementarity includes conceptual, interpersonal, and compositional complementarity.; 2) Intersemiotic complementarity refers to the complementary relationship between images presented through visual representational techniques and texts expressed through semantically related symbols in multimodal discourse.

3 The 4-steps intersemiotic complementarity translation framework

Royce puts forward three-steps analysis framework of intersemiotic complementarity analysis to make the research process logical. 1) visual symbols analysis; 2) verbal symbols analysis; 3) image-text relations analysis (Royce, 2007: 22–295).

This paper divides the sinology comics translation into four stages: (1) visual element analysis of source text, (2) text element analysis based on systemic functional grammar, (3) image analysis based on visual grammar, and (4) multimodal discourse analysis based on the inter-semiotic complementarity theory.

It examines the cover page in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* to demonstrate how visual and textual modalities synergistically transform classical monomodal texts into multimodal comics. By applying intersemiotic complementarity theory, the analysis focuses on the mechanisms of semantic reinforcement between images and words, revealing how their dynamic interaction enables accurate cross-cultural meaning transfer and generates innovative translation strategies during this modal conversion process.

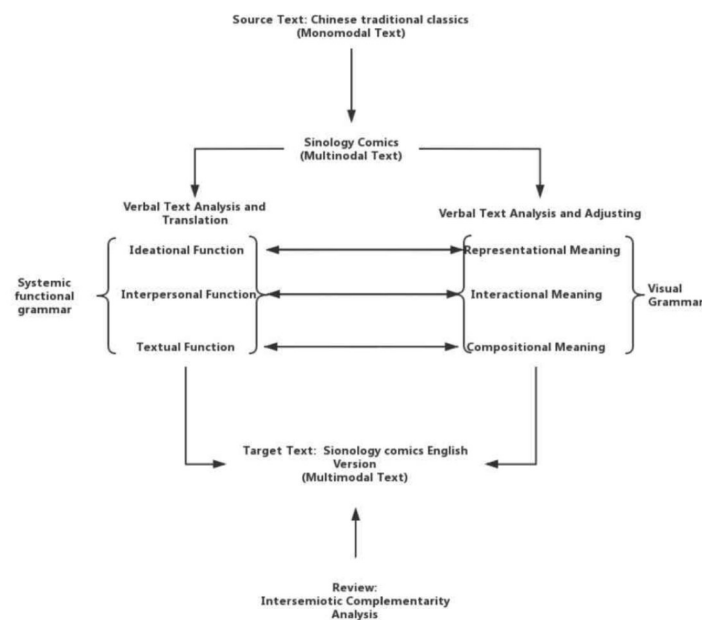


Figure 1

3.1 Source text analysis

The source language analysis mainly focuses on the recognition of Visual Message Elements (VMEs) originating from the text, which can be divided into three steps. 1) to divide the unimodal text modality of the source language into several translation clauses; 2) to decide whether it is possible to visualize them one by one; 3) to present a multimodal sinology comics discourse after counting the translation clauses that need to retain the text modality and those that need to convert to the visual modality.

Clause translation in the first step draws on the concept of clauses in systematic functional grammar to classify translation of clauses for the source language text mentioned above. In the second step, the decision of VME in the text.

Clause with "schema" attribute can be visualized into image. The concept of "schema", being attributing from the schema theory, refers to the image or association in people's mind when they hear or read certain information. The information of schema comes from our life experiences. (Bartlett, 1932: 201).

ST: 太原王生,早行,遇一女郎,抱襖独奔,甚艰于步。急走赶之,乃二八姝丽。

The above example is excerpted from the story in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, the "Painted Skin", which is the first sentence in the opening of the whole story. According to the three-step VME identification method described above, the entire source language was first divided into several translation clauses, and nine translation clauses were obtained:

According to whether the translation clause in the source text has schema attribute, the above source text sample sentences can be classified whether they can be visualized, and can be divided into three situations: Yes(Y), Partial Yes (P), P and No (N). The VME identification followed rigorous criteria:

