The Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Documentary Series "The Firsts in Life"

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Abstract: The images, text, and sound in the documentary video will arouse audiences' curiosity. The documentary series "The Firsts in Life" integrates multiple modalities, such as images, texts, and sounds, which can express the theme of the documentary in a simple manner. While people are watching a documentary, it is actually a process of decoding symbolic elements in multimodal discourse. After the documentary series "The Firsts in Life" released on CCTV on January 12, 2020, its Douban score has reached 9.2, which has attracted much attention. It is based on Zhang Delu's Synthetic Theoretical Framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Kress & van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar. In this paper, we analyze the language mode, para-language mode, bodily mode and non-bodily mode in the video. Moreover, the author explores how the documentary reflects the relationship between characters, such as text, images, and sound, to construct the overall meaning of the documentary.

Keywords: Multimodal discourse analysis; Visual Grammar; "The Firsts in Life" documentary; Zhang Delu's synthetic theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis

1. Introduction

With the advent of 5G era, diversified social cultures have made people's lifestyles different. Nowadays, a single modality based on language cannot meet the needs of modern people. However, the combination of pictures, colors, text, music and other elements is becoming increasingly popular in the public. On this basis, the linguistic texts are multimodal, and non-verbal information is in a dominant position. Therefore, it is crucial to improve people's ability to recognize the multi-modality. Since 2003, Chinese scholar, Li Zhanzi, first proposed the multimodal discourse analysis. Hence, multimodal discourse analysis has become popular. Varied movies, TV shows, movie posters, festival promotional posters and promotional videos also provide examples and platforms for the application of multimodal discourse analysis.

Since the documentary series broadcast on January 15, 2020, it has received infinite praise. There is no gorgeous rhetoric or modification on purpose in "The Firsts in Life" which is only about the purest insight of life. Furthermore, the documentary is divided into 12 episodes: birth, going to school, growing up, joining the army, going to work, getting married, moving into a big city, buying a house, reuniting, retirement, old age's life, and farewell. The description of "the firsts in life" is not just a 12-step process, which on the other hand, is the most common experience of mankind. The first in life stages may be the waves. Although it is not turbulent, it can evoke everyone's memories. People are growing up little by little this way.

2. Theoretical reviews of multimodal discourse analysis

Since the 1930s, linguists and semiotics have begun to study multimodality. During this period, linguists began to use drama as a "multi-symbol system." It is a breakthrough to rebuild the connection between people and their surroundings. In the 1960s, Parisian structuralist semiotics used linguistic concepts and methods, other than language, to understand communication patterns. To a large extent, they applied these to analyze mass culture and media, rather than art [1]. The main work of linguists, in this period, focused on visual images and fashion, such as analyzing the titles of fashion magazines. At the same time, the semiotics of the Paris School also studied semiotics in film, comics, and music using similar methods. Since the 1970s, although the multimodal discourse analysis has developed on the basis of some multimodal analysis elements, the traditional multimodal discourse analysis still occupies the mainstream. It was not until the 1980s that discourse analysis made breakthrough progress, and the scope of it was unprecedentedly expanded. At this stage, American linguists became interested in the multimodal analysis of spoken and nonverbal communication and connected this with wider social and political background. Entering the 21st century, the interdisciplinary value of multimodal analysis has been further explored, and its coverage has become broader and more complex, and the trending towards dynamic research has become more obvious than previous studies.

At present, research on multimodal discourse analysis focuses on its cross-domain value, such as multimodal analysis in the teaching process, multimodal discourse analysis in the new media communication, and multimodal discourse analysis in network discourse analysis [2]. The role of multimodal analysis in social studies has given less attention. But it has been paid to the correlation between textual and visual text in multimodal analysis.

3. The multimodal discourse analysis of "The Firsts in Life"

"The Firsts in Life" shows the relationship between the characters from various scenes, showcasing the importance of "the firsts in life." Whether the firsts in life are good or bad, we have experienced all of them. These firsts in our life make us mature. In this paper, we based our analysis on the seventh episode of the documentary – "A Migrant Dream" – focusing on the analysis and discussion of representational, interactive and compositional meaning [3].

