

Research on Meaning Construction of the COVID-19 Documentary in the Perspective of Visual Grammar

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Abstract

After the outbreak of COVID-19, the literary and artistic works about COVID-19 have appeared one after another. As a new branch of discourse analysis, the Multimodal Discourse Analysis has always been an important way for studying multimedia discourses. Based on the theory of visual grammar, this study intercepts and makes a qualitative analysis of the images with research significance in the documentary *Together Against COVID-19* produced by CGTN. In this way, this study has drawn a conclusion that the documentary editors use picture language to create a responsible, friendly, and also dignified national image of China, to describe the emotional state of the masses in China in the process of COVID-19, and to achieve the purpose of conveying emotions and shaping positive national image through different aspects.

Keywords: Visual grammar, COVID-19, documentary, Multimodal Discourse Analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

With the development of multimedia technology, linguists began to turn their research object from verbal language to multimodal discourse. Linguistic research expanded from text to modalities such as picture, color and sound, which promoted the depth and breadth of linguistic research to a new stage. Visual grammar, as an important theory in Multimodal Discourse Analysis, provides a theoretical basis for the image research of multimodal discourses. By searching the keyword “visual grammar” on CNKI, 1193 search results can be obtained. From the overall trend chart of the number of articles published, it can be seen that the number of studies related to visual grammar has increased since 2008, which shows that the theory of visual grammar and Multimodal Discourse Analysis are in vigorous development. This article will take visual grammar as the theoretical foundation, and take the COVID-19 epidemic which broke out at the end of 2019 as the breakthrough point, to analyze the Chinese documentary *Together Against COVID-19*.

Multimodal Discourse

With the rapid development of information technology, the way to express is no longer limited in verbal language, but can be carried out from multiple modalities. Different from the words “mode” and

“media”, the “modality” refers to the channels of communication, including language, technology, image, color, music and other symbol systems. As the name suggests, the Multimodal Discourse Analysis regards modalities beyond verbal languages as discourse. Compared with traditional discourse analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis pays more attention to the study of the overall meaning of discourse [1], and makes the interpretation of human behavior more specific and comprehensive. Multimodal analysis fully adapts to the development process of social information technology, enriches the research content of discourse analysis, and brings the research of discourse analysis into a new stage.

Documentary is a form of artistic expression to record real events and process it artistically. Compared with other art forms, the authenticity is the most prominent feature of the documentary. In addition, as a multimodal discourse, the commentary is also a corpus material of great research value.

Theoretical Basis

The theoretical exploration of Multimodal Discourse Analysis is much earlier in western society. As early as the 1970s, some scholars had put forward the concept of “image vocabulary”. After that, Kress and van Leeuwen made a study on the relationship

between modality and media, specifically discussed the phenomenon that various modalities express meanings regularly, and extended language grammar (the systemic functional grammar) to the field of vision for the first time. Based on the three meta functions of language in the systemic functional grammar, they constructed theoretical systems including visual grammar and color grammar.

Visual grammar is mainly composed of three meanings: the meaning of representation, the meaning of interaction and the meaning of composition. The meaning of representation is the ideational meta-function in the three meta-functions in systemic functional grammar correspondingly, which can be divided into narrative representation and conceptual representation. Narrative representation mainly includes action process including analysis on actions, reaction process including analysis on eye contact, and mental discourse process including analysis on psychological activities. Conceptual representation includes classification process including analysis on positions such as upper or lower positions, analysis process including analysis on the relationships between the whole and the part, and symbolic process including analysis on symbol hint and symbol attribute. The meaning of interaction is the interpersonal meta-function in meta-functions of languages, including several analysis modes of contact, social distance, attitude and modality, while the meaning of composition meaning is the textual meta-function in languages, including information value, significance, frame, prominence and so on [2].

RESEARCH METHODS

This article makes a Multimodal Discourse Analysis on the documentary *Together Against COVID-*



Figure 1

The vector can connect the surface elements with actions and eye contact, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. There is a vector connection through actions such as feeding and shaking hands between the action provider, the medical staff, and the action receiver, the patient. And the direction of eye contact in the two images also create the vector. These two images reflect the action process and reaction process, which show the

19 produced by CGTN official, which aims to interpret the discourse construction mode of China's foreign publicity materials. The visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen is used as the theoretical framework on the basis of systemic functional grammar proposed by Halliday [1]. It aims to analyze the ways that CGTN producers used to construct the image of China and also contribute to the field of Multimodal Discourse Analysis.

The research method used in this paper is qualitative analysis based on the theoretical frame of visual grammar. The pictures with research values will be first selected from the documentary released by China's authoritative media, and then saved in the way of purposeful sampling, and finally they will be classified by different meaning types under the framework of visual grammar, which will be explained in details in the analysis part.

