

Research on Meaning Construction of Multimodal Metaphors in Cartoons from the Perspective of Visual Grammar

-- Taking the Cartoons Anti-epidemic from *China Daily* as an Example

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Abstract: In recent years, the research of multimodal metaphor has been a research hotspot in metaphor research. From the perspective of multimodal metaphor, based on multimodal metaphor theory, the research takes the cartoons in *China Daily* about COVID-19 epidemic and the keywords “Fighting COVID-19 epidemic” as the research object. Then the analysis is carried out specifically by expounding the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning of images, and then multimodal metaphor theory is used to analyze the deep meaning of such cartoons. According to those, the research objectively and appropriately interprets the multimodal information conveyed by the cartoons to further analyze the meaning construction of the multimodal metaphor in the cartoons.

Keywords: Multimodal Metaphor; Visual Grammar; Cartoons of *China Daily*.

1. Introduction

In addition to being a form of language, metaphor is also a way of cognition, which has the functions of concept construction, meaning highlight and value creation and so on (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). At the end of the 20th century, with the popularization of digital technology and multimodal interactions, the study of metaphor has expanded to the field of multimodality. And on the forms of multimodal metaphor representation and cognitive mechanisms by linguists has deepened people’s understanding of its essence through the systematic research (Zhao, 2013). Since the emergence of the “COVID-19 Epidemic” in 2019, the media in China has responded positively and taken effective measures to prevent and control the epidemic, including publicity posters and cartoons in the form of multimodal forms, which are also spread throughout the major media platforms in China. This kind of symbolic system composed of words, images, sounds, etc. can stimulate the public’s psychology to a certain degree, which is conducive to the formation of “a sense of community to unite and overcome the difficulties together” (Miao & Li, 2020). Based on the theoretical framework of visual grammar and multimodal metaphor, this study takes the cartoons with the theme of COVID-19 Epidemic and the keywords of “fighting the epidemic” in the website of *China Daily* as the research object, studies the meanings expressed by the cartoons. The study aims to further analyze the construction of meaning of the multimodal metaphors in the cartoons by interpreting the multimodal information conveyed by the cartoons objectively.

2. Theoretical Background and Related Research

2.1. Visual Grammar

In the late 1990s, the linguists Kress and Van Leeuwen jointly proposed the theory of visual grammar, a theoretical framework for image research, based on Halliday’s Systemic

Functional Linguistics (SFL). So far, many researches have chosen this theory as a guide to explore multimodal discourse research (Feng, 2017). Since multimodal discourse theory believes that other semiotic systems besides linguistic symbols are also served as the sources of meaning and also have multifunctionality. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) replaced pure linguistic symbols with pictorial symbols, and believed that visual images consist of the participants of the images, the social interaction of the representations between the participants and the readers, and the way of composing the symbolic contents. Therefore, they took Halliday (1994)’s SFL as the basis of their theory, extended the three major metafunctions of SFL summarized by Halliday to other semiotic systems including visual symbols, and interpreted separately them as representation, interaction and composition in multimodal discourse containing images to create a theoretical framework for analyzing images. In the study of how to construct the meaning of visual images, it is grammaticalized the constituent elements in the images to propose the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning of multimodal discourse.

The representational meaning corresponds to the concept function, both of which are true representation of the people, things and processes in the objective world. The meaning of image reproduction consists of two parts, namely narrative reproduction and concept reproduction. The main criterion to distinguish between the two is to determine whether there are vectors between the image elements. In images, vectors are generated by the interaction of image elements. In narrative reproduction, visual or action communication is realized between image elements, so as to generate vectors, while there is no vector generation between concept reproduction elements. The type of vector divides narrative representation into action, reaction, thought and language process. The reproduction of the image shows the character, attribute, type and meaning of the image elements to the reader.

Interactive meaning corresponds to one of the Halliday’s three metafunctions, interpersonal function, which

corresponds to interpersonal meaning. According to the interpersonal function corresponding the interaction meaning between the speakers, the interpersonal meaning refers to the interaction between the image and participants in it. Therefore, interactive meaning refers to the relationship between the author, the image and the reader communicating together, and the realization of this meaning mainly relies on the three dimensions of contact, distance and perspective (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Contact, based on eye contact between the reader and the image participant, is classified as providing information and requesting information. The providing one refers to the absence of visual communication between the participant and the reader; the requesting category refers to the visual contact between the image participant and the reader, in which information is requested or conveyed to the reader. Social distance is the intentional arrangement of image distance between participants and reader by the image designer. The lens framing of the image used reflects the affinity status of the image with the reader, which can be categorized into close-up, medium and long lens (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The farther the lens indicates its state of remoteness, and vice versa, the closer it is. In order to create different image information for the reader, the author of the image will use horizontal and vertical perspectives. Horizontal perspective, the front angle provides readers to participate in the interactive experience, the side or tilted perspective will let the viewer produce the psychological state as an outsider (Mo, 2020). Vertical perspective, the flat view brings the state of equal relationship between the reader and the image. The top-down view is the reader's high position. On the contrary, the down-top view is the reader's low position.