- Y (Yes): Concrete nouns/actions with >80% imageability score (Paivio et al., 1968)
- P (Partial): Semi-abstract terms requiring contextual cues
- N (No): Abstract concepts needing textual retention

The specific analysis process is as follows:

Table 1

Clauses	Part-of-Speech	Schema attribute	Visualization Part	Reason for N&P
太原	n.	N	None	Fuzzy location
王生	n.	Y	王生	
早行	adj.+v.	P	行	Fuzzy time
遇	v.	Y	遇	
一女郎	num.+n.	Y	一女郎	
抱襖独奔	v.	Y	抱襖独奔	
甚艰于步	adj.	N	None	Fuzzy description
急走赶之	adj.+v.	P	急走	Pronoun
二八姝丽	adj.	P	姝丽	Fuzzy age

Some clause allows readers have a graphical association. It can be nouns, such as people, things, specific places, specific time nodes (e.g. morning, evening, Spring Festival) It can be verbs, such as running, jumping, walking, and it also can be adjectives, such as the expression of characters. Based on the VME analysis above, the source text can be translated into the following figure:

TT-Verbal text: One morning when a scholar named Wang, of Taiyuan, was

out walking, he ran into a young woman... ,

TT-Visual image:

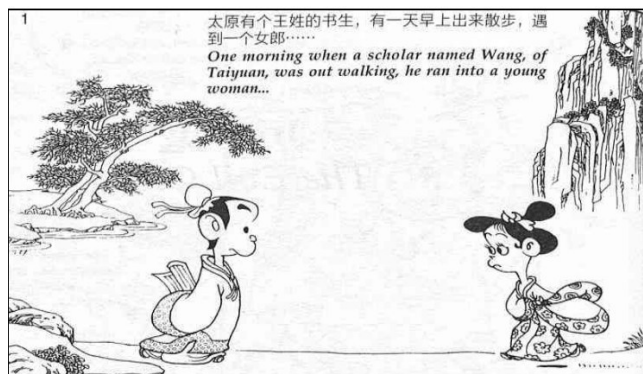


Figure 2

3.2 Verbal text analysis

The second stage is the analysis of the verbal text part of the comic. The translator is responsible for translating the text section of the comic from the source into the target language, and the translator has to consider two aspects in the final translation presentation: first, to think about the relationship between the existing text elements and the VME in the first stage from the conceptual inter-semiotic complementary perspective; second, to mainly consider how the translation relates to the reader, transmits information to the reader or communicates with the reader from the interpersonal semiotic complementary perspective.

According to the intersemiotic translation framework, we can analyze the textual meaning of this comics from two dimensions: conceptual and interpersonal intersemiotic complementarity. From Halliday's three meta-functions, the conceptual function refers to the function of language to express people's experiences in the real world; the interpersonal function is the function of the speaker to use language to participate in social activities; and the discourse function refers to the function of language to organize information. The interpersonal function refers to the speaker's use of language to participate in social activities; the discourse function refers to the function of language in organizing information. These functions are realized through objectivity, tone and mood, and subject-description structures.

From the point of view of intersemiotic complementarity, it is not necessary to follow the systemic functional grammar and consider the full range of and physical characteristics when studying the conceptual-meaning relationship of the image text, as Royce argues. Therefore, this study was only for the participants of the whole process.

TT-Verbal text: One morning when a scholar named Wang, of Taiyuan, was out walking, he ran into a young woman... ,

The translated text contains two participants 1) Scholar Wang and 2) young woman. These two participants are not only the subjects in the translated text, but also the main elements in the visual graphics. Therefore, the participants can be visualized at this time, and there is no complete equivalence between their images and the text. Because what can be visualized are the conceptual images of "scholar" and "woman", but the surname of scholar is Wang and the woman is

young, which need to be supplemented by the text.

At the text level, the translator adopts an additional translation from the original to the translated text. The word "早" in "walking in the morning" is translated as "one day morning"; "太原王生" is translated as "a scholar named Wang from Taiyuan", with the addition of "a", "of" and other conjunctions and numerals.