The Meaning of Representation

Visual grammar divides the meaning of representation into narrative representation and conceptual representation. The difference between narrative representation and conceptual representation is whether the participants in the image can be connected through vectors. When the elements in the image are connected by vectors, the image shows the narrative meaning. Such narrative representation can be divided into action process, reaction process and mental discourse process. On the contrary, if there is no vector in the image, it can be said that the image belongs to conceptual representation, which can be divided into classification process, analysis process and symbolic process [2].



Figure 2

narrative representation. It is a reflection of the unfolding actions, events, and instantaneous spatial arrangement, also a representation of the scene that the medical staff take care of the patients. In Figure 1, the medical staff is associated with the patient through the action of feeding, resulting in showing the image language of "medical staff take good care of elderly patients". In Figure 2, the medical staff is associated

with the patient by shaking hands, resulting in the image language of “the medical staff express their concern for the patients”, and indicating that there is a good relationship with the patients. In these images, medical staff, as the sender of actions, are in the dominant position among all of the elements in the images. This composition can highlight the initiative of medical staff better to interact with patients in the medical process, and then show the professionalism and dedication of Chinese medical staff.

The conceptual representation is the representation of participants in category, structure, or significance. It is “a summary, stable and timeless essence representation participant” [3]. Conceptual representation corresponds to the relational process and

the existential process in the systemic functional grammar [4]. As shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4, the images are composed of people, stairs, bridges, roads, vehicles and other elements, showing the scene with the participation of elements, which is not connected by obvious vectors. These conceptual representation plays an important role in setting up the atmosphere and enhancing the artistic expression. As shown in Figure 3, the single person which is sitting alone by the river, creates the lonely and bleak atmosphere which is consistent with the shooting background of epidemic outbreak. Figure 4 shows the street conditions under COVID-19, providing effective information for the viewer, and laying a solid foundation for the development of emotions in the later place.



Figure 3



Figure 4

The Meaning of Interaction

The meaning of interaction mainly indicates the relationship between participants and viewers. Kress and van Leeuwen believe that one image contains the relationship between the image maker, the things

represented by the image and the viewer of the image, and also reminds the viewer of the attitude they should take towards the represented things. Therefore, the meaning of interaction mainly includes three elements: social distance, contact, viewpoint and modality.



Figure 5



Figure 6

Contact mainly refers to a virtual behavior in which the participants in the image connect with the viewers through eye contact, so as to trigger the emotional experience of the viewers. In Figure 5 and Figure 6, there is direct eye contact between the subject in the image and the viewers outside the image. The doctors and patients in Figure 5 are sitting close to each other, conveying the sense of smile through the eye contact, which can directly express positive, optimistic and hopeful feelings to the audience. In Figure 6, the woman on the right side of the image has calmer eyes, conveying the emotional attitude of worry or inquiry.

Through the “contact” in the meaning of interaction, the images in the documentary make a straight connection between the elements and viewers. Take these two images for an example, it can be seen that the documentary not only shows the tenacious and optimistic spirit of Chinese doctors and patients in the process of fighting the epidemic, but also shows common people’s complex feelings of worries about the unknown state of the epidemic and desires to communicate with others. The emotions expressed in the images are layered.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Social distance is related to the selection of lens framing size, which determines the intimacy between represented participants and viewers in the image [2]. Close shots can construct closer social or emotional distance, which means that the elements shown in the images have a continuous relationship, which means, emotional distance is often in direct proportion to physical distance [5].

As can be seen from Figure 7 and Figure 8, the documentary producers narrow the shots deliberately. The close shots, also the “close-up” in the media language, will quickly narrow the distance between the viewer and the main element in the lens, enhancing the emotional communication between the two, also

improving the recognition and acceptance of the interactive participants. Figure 7 shows a close-up of the medical staff’s hands, while Figure 8 shows a close-up of the fingers of a COVID-19 patient lying on the hospital bed. Both of the images represent close-up shots of “hands”. The close-up shot in Figure 7 shortens the distance between the viewer and the subject shown in the image, which is the medical staff. The close-up of the wounds on both hands makes it easier for the viewers’ emotions to participate in the image, resulting in the effect of “empathy”. In the same way, the close-up in Figure 8 enables the viewers to understand the patient’s weakness and achieve the effect of emotional communication.