Compositional meaning corresponding to textual meaning, it reflects the overall framework of the image (Wei, 2009). According to arrange the elements in a certain spatial order, readers can precisely and rapidly get an overall impression. The main elements of compositional meaning include information value, salience and frame (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Information value refers to the spatial position of the image elements in the composition, so different positions assign different information to the elements. The composition is mainly divided as vertical or horizontal composition. In the horizontal structure, the left side represents the known information, and the right side represents the new information. In terms of vertical composition, the lower part refers to the real information, and the upper part refers to the ideal information. The ideal one is available information in an abstract or non-existent state, which is concretized with the help of concrete elements. Real is the presentation of information that is real or concretely present. Prominence indicates the value of the different degrees to which the image elements attract the reader's attention, including framing, size and color tone, etc. Based on the degree of prominence of their components adjusted, the importance of these elements can be known. Framing is the frame structure in the image to make the image components divided to reflect the image elements relationship.

2.2. Multimodal Metaphor

The theory of multimodal metaphor is based on the development of metaphor, which has shifted from the study of a single linguistic modality to the study of a combination of modalities not only the level of language. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) first talked about the theory of conceptual

metaphors in *Metaphors We Live by* and mentioned the traditional definition of metaphor, which is more of a form of cognition and a cross-domain mapping of a relatively concrete Source Domain to a relatively abstract Target Domain, thus euphemistically implying an entity or concept with similar characteristics to implicitly reveal meaning. Currently, as information science advancing rapidly, the metaphor research has broken through the textual modality barrier to promote its combination with other modalities, such as sound and image, image and language, and other modalities are arbitrarily combined to form different multimodal representations (Wang & Xiang, 2016). Therefore, multimodal metaphor is the preferred research hotspot for scholars.

Forceville (2009) proposed the definition of modality, which is a symbolic system that can be specifically interpreted by using perceptual processes. And multimodal metaphor refers to a metaphor in which the two mapping parties are presented with different modalities respectively or mainly. However, Zhao (2011) defined the concept of multimodal metaphor as narrow and broad senses, Forceville's definition of multimodal metaphor belongs to the narrow one. Zhao (2011) believed that the broad multimodal metaphor is more in line with the current rapid development of science and technology. In other words, two or more modalities are constituted a metaphorical mapping together. Unlike the conceptual metaphor initially proposed, multimodal metaphor not only has the general characteristic of "concrete is concrete", but also includes distinguishing characteristics, i.e., dynamicality, narrativity, and vividness. Therefore, the study attempts to identify multimodal metaphors in cartoons by using the broader sense of multimodal metaphors defined by Zhao (2013).

2.3. Related Studies

Yu and Li (2016) believed that in the framework of visual grammar theory, its meaning analysis could add multimodal metaphor analysis to make the correspondence more flexible. Therefore, combining the two could reveal the deeper meaning of metaphor in multimodal discourse in a more appropriate and comprehensive way. So far, multimodal discourse has been mainly studied from the perspective of visual grammar and multimodal metaphor (Wu & Zhong, 2014). Teng and Miao (2018) revealed the multimodal meaning construction of children's picture book discourse from the functional perspective of visual grammar. Taking two coke advertisements as examples, Teng and Miao (2016) interpreted the dynamic meaning construction of the advertisement discourse with the help of visual grammar and multimodal metaphor theory. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) deconstructed the news cartoons to present its deeper connotations on the basis of visual grammar and multimodal metaphor. Scholar Liu (2020) took vertical screen microfilm advertisements as the research object and explained its advertising function from a dual perspective, a combination of visual grammar and multimodal metaphor. So far, the research objects of multimodal discourse in visual grammar and metaphor mechanism are mostly focused on advertisements, and the research on cartoon discourse is less than that on advertisement discourse. Therefore, it is worthwhile to study cartoons from the perspective of visual grammar and multimodal metaphor to explore its meaning of construction. Next, the study attempts to analyze the cartoons from two theoretical perspectives, visual grammar and

multimodal metaphor. The source of the three cartoons as the objects of the study are chosen from the website of *China Daily* with the theme of "COVID-19 Epidemic" and the keyword of "Fighting the Epidemic". The study will adopt the theory of multimodal metaphor to explain representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning of the selected cartoons. At last, the multimodal information conveyed by selected cartoons are objectively analyzed and interpreted to further summary the construction of the meaning of the multimodal metaphor in this kind of cartoons.