3.3 Visual image analysis

The third stage is the analysis of the graphics in the comics, which need to study and evaluate the compositional relationship between text and visual in comics in terms of information value, salience, framing, image similarity, and potential reading paths. It considers the cultural environment and readers' preferences for the target language market, and finally adjusts the image-text relationship of comics to the presentation that best fits the reading habits of the target language.

The identification process in this comic focuses on "Scholar Wang" and "the young woman", both of whom are represented participants. As Tsai Chih Chung uses similar forms in portraying the characters in comics, details are made in the characters' clothing in order to distinguish between the two.

In the picture, Scholar Wang's clothing focuses on his identity as a scholar, and the character wears the long gown and mandarin jacket, which is typical of the character, and his headdress is also highly recreated from the ancient Chinese costume of a scholar, while the young woman's clothes are added with a floral pattern to emphasize her gender identity.

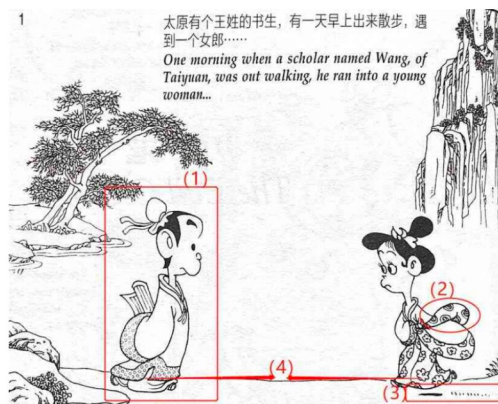


Figure 3

As we illustrate the action processes involved in the entire comics (represented processes) including: 1) Wang Sheng is out for a walk in the morning; 2) The young woman is holding the bag; 3) The young woman is in a hurry; 4) Wang Sheng and the young woman meet by chance on the road.

In terms of the compositional inter-semiotic complementarity, the whole picture is composed from the horizontal, with Wang Sheng on the left and the young woman on the right.

3.4 Intersemiotic complementarity analysis

The last stage is the intersemiotic complementarity analysis. Based on the previous three steps, the translator can review the overall translation of the comics and the visual-textual relationships in the perspective of intersemiotic complementarity. When it comes to the relationships between text and image, Royce mentioned six possible image-text relations of multimodal discourse: 1) Repetition 2) Synonymy; 3) Antonymy; 4) Meronymy; 5) Hyponymy; 6) Collocation

Following the above six kinds of inter symbol relations, it can explore the collaboration between visual mode and text mode in sinology comics. The analysis of this stage is mainly carried out from three aspects, ideational intersemiotic complementarity, interpersonal intersemiotic complementarity, compositional intersemiotic complementarity. Through the analysis of the image-text relations in sinology comics, this research interprets the corresponding relationship between the text, the image and the multimodal discourse.

3.5 Intersemiotic translation strategies classical sinology comics

Since each meaning of visual grammar has its own index system, the section will combine the characteristics of ancient books and comics, select the index features with high correlation in each meaning, and use these indexes to carry out the multimodal analysis of ancient books and comics on the graphic level. The presentation strategies at the graphic level can be combined with the three meanings of multimodal visual grammar, which can be summarized as conceptual meaning presentation, interactive meaning presentation and composition meaning presentation

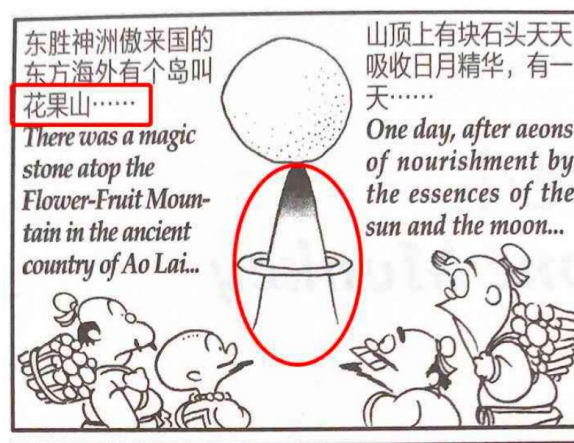


Figure 4

The image and text are not completely equivalent, and the mountain chosen in the graphic is the superlative replacement of Flower-Fruit Mountain. Therefore, the concept of "花果山 Flower-Fruit Mountain" is shown by the substitution of the upper and lower meanings between the figure and the text, i.e., at this time it is the intersemiotic hyponym relation from the figure to the text.