3.1. Representational meaning

The representational meaning refers to the construction of characters, events, and environment in the documentary through images, language, and sounds. The success of representational function depends on the audience's desire. The representational meaning is divided into narrative process and conceptual process.

The "A Migrant Dream" obviously and largely includes the representational meaning. In the 4 min 30 sec to 6 min 59 sec timeframe of the video, the story revolves around a recruiter, Liu Zengxiong, who rides a motorcycle and does propaganda from house to house. Later, what emerges before us is a picture of a crowd of people, all of them holding a recruitment leaflet in their hands. Besides, in this clip, there are language modalities, such as voiced words, body modalities, the job applicants' eye contact, facial expressions and movements in the video, which can constitute a narrative process. At this moment, the job applicant is the initiator of the action, their eye contact is vector, and the recruiter is the goal of movement. The narrative process shows us that job seekers are eager to find a good job with a desirable salary. During this interval, there is another video clip. It is a video conversation between job seekers and recruiters, conducting interviews. In this part, there are language modalities, movement modalities, and expression modalities, and it also constitutes a narrative process. It expresses that the job applicant nodded repeatedly and agreed to the interview requirements directly. The interviewer is the sender of the action and the target of the job seeker; the video constitutes the vector, telling us that the applicants are eager to apply for a job,

and are agreeable to the requirements of the interviewers. If they want to achieve the migrant dream, they have to surrender to the reality of life.

From 10 min 50 sec to 13 min, it was Liu Zengxiong, a migrant worker who bid farewell to his wife, son, and daughter. The son is taller than last years. This scene includes movement modality and language modality. Last year, the son was only 1.4 meter in height, but this year he is almost as tall as his father. The father's words tell us that he hasn't seen his family for a long time because he was diligently making a living for his family. Then, Liu walked to his son's room, handing in the money to his son, and told him that boys should be more generous. This action modality describes that the father is not at home all year and he cares and thus shows concern to his son. Only by working hard to make money can the family live a good life. When Liu packed up his luggage, he went down the stairs and the daughter cried loudly. He walked a few steps and looked back at his daughter and his wife. The father's action modality tells us that he is reluctant to leave his daughter and unwilling to be forced to separate from her. Finally, father sat in the car, he took off his glasses and wiped his tears. This action process expresses that father is not easy in a family, and that the father has great responsibilities. He must take on the great responsibility, which is to make money for his family. In this clip, it shows a moving story through language modality, movement modality and expression modality that comprise of the narrative process.

Moreover, from 8 min 40 sec to 10 min 18 sec, the family members persuade Wang Yinhua, who had already applied for the job, to carefully consider the matter of entering to the big city. In the video, Wang's husband tries to show happiness because he had to support his wife to work in the big city. Furthermore, he is disabled. His family's income was only enough to support daily expenses and could not support his children's schooling. A person next to him persuaded: "You have to consider that if you work in the big city, you will ignore the education of children. Education is the biggest responsibility of parents." The persuader is the initiator of the movement; the serious facial expression is the vector, and Wang is the goal of the movement. It tells us the difficulties of housewives through language and facial expressions. Not only do they have to take care of the family after marriage, but they also must take care of their husbands and children and worry about the welfare of the family. Various modalities constitute the narrative process; it presents that Wang's life is hard, which arouses audience sympathy.

From 20 min to 22 min, it is the scene that Wang Yinhua begins to work after arriving in Shanghai. She was so exhausted after working all day. However, she persists in walking to the beautiful Bund in Shanghai. Then, she turned on the phone and started to chat with her daughter via video call. She shared the beautiful Bund on the sea with her daughter and let daughter see the beautiful cruise ship. She also showed her the prosperity of the big city. The movement modality and language modality tell us that Wang Yinhua misses her daughter very much, and she is eager to accompany her, but she prefers to provide a better life for her. Even though she faces a strange environment and is unfamiliar with the language and she is a little lost, she still try her best to adapt to the prosperous city and works hard. By image, sound, facial expression and body movement, it presents that with Wang Yinhua's efforts, destiny seems to turn to a new direction. As for Wang, this "first time" is valuable and precious.

