Multimodal discourse analysis of the external publicity documentary four seasons of China

Jiaxin Lv*
Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China

Abstract. As one of the effective forms of cultural exchange between China and foreign countries and the shaping of national image abroad, the external publicity function of documentaries has been increasing. The paper argues that the mutually reinforcing relationship between the images and text modes in the documentary objectively conveys to foreign audiences that China upholds the ecological concept of caring for nature and advocating the harmonious coexistence between man and nature. Meanwhile, the paper finds that the image of a big country has been established, including the image of respecting nature, adapting to nature, and protecting nature in the Four Seasons of China. The implications of this study are relevant for proposing an MDA framework for external publicity documentaries from the cultural, context, content, and expression levels, to explore the multimodal strategy of external publicity documentaries to help China project a good national image internationally.

1 Introduction

Since the 18th Party Congress, President Xi has emphasized the need to enhance the creativity, appeal and credibility of foreign discourse, to tell the Chinese story and spread the Chinese voice in a way that overseas readers can readily accept and in a language that is easy to understand. At the same time, the development of globalization and digitalization has brought many new opportunities and challenges to the external publicity of China’s national image. Film historian Richard Bassam argues that documentaries serve a dual political and social purpose, eliciting an emotional response and social effect by conveying a message (Bassam, 2013). At the same time, as a mixed product under the interaction of multiple modalities, documentary is an ideal research object for multimodal discourse analysis.

Existing multimodal research focuses on following topics, including multimodal critical discourse analysis (Tian Hailong, Pan Yanyan 2018), multimodal aesthetic discourse analysis (Dong Mei, Yuan Xiaolu 2021), multimodal metonymy and image meaning construction (Feng Dezheng, Zhao Xiufeng 2017), multimodal stylistic research (Yan Yun et al. 2021), multimodal translation research (Wu Jianguo et al. 2021; Ji Wenkai 2021). However, in the process of image establishment and external communication, there is a lack of practical operation on how to externalize the “shallow meaning” of each mode in the

* Corresponding author: Dearlvsuper@163.com

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external publicity documentary, to achieve the purpose of disseminating culture and establishing good national image level-specific recommendations.

Therefore, this paper constructs a multimodal analysis framework for external publicity documentaries by applying the system function grammar of Halliday, the visual grammar of Kress & van Leeuwen, and a comprehensive framework for MDA of Zhang Delu. It aims to explore how the external documentary completes meaning integration through the two symbols of images, texts, and the cooperation between these two symbols. The documentary *Four Seasons China* shaped the national image of China following the ecological concept of “respecting nature”, “adapting to nature” and “protecting nature”. In this way, this paper inspires the production of external publicity documentaries that project China’s good national image, and disseminate Chinese culture globally in the future.

2 The analytical framework of four seasons China

2.1 System functional grammar

Halliday (2014) proposed three meta-functions of language, namely conceptual function, interpersonal function and textual function. The concept function can explain the experience of the world and establish the logical semantic relationship between clauses, which is composed of transitivity and phonetic system. Interpersonal function focuses on embodying complex social relationships, which reflects that in a social context, language can not only be used to explain experience and reality, but also express the speaker’s attitude, maintain interpersonal relationships, and influence the recipient’s response and behavior. The three meta-functions of the above languages can be used to analyze the relationship of textual modalities.

2.2 Visual grammar

Kress & van Leeuwen carried out further research on functional grammar, extending it to visual patterns. At the same time, by analogy to the meta-function of language and drawing on the relevant theories of film studies, Kress & van Leeuwen proposed a visual grammar analysis framework. This grammar includes the reproduction meaning, the interaction meaning, and the compositional meaning of the images. In representational meaning, Kress & van Leeuwen differentiated images into two categories, narrative and conceptual. According to the presence or absence of projections of image participants, actions and reactions and mental and verbal processes are distinguished, where no projections exist for the first two processes. In the meaning of interaction, the main concern is the subtle and specific relationship between the audience and the image participants, which can be reflected in three aspects: (eye) contact, distance, and perspective. (Li Zhanzi, 2003).

2.3 Comprehensive framework for MDA

Zhang Delu (2009: 27-28) proposed a multimodal comprehensive theoretical framework, which distinguished the relationship between the language text mode and the image mode, that is, the complementary relationship and the non-complementary relationship. Complementarity means that a mode cannot fully express its meaning, and needs to be supplemented by other modes to ensure the integrity of meaning. This is a typical multimodal discourse pattern, which can be further divided into reinforcing relationship and non-reinforcing relationship. Therefore, using the multimodal discourse analysis framework
can better analyze the interactive relationship between language modality and image modality and the effect achieved.

3 Research design

3.1 Research objects

The research object in this study is the CNC documentary *Four Seasons of China*, which was broadcast on the CNC overseas platform and YouTube on February 4, 2019. The documentary is divided into 24 episodes. This paper selects the four episodes of the documentary *the Beginning of Spring, Rainwater, the Waking of Insects, and the Spring Equinox*, which are the most played on YouTube, as the research objects. Once the program was aired, it was well received by audiences in Israel, the United Kingdom and other countries. At the same time, Tang Guoqiang, a Chinese diplomat in Norway, also praised the program. It can be seen that the broadcast of this program is a successful case of “Chinese culture going global”.