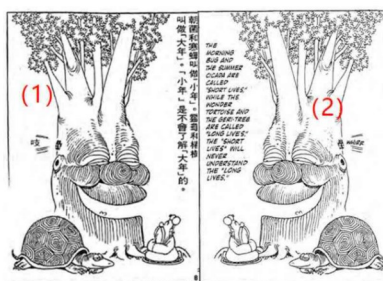


Figure 5

Typography is the most common way of interpersonal intersemiotics dissonance, mainly refers to the means of character formation, including font size, proportion, word spacing, and direction of text arrangement.

Given the reading habits of foreign readers, the English version directly flips the entire text horizontally. Although the flip sometimes diminishes the reader's reading experience, for example, if the figure in the original text was writing with a pen in his right hand, the flip turns the pen into a left-handed one, which may make the reader feel awkward. However, in general, the flipped text order is more suitable for the reading habits of the target language readers, which is conducive to the dissemination of the English translation in the target language and allows more foreigners to learn about traditional Chinese classical culture.

Taken from Zhuangzi Speaks, the textual message mentions "nature is superman", and the image as a whole adopts

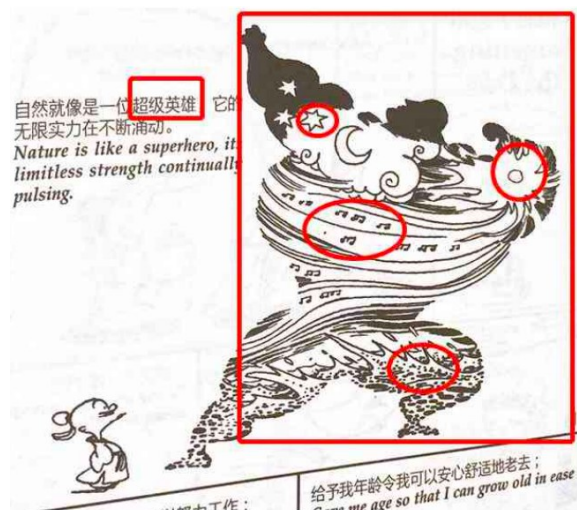


Figure 6

the appearance of superman, so the compositional inter-semiotic complementary is used to shape the conceptual meaning of "superman"; in expressing the metaphorical relationship between nature and superman.

The image is filled with natural elements such as the sun, moon, stars, earth, and water, all of which are representatives and symbols of nature, which creates a superman filled with natural elements. At this point, the textual information and the image are intersemiotic collocation, and the image level completes the construction of the concept of superman, while the text level provides the most accurate description and definition of the relationship between nature and superman.

4 Conclusion

The findings of this paper challenge conventional translation paradigms by revealing how Tsai's works achieve functional equivalence through semiotic rather than purely linguistic means. For instance, culture-specific terms like "Mount Huaguo" are rendered as generic visual landscapes while retaining narrative function—a strategy that aligns with recent shifts in multimodal studies toward dynamic resource reorganization across cultural boundaries. Additionally, the study explores how image-text relationships facilitate the translation of abstract concepts (e.g., Zhuangzi's metaphors) into visually accessible formats.

However, the study also confronts limitations, including the subjectivity inherent in multimodal analysis and a focus on static comics. Future research should explore animated adaptations and employ corpus-based methods to validate the proposed framework. Emerging technologies like AI-driven multimodal analysis and virtual reality could further refine strategies for immersive cultural transmission.

By bridging translation studies with visual semiotics, this research not only advances academic discourse but also provides actionable insights for promoting Chinese cultural soft power in an era of digital globalization. The demonstrated success of intersemiotic approaches offers a replicable blueprint for translating other complex philosophical traditions into engaging, cross-modal formats.

About the Author

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