These narrative processes with multimodalities, such as language modality, movement modality, visual modality, and auditory modality, can summarize the documentary "The Firsts in Life" in a single line. It shows us that migrant workers and their families have a deep affection, but they are forced to leave their hometowns and their families. All the things they do is to give children a better life and ensure a better education for them. We can feel that it is not easy for migrant workers to adapt to the big city when they leave their small town. This is the "first time" to migrants in their life, which they need to sacrifice a lot, i.e., leaving their children and not able to accompany them and be part of their education, so as to make the children's life more prosperous. Father and mother are the greatest people in children's life.

3.2. Interactive meaning

Based on Kress & van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar, the interactive meaning mainly reflects the relationship between interactive participants and narrators, which is a very essential aspect in multimodal discourse analysis. This thesis mainly analyzes from three aspects: contact, social distance, and perspective.

3.2.1. Contact

Contact is an imaginary interpersonal relationship established through eye contact between participants and viewers. According to whether there is eye contact or not, it can be divided into providing images and requesting images. From 10 min 20 sec to 10 min 30 sec, Wang Yinhua faces the audience with a serious expression. She is filled with bitterness. This facial modality asks the audience to show empathy. At this time, the audience will praise on mothers' perseverance through images.

3.2.2. Social distance

Social distance reflects the relationship between participants and radio. The characters' relationship in "The Firsts in Life" is horizontal. Therefore, audiences are able to see the entire images of people entering the big city, which belongs to the close social distance. In this way, the audience can directly understand the relationship between the main characters. It will inspire the audience's curiosity, and keep them watching this documentary.

3.2.3. Perspective

The perspective reflects the attitude of video designers that highlight the characters in the video. It can be divided into horizontal angle and vertical angle. If the image presents in horizontal angle, the viewer can quickly blend into the image, indicating that the characters in the radio and viewers are in equal relationship and vice versa. The whole documentary is presented using a horizontal angle. So, it allows the audience to interact with the characters through images, and gradually bring the audience closer to the characters.

3.3. Compositional meaning

Compositional meaning is mainly divided into information value, frame and salience. This thesis is focused on salience, which refers to the different degrees of each element in an image. The more prominent it is, the easier it is to attract the audience's attention.

At the beginning of this documentary, there is a tagline that goes by "The most powerful weapon of mankind is not nuclear, but the courage to give it all." The documentary highlights and emphasizes the discourse through language modality. In order to highlight the theme of the video, the documentary highlights the migrant clearly. Actually, the story about leaving their hometown and moving to a big city is reflective of the main idea of these words.

4. Conclusion

With the rapid development of science and technology, the single mode has been unable to meet people's needs for obtaining information. Other modalities, such as images, sounds, and text, are playing an increasingly prominent role in information dissemination. Various types of advertisements, propaganda films and documentaries integrate multimodalities to quickly attract the audience's attention. These are the typical multimodality discourse.

This thesis is based on Kress & van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar, combined with the documentary "The Firsts in Life" – "A Migrant Dream" which contains language modality, para-language modality, bodily modality and non-bodily modality. Besides, many images in the video constitute representational meaning. It reflects that we will experience many firsts in our lives. But we must bravely take our first steps

and try. Years later, after we experienced and withstood the challenges of turbulent waves, we will find that they are nothing but waves of the garden at our feet.

In short, this thesis conveys the theme of the documentary through synthetic theoretical multimodal discourse analysis and the three meanings of Kress & van Leeuwen. Furthermore, the main characters can resonate with the audience and arouse the audience's curiosity about the radio.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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