3.2 Research questions

The following questions are answered in this paper: 1) How does the image mode in *Four Seasons of China* construct China’s ecological image of “respecting nature”, “adapting to nature” and “protecting nature”? 2) How does the text mode in *Four Seasons of China* construct the ecological image of “respecting nature”, “adapting to nature” and “protecting nature”? 3) How do image and text modes interact to construct the ecological image of “respecting nature”, “adapting to nature” and “protecting nature” in this documentary?

3.3 External publicity MDA framework:

To answer the three questions in 3.2, a multimodal analysis framework for external publicity documentaries is proposed in this paper to analyze how image and text modes conduct an ecological image of China and the complementary relationship among image and text modes in the documentary.

4 Results

4.1 Image mode

4.1.1 Representationa meaning

In the sense of representational meaning, Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) believed that it can represent the construction of the experience of the external world, and distinguished two types of narrative process and conceptual process of images according to the characteristics of images with or without vectors.

Symbolic processes represent what the participants are or mean (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In image 1 of the documentary, both the vector and the symbolic ecliptic theodolite and atmosphere appear. Image 1 shows the scene when the host observes the instrument around the astronomical instrument. The host’s gaze (vector) is set on the celestial
instruments (target), which is an action process. Through the action process in the narrative concept, the documentary shows the awe, love, and exploration of nature in today’s China. Therefore, these various astronomical instruments and the working principles behind them reflect the important idea that respecting nature is always important in Chinese ecological concepts.

The process of conceptual meaning in the representation of meaning proposed by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) just corresponds to the descriptive relationship and existential relationship in functional grammar. The analytical process involves a “part and whole” relationship (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). There are two kinds of actors involved in this process: the carrier (the whole) and the owned property (the part). Image 2 reflects the analysis process of conceptual meaning, which belongs to the non-structural analysis process. It demonstrates to the audience the overall construction and layout of the Dujiangyan Water Conservancy Project, to make sure the audience understands the names of the various parts of the Dujiangyan Water Conservancy Project and their specific locations. In this way, the audience can understand the great water conservancy project in ancient China. At the same time, through the construction principle of Dujiangyan, the audience can understand the ecological philosophy of “adapting to nature” runs through the blood of Chinese culture.
4.1.2 Interactive meaning

Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) proposed three methods to examine the interactive meaning in images, namely contact, social distance and perspective. The first is “contact”, which contains two images of “offering one” and “requesting one”. In the “requesting” images, the participant’s eyes usually look at the viewer, which means that the participant asks the audience for attention and approval, and invites the audience to participate.

Image 3 was taken from Rainwater and belongs to the “requesting” image. In the image, the old woman looks at the audience with a smile on her face. It seems that she wants to convey the joy of starting farming to the audience through the screen so that the audience can also feel her joy. By requesting similar images, the audience can easily feel the emotions that the documentary wants to convey, achieve emotional communication with the audience through images, and establish the image of a country that respects nature in the minds of the audience.

Another concept in visual grammar is perspective, also called attitude, which is divided into horizontal perspective and vertical perspective (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). Image 4 applies the process of shooting from a top-down perspective, giving the viewer a certain symbolic authority, surpassing the participants themselves, and making the image display more objective. This process is an action process, reflecting that people’s daily life operates by the laws of nature. So it makes the foreign audience understand the importance of the philosophy of adapting nature to people’s daily lives.

4.1.3 Compositional meaning

Compositional meaning examines how representational and interactive meanings function as a whole, a way of representing the relationship between documentary participants and viewers. Applying significance is to attract the audience’s attention, including the use of colour, relative size, perspective, and foregrounding or background. In this documentary, the images are always highlighted with colour, foregrounding, and size. For example, in image 5, a lovely giant panda slowly walks toward the audience from a green bamboo forest, reflecting the fact that endangered species such as the giant panda have been largely removed from the danger of extinction under Chinese protection measures. These images make the audience an impression that China is a country that has made good achievements in environmental protection, thus building up the image of a great nation that protects the environment.

4.2 Text mode

The main manifestation of the text mode of the documentary is the subtitles appearing on the screen. According to the three meta-functions of language proposed by Halliday, namely, ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. This paper will
analyze text mode in the *Four Seasons of China* by applying this theory. The examples are as follows:

**Image 5**

Water has always been a crucial resources for the Chinese people. This is why the Rain Water solar term holds such an important place in Chinese culture.
Man and nature were one and the same.
The brilliance of Dujiangyan is that it takes full advantage of the local terrain.
The fields are showing a little green and peasants who follow the solar terms have begun their hard work.
Precious medicinal herbs are often hidden in the deepest forest.

4.2.1 Ideational function

Halliday believes that the function of language concepts is mainly expressed by the transitivity of sentences (Halliday, 1994). Transitivity is a semantic system that expresses the function of concepts, “it is to divide what people see, hear and do in the real world into several kinds of ‘processes’, as well as the ‘participants’ and ‘environmental components’ related to various processes.” (Hu Zhuanglin, Zhu Yongsheng, Zhang Delu, 2009). The relational process expresses the relationship between the objects, and the sign of the judgmental relational process is the existence that contains “is”.