3. Research Questions and Research Materials

3.1. Research Questions

There are three research questions in this study. First, how is the visual grammar reflected in the cartoons with the keyword "fighting the epidemic"? Secondly, how to analyze the multimodal metaphors of the cartoons with the keyword "fighting the epidemic"? Finally, what kind of multimodal metaphorical meanings are constructed in the cartoons with the keyword "fighting the epidemic" in the dual perspective, a combination of visual grammar and multimodal metaphor.

3.2. Research Materials



Figure 1. Contemporary Zhong Kui (Chinese Name “钟馗” An Ancient Chinese Ghost Hunting Master) (January 30, 2020)



Figure 2. Crooked Reasoning (January 29, 2020) (Picture Content: You're all wearing masks, so I don't need do.)

The materials used in this study comes from *China News Cartoon Network* (CNCN), for short *Newscartoon*. This website is the first professional website of cartoons in China sponsored and co-organized by *China Daily* and *China Newscartoon Society* (CNS). Therefore, it is authoritative and

representative in the domestic and international arena. First of all, the theme of the cartoons selected for the research materials centers around "COVID-19 epidemic", with "fighting the epidemic" as the keyword. The keyword "fighting the epidemic" is entered into the search box. The search yields 202 results, and the date range of the cartoon is from January 1, 1970 to March 30, 2022, according to the search results. Next, among the 202 results obtained, some cartoons that do not fit the theme of "COVID-19 epidemic" and the keyword "Fighting the Epidemic" are manually screened and eliminated. Then, the time span of the cartoons that meet the requirement of the theme of "COVID-19 epidemic", from January 30, 2020 to March 30, 2022 using the keyword "fighting the epidemic", the actual number of cartoons is 200 cartoons. Finally, from 2020 onwards, three cartoons belonging to the initial climax and waning stages of the epidemic are selected among the 200 cartoons screened as the materials of the study. And the selected criterion that the selected cartoons have a relatively high click rate, with more than 40,000 clicks, further indicates that the three cartoons are of high creative quality and resonate with readers. The selected cartoons are richly illustrated, which include both textual and pictorial representations to construct a multimodal discourse and create a complete discourse and event together. In the following, each of the three cartoons will be analyzed using two theories, visual grammar and multimodal metaphor.



Figure 3. A Group of Anti-epidemic Personnel with Firewood Burns a Brighter Flame Than One Person with Firewood (Picture Content: resolutely eliminating the ferocious virus) (January 29, 2020)

4. Analysis of Visual Grammar in Cartoons

In the following part, the study will use the theory of visual grammar to analyze the three cartoons with the keyword of "fighting the epidemic" from the website of *China Daily*, in order to explore the meaning construction of multimodal metaphors in the cartoons.

4.1. Reproduction Meaning

The cartoon in figure 1 is entitled "Contemporary Zhong Kui". Zhong Kui who an ancient Chinese ghost hunting master guaranteed public security. Just like Zhong Kui, the doctor in figure 1 makes great efforts to prevent the public from the pandemic of Covid-19 wearing a protective suit, goggles and mask, and holding a large syringe. In the front of the virus, the doctor looks straight ahead with a determined eye, armed to the teeth against the virus. This doctor represents the millions of "white coats", the millions of doctors, in our country. According to the symbols in the cartoon, "the contemporary Zhong Kui is here, where can the

small virus escape”, the whole cartoon represents the reality of the doctors’ fighting against the virus. In the cartoon, the doctor is staring at the virus in front of him with his eyes wide open to obviously reproduce two vectors, which appear in the reaction process and the action process of the narrative representation, respectively, between the doctor and the virus. The first vector is in the reaction process, where the doctor is the reactor and the virus is the phenomenon. The second is in the action process, where the action of the doctor taking the syringe and stabbing it creates a strong diagonal between the doctor and the virus, producing the second vector. The two vectors between the doctor and the virus indicate that produce a dynamic process between them, expressing that at this moment the Covid-19 is an obstacle for the doctor to save the patient, and that the doctor is trying to fight the Covid-19.