Figure 9

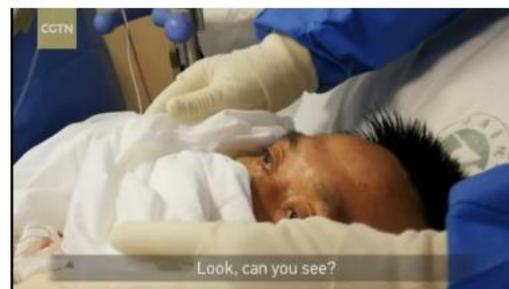


Figure 10

The embodiment of modality mainly focuses on the hue of the image. Figure 9 and Figure 10 are taken from the same scene in the documentary. As can be seen from Figure 9 and Figure 10, there is a deliberate way of reducing saturation to cooler the colors used in the scene, while in the Figure 10, the colors are bright and warm. The background of the images selected here is: rescuing critically ill patients. The images that we selected here are showing the process from critical illness to successful rescue. Therefore, the hue of the images can clearly reflect the rhythm of the documentary plot and the emotion it

wants to convey to the viewers. When the patient is dying, the color saturation of the image decreases, which reflects the depression of the medical staff and also affects the feelings of the viewers. When the patient’s life is saved, the color saturation of the image increases, which forms a sharp contrast with the previous image, reflecting the excitement of the people in the room when one person’s life has been saved and showing what the exact scenes the patient has seen after regaining consciousness. It reveals that the hue of the images is very important for the construction of media language.



Figure 11



Figure 12

Attitude depends on the viewpoint of image shooting. In visual grammar, viewpoints reflect the subjective and objective attitudes of participants involved in the images. Subjective attitude belongs to people while objective attitude belongs to objects. Viewpoints are divided into horizontal viewpoint and vertical viewpoint. Any image can be analyzed from these two dimensions. From the horizontal viewpoint, the direction of front indicates “empathy and integration”, and the view from side or tilt indicates “indifference”. From the vertical viewpoint, the view of overlook indicates that the viewers are strong, authoritative and superior, and the view of level indicates that the viewers and the participants are in the same position, while the view of looking up indicates that the viewers are in the position of disadvantage or lower status and authority than the participants.

As Figures 11 and Figure 12 show, when it comes to the buildings representing authority of the state, the shooting viewpoint usually adopts the look-up view, which reveals that viewers are in a lower position. Combined with the cultural context, it is the embodiment of the CPC’s authority. There is a sense of awe embedded in the images which shows the CPC’s guidance and central position in the fight against the epidemic, and also conveys the importance of the party for the people in the face of epidemic.

The Meaning of Composition

The meaning of composition mainly includes three perspectives: information value, significance and frame. The meaning constructed by frames are not obviously presented in this documentary. Thus, we choose the ways of information value and significance to analyze.

First, the information value is realized by the placement of elements in the composition. The role of any particular element in the whole depends on whether

it is placed on the left or right, in the middle or edge, in above or below of the image or page. Kress and van Leeuwen believe that the placement of elements in the image from left to right represents the change from known information to unknown or new information, and the placement from top to bottom indicates “ideal” and “real” respectively [2].



Figure 13

As the elements shown in Figure 13, the medical staff in this image represents known information, and the action of helping to wear protective clothing revealed on the right side of the image is reflected as unknown new information, which constructs the new information of “medical staff help each other” for the viewer, and shapes a positive image of Chinese medical group with unity, mutual assistance and firm will.

Significance refers to the degree to which an element attracts the viewer’s attention, which can be realized by places of foreground or background, relative size, contrast of hue value (or color), vividness, as well as the influence of cultural factors. The degree of significance of an element may be related to the embodiment meanings and the importance of the element itself.



Figure 14

We can find that in Figure 14, the stone lion statue is the element that has been highlighted. The highlight of the stone lion statue makes the background, Tian'anmen Square solemn and safe. They use the lion's majestic guardian image to highlight the status of the building with political significance, conveying the information of absolute leadership and firm confidence of the Chinese government and the CPC in the fight against the epidemic. Also, we can find that in Figure 15, the national flag and the national emblem have been highlighted by color contrast, which is also intended to attract the viewer to focus on the elements representing the national image so as to highlight the main focus in the shot, and use the color to construct the meaning of interaction and trigger the viewers' emotional resonance.

CONCLUSION

In the perspective of visual grammar, we can make a conclusion through analyzing the image language in the documentary *Together Against COVID-19* that the documentary constructs the image language by the meaning of representation, the meaning of interaction and the meaning of composition, more specifically, through actions, eye contact, color contrast, positions, hue of the images and distinctions of significance. It shows that during the fighting process of COVID-19, Chinese medical staff and patients have established a harmonious and friendly relationship. The images construct the figure of Chinese medical workers who take the responsibility actively, treat the patients carefully, and assist with colleagues corporately. And also they construct the figure of the state in a solemn and leading way, highlighting the leadership of the



Figure 15

CPC. Besides, they reveal the emotional state of the Chinese people under the pressure of the COVID-19. At the same time, these images use a variety of means to shorten the distance between viewers and participants, achieve the purpose of accurately transmitting emotional attitudes, and provide reference for the meaning construction of other epidemic documentaries. However, the research object of this study is relatively single and the corpus is not large enough. The conclusions are only applicable to the documentary corpus of this study, which can not make an overall and systematic contribution to the Multimodal Discourse Analysis research of documentary language, and there is still room for progress.

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