The main clauses of example 1 and 2 contain copulas “been”, “is” and “were”, which are typical sentences representing relational processes. Among them, the first sentence of example 1 and example 2 belong to the modified type, while the second sentence of example 1 belongs to the identification type. In example 2 shows that for the Chinese nation whose main mode of production in agriculture, rainwater is like a gift from nature. In example 3, the painter’s description of the connotation behind the creation of Chinese ink painting, that is, “the integration of man and nature.” It can be seen that Chinese people have always advocated the concept of harmonious coexistence between man and nature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Water</th>
<th>Carrier</th>
<th>Process: containing</th>
<th>Attribute: characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>Why the Rain Water solar term holds such an important place in Chinese culture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.** Relational process analysis form.

4.2.2 Interpersonal function

The interpersonal function of language involves the speaker’s attitude, intention, and judgment, and is mainly realized through tone. There are three basic types of tone in interpersonal functions: declarative sentences, imperative sentences, and interrogative
sentences (Halliday, 2014). And according to Halliday’s definition of the nature of declarative sentences in his framework as “giving of information” rather than “giving of goods or services”, “question of information” and “order of goods and services” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, Hu Zhuanglin et al. 2017). Whereas the main purpose of a declarative sentence is to provide information. It found that this documentary tends to use declarative sentences, for example, the above five sentences are all declarative sentences. There are large differences in Chinese and Western cultures, so the use of declarative sentences helps to clearly explain some difficult cultural concepts to foreign audiences, helping them understand and eliminate the difficult problem of viewing movies due to lack of cultural background knowledge. And the expression of declarative sentences makes the content expression more objective and real, so that the audience can feel the authenticity of the content, so that they are more willing to accept the good ecological concept conveyed in the film, and establish a good national image of China in the minds of the audience.

4.2.3 Textual function

Textual function is mainly realized through topic structure and information structure, emphasizing the organization of discourse. This paper takes example 3, example 4 and example 5 as examples, and mainly discusses the topic structure including theme and rheme. As shown in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The brilliance of Dujiangyan</td>
<td>Is that it takes full advantage of the local terrain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fields/ peasants</td>
<td>Are showing a little green/ have begun their hard work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precious medicinal herbs</td>
<td>Are often hidden in the deepest forest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through the above table analysis, it is found that these examples employ objects as themes instead of people to emphasize the philosophy of adapting to the nature of Chinese people. This way of expression highlights the guiding role of natural objects in human activities and shows that people arrange their daily production and living activities by natural laws. Following the laws of nature will help human beings create a better life, and it is a clever way for human beings to resolve various problems in nature. Thus, the audience acquires and establishes the image of China as a country that respects the philosophy of adapting to nature through the text mode in the documentary.

4.3 Comprehensive framework for MDA

Zhang Delu (2009:26) proposed that the two kinds of relationships between various modalities are complementary relationship and non-complementary relationship. The main function of the documentary text mode is to present specific information that cannot be expressed through the image mode. The subtitle commentary in this documentary assumes the main function of the image mode, expressing the meaning of the content in the most direct way. And Image mode in image 3 introduces the overall picture of the Dujiangyan Water Conservancy Project and the names of each part, with the text mode “Waijiang is used for flood discharge”. The complementary relationship is manifested between image mode and text mode, where the image mode serves to strengthen the text mode. In the image 4, the text mode “The fields are showing a little green and peasants who follow the solar terms have begun their hard work.” is the main mode to make the audience understand the importance of the philosophy of adapting to nature in Chinese people’s daily life, while
the image mode “farmers are spreading medicine among the fields” strengthens the idea. Therefore, the relationship between image and text mode is a strengthened relationship among complementary relationships, which is conducive to establishing good China’s image in the audience’s mind.

5 Conclusion

Combining systemic functional grammar, visual grammar theory, and Zhang Delu’s comprehensive framework of multimodal discourse analysis, this paper, from the aspects of culture, context, content, and expression, conducts multimodal discourse analysis on the CNC documentary *Four Seasons of China*. The meaning construction of the international communication image of “respecting nature”, “adapting to nature” and “protecting nature” is conveyed by China’s twenty-four solar terms and its related customs and customs, and its multimodal discourse. The research found that through close-ups of the characters and shooting from a bird’s-eye view, the harmonious composition, color matching, and harmonious complementarity of images and texts in the documentary together, the documentary completed the construction of the tone of the discourse, presenting the objectivity and truth of China’s cities and villages featured by characteristics of traditional customs to foreign audiences. At the same time, in the documentary *Four Seasons of China*, the relationship between the image mode and the text mode is presented as a complementary relationship. The coordination of each mode shows a national image of “respecting nature”, “adapting to nature” and “protecting nature” in which history and modernity are combined, scientific and technological progress is inclusive and open, man and nature are in harmony, and diversity coexists.

References