Figure 2 presents a scene of chatting in a group, five of whom are wearing masks, and only the one sitting in the center not wearing mask. Combined with the literal symbol in the cartoon, “you all wear masks, so I don’t have to!”. It can be seen that the cartoon reproduces the current epidemic of Covid-19. Some ignorant people still do not take protective measures and even think that as long as other people wear masks and he spared. There are two vectors in the figure. The participants forming the vectors include those who wear masks and those who do not. The first vector appears in the reaction process of narrative representation. While the person without wearing mask is the present phenomenon, the other people wearing masks are the responders. And the people wearing masks stare closely at the person without a mask, forming the first vector. Then the second is the linguistic process of narrative representation, which the person without a mask speaks to the listeners who wear masks forming the second vector. From above two vectors can reflect a status quo of the Covid-19 epidemic, most people in the society have a sense of safety precautions, which wear masks at anytime and anywhere, to protect themselves and also to protect others. However, there are always some people who are still uncaring against the Covid-19 and do not wear masks, emphasizing the theme of the cartoon.

The cartoon in Figure 3 depicts the dynamic process of the anti-epidemic personnel’ continuous efforts to eliminate the virus in the face of the Covid-19 epidemic. Moreover, the cartoon is combined with the symbols of texts “resolutely eliminating the ferocious virus”, which represents the determination of the anti-epidemic personnel to eliminate the Covid-19. The cartoon consists of two vectors in the narrative representation between the anti-epidemic personnel and the virus. Firstly, during the action process, the action of the workers holding matches to the fire and continuously adding wood to the fire to burn the virus creates a strong diagonal between the workers and the virus burned on the fire, resulting in the first vector. Secondly, the reaction process, where the anti-epidemic personnel are the reactors and the virus is the phenomenon that the virus is raging, creates the second vector. From above two vectors, it can be seen that in the face of the severe epidemic of Covid-19, the Chinese public chose to fight bravely against the epidemic together.

4.2. Interactive Meaning

As shown in Figure 2 belong to provide information, the interlocutors communicate with each other without any visual communication with the viewers. Therefore, the cartoon shows the viewers an objective point of view of the responses made by Chinese nation to the epidemic prevention and

control.

The authors of the three cartoons, as shown in the figure, use long shots to objectively describe the current situation of epidemic prevention and control in China (Lin, 2008). From the horizontal perspective, all three cartoons are tilted, indicating that they are objective ways to convey information to the viewers, truthfully reflecting the work of Chinese nation in fighting the epidemic, without mixing the subjective attitude of creators of the cartoons (Huang & Feng, 2020). From the vertical perspective, they are all leveled, indicating that, in the context of the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic, the viewers and the participants are on an equal stance.

4.3. Compositional Meaning

In Figure 1, the discourse image as a whole belongs to a structural layout of the center and the edge. The anti-epidemic personnel, heavily armed, is located in the center of the cartoon, accounting for 1/3 of the whole image, indicating that the anti-epidemic personnel are the main elements in the cartoon. Moreover, the positions of the anti-epidemic personnel are in the foreground while the creamy yellow renders behind them serves as the tone, which further highlights the white protective suits worn by the anti-epidemic personnel, and better emphasizes the importance of the anti-epidemic personnel (Yuan & Zhang, 2012). The discourse texts on the right side of the cartoon are vivid portrayals of the image, complementing the texts and the image in terms of discourse meaning, thus allowing the reader to quickly focus on the main information conveyed by the cartoon (Sun, 2012).

The discourse images in Figure 2 are laid out sequentially from left to right, forming horizontal composition. The people of left and right sides without masks are known information. During the period of the Covid-19 epidemic, wearing masks has become necessary part of human in daily life. According to the horizontal reading order, viewers see the new information, which a person without a mask in the center talking eloquently about “you all wear masks, so I don’t need to wear one”. This person is in a prominent position, corresponds to the people with white masks on the left and right sides, making him out of place in the scene. The images of these two kinds of people in the cartoon are split to form two frames. In the broader context of COVID-19 epidemic, as a result of the texts above the cartoon combining with the images, the image of a person without a mask leaves a deeper impression in the viewers’ minds.

By looking at Figure 3, the image elements of flame and virus take up nearly 2/3 of the whole cartoon. Through large size in the cartoon, they are in prominent positions to attract viewers’ attention. And the textual phrases “resolutely eliminating the ferocious virus,” which embody the principle of prominence of the cartoon. The information value of Figure 3 is realized by the top and bottom composition. The virus on the top of the image is burned by the flame and becomes hideous. In fact, the virus cannot be seen by human eyes, while the virus appears on the top of the flame in the cartoon, which is through the ideal and visual state to express the desire to eliminate the virus. At the bottom of the cartoon, the anti-epidemic personnel are holding fuel wood to make the fire grow hotter and hotter, this scene is a perfect illustration of the reality that all the public are working together to make the fire bigger and bigger to burn the Covid-19. Frames are used as the most prominent information in the picture. The virus and the flame are divided into two image frames,

conveying different and significant messages.

5. Analysis of Multimodal Metaphors in Cartoons

The deconstruction of the three selected cartoons from the perspective of visual grammar reveals the intention of the cartoons, but lacks the dissection of the deeper meanings of the cartoons. Cartoons often use metaphors to characterize the potential meanings, so the next step is to dissect the deeper meanings of the cartoons from the perspective of multimodal metaphor theory. Multimodal metaphors are more creative and intuitive in expressing emotions and positions. The three cartoons all highlight the united phenomenon of the Chinese nation's fighting against COVID-19 epidemic and express mutual desire to win the victory over the Covid-19 pandemic as soon as possible.

In the pictorial modality of the cartoon in Figure 1, the "anti-epidemic worker" is metaphorically referred to as "Zhong Kui, god of Taoist culture". In ancient Chinese, Zhong Kui specializes in fighting ghosts and exorcising evil spirits, and is a Chinese folk god. The metaphor of Zhong Kui for anti-epidemic personnel is in other words a metaphor of the Covid-19 for "evil spirits". Combined with the textual modality "the contemporary Zhong Kui is here, where can the small virus escape", the cartoon characterizes the spread of the epidemic throughout China, and the anti-epidemic personnel in China have bravely rushed to the frontline of the epidemic and taken practical actions to actively combat the Covid-19 epidemic, implying the admiration of the authors of the cartoons and gratitude to the anti-epidemic personnel.

Against the background of the Covid-19 epidemic, Figure 2 metaphorically refers to the people in the cartoon as "people in society" and "people wearing masks" as "people who abide by the rules of prevention epidemic" through picture modality. Vice versa, the corresponding "people without wearing masks" is "people who do not follow the rules of epidemic prevention". This is complemented by the textual modal, "you all wear masks, so I don't have to!" As can be seen from the cartoon, most people choose to wear masks, while only one person takes a chance and thus does not cooperate in wearing masks. Therefore, the cartoon as a whole characterizes that most of the people in the society nowadays are very positive to cooperate with the fighting against the epidemic. However, there are still some black sheep who break the rules of epidemic prevention.

In Figure 3 of the cartoon, the textual modality "resolutely eliminating the ferocious virus" is at the center of the cartoon, responsible for conveying the core information of the cartoon. On the one hand, the phrase "resolutely eliminating the ferocious virus" indicates the determination of anti-epidemic personnel to eliminate the virus. On the other hand, it also implies the determination of the whole nation to unite and fight against the epidemic. In the picture modality, "anti-epidemic personnel" is the source domain. As the result of the anti-epidemic personnel wearing protective suits and gathering wood to burn the virus with fire, the virus shows a threatening state, which means that the flame is getting stronger and stronger, metaphorizing for the progress of public in the fighting against the epidemic. Based on the text and picture modality, the cartoon characterizes the belief and determination of the Chinese nation to overcome the epidemic in the face of the severe Covid-19 epidemic.

6. Conclusion

Based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar and Lakoff's conceptual metaphor theory, the study conducts multimodal metaphor analysis of three cartoons in *China Daily* with the theme of "COVID-19 epidemic" and the keyword of "Fighting the Epidemic". The analysis verifies that these two theories can activate and retrieve the readers' background knowledge and similar experiences of the relevant contexts on a wider scale, and that multimodal metaphor can make the source domain and the target domain map each other to establish a kind of conceptual statute, makes the process of interpreting the meanings clearer and richer. At the same time, as a media oriented to the mainstream group of society, *News cartoon* has a decisive influence on and a strong supporting role for the mainstream values of the country and the Chinese nation through interpretations of social phenomena affecting the public's viewpoints and ways of thinking in a long-term manner. On deeper meanings, these kinds of cartoons have strengthened the firm belief of public in overcoming the epidemic together, conveying the idea that win-win cooperation and inspiring a sense of community in overcoming the difficulties in public's minds.

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