Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Volunteerism in Anti-epidemic Documentaries—The Example of “Epidemic” Line of Youth

ZHANG Zifan, SHEN Shiyang
University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Based on the multimodal discourse analysis theory, the paper analyzes the spiritual connotation of the “Anti-epidemic Documentary | ‘Epidemic’ Line of Youth” released by the microblog account “Nanjing Daily” in terms of the video’s modalities and narrative features. Through a variety of modalities of text, sound, and images, the video effectively conveys the positive energy that it wants to promote by focusing on the volunteers. The paper also finds that that video rhythm and video construction also play a significant role in meaning-making.

Keywords: multimodal discourse analysis, video footage, anti-epidemic micro-video

Introduction

In recent years, with the rise of Wechat, Tiktok, Instagram, Youtube, and other social media applications, micro videos are widely available in today’s fast-paced society by virtue of their short duration and rich content, and more and more audiences will use fragmented time to get the latest information through micro videos and other forms, which also indicates that micro videos will gradually become popular in the era of self-media. During the ravages of COVID-19, countless self-publishers or official state media released a series of anti-epidemic micro-videos on major online platforms, such as “Thank you! Tribute to Grassroots Epidemic Prevention Workers” and “Hebei’s Epidemic Fighting Villagers Meet in Hebei”, etc., aiming to record the numerous ordinary but great heroes in the process of fighting the epidemic and to carry forward the great spirit of fighting the epidemic, which is “life first, the whole nation together, sacrificing life and death, respecting science and sharing fate”. Based on the multimodal discourse analysis theory, this paper selects “Anti-epidemic Documentary | ‘Epidemic’ Line of Youth” as an example to extend a series of analysis and summarize, and enhance the audiences’ deep understanding of the micro-video content itself in order to better grasp its connotation.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal discourse refers to a symbol system with other forms besides the text itself, i.e., language coexists with other symbolic resources, and language and other forms of symbol systems, such as images,
sounds, colors, animation, technology, music, etc. work together to construct the real intention (Hong & Zhang, 2010). In daily life, a single modal discourse does not exist when expressing emotions, and the process of communication does not stop at words. People naturally add expressions and gestures. In today’s society, due to the rapid development of the Internet, web pages do not just contain texts, but also pictures or background music that plays a certain role. With the emergence of micro-video platforms in recent years, multimodal discourse has become a popular mode of conveying information, and the acceptance of messages often requires multiple forms of symbolic systems to optimize or complete the meaning to be expressed.

Multimodal discourse analysis means that in addition to the usual discourse analysis, we can also analyze visual modality, auditory modality, etc. The systemic functional (SF) approach to multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) is concerned with the theory and practice of analysing meaning arising from the use of multiple semiotic resources in discourses which range from written, printed, and electronic texts to material lived-in reality (Hong & Zhang, 2010). The study of visual modality is basically based on Kress and Leeuwen’s optical grammar, which is derived from Halliday’s three major meta-functions of language, namely, representational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and compositional meaning (Bezemer, 2012a). Using modes to “make meaning material” takes an internal thought or emotion and transforms it into a material that others can access (Bezemer, 2012b). Modes are not interconnecting or parallel versions or the same things done differently rather they allow humans to do somewhat different things in relation to the same thing. Modes allow people to make combinations of things to create richer meanings (O’Halloran, 2008).

This paper makes use of multimodal discourse analysis of the video, “Anti-epidemic Documentary | ‘Epidemic’ Line of Youth” from “Nanjing Daily”, to demonstrate the spiritual connotation it intends to express. This thesis will analyze the overall meaning of video discourse from three aspects: text, image, and sound, and understand more deeply the different effects presented by the combination and decomposition of each modality. The study shows that the multimodal discourse in the micro-video is also beneficial to the audience’s complete understanding of the aspiring energy the video wants to convey.

Modal Analysis of the Video

Text Modalities

In the micro-video “Anti-epidemic Documentary | ‘Epidemic’ Line of Youth”, the text modalities refer to the subtitles of the three main characters’ self-reports and the introductory texts of the three university student volunteers, who cross-talk about their main work as volunteers in the community. At the beginning of each character’s appearance, a text appears at the bottom right that lasts for a few seconds: “Providing household goods shopping services for isolated households”, “Installing ‘door magnets’ for households in isolated homes in the community”, and “volunteered to ‘change the code’ in the community”, all of which precisely and succinctly point out the main work of community volunteers during the outbreak.

In the video, the subtitles use numbers several times, such as “we have installed 49 households from the 23rd (of July) to now”, “from 9:00 in the morning until 8:00 or 9:00 in the evening”, “work until it’s about 10 of the clock at night”. The use of numbers explicitly and concretely shows how hard the community works and
how much the volunteers put in. At the end of the video, the big words “responsibility”, “dedication”, and “growth” point out the theme of the video, which demonstrates that the college students have gradually matured and dedicated themselves to the society. They have grown up and have contributed to the society and taken up the social responsibility.

**Image Modality**

In the micro-video “Anti-epidemic Documentary | ‘Epidemic’ Line of Youth”, the image modality and the verbal-textual modality are strongly complementary, and the text and the image are highly compatible. The video starts with an overhead shot of a silent street, where the busy figures of staff in protective clothing first come into view, showing that residents are in a situation of isolation at home due to the epidemic, but there are also a lot of anti-epidemic volunteers who have stepped forward. With the appearance of the main character wearing a red vest “youth volunteer”, the narration of the micro-video also gets started. The three volunteers appear in the camera alternately, and the first three scenes relate to the three main characters, with words and sounds introducing their motivation for volunteering.

Multiple shots switch and follow the volunteers at work, better guiding the audience to immerse themselves in the hard work of the community volunteers. Before the last volunteer narrates, three shots of answering phone calls and the interruption of ringing in the middle to visually reflect the busy work of community workers. At the end of the micro-video “Anti-epidemic Documentary | ‘Epidemic’ Line of Youth”, the powerful “Go Nanjing! The strong complementary relationship between the words and the gestures of the volunteers resonates with the audience. At the end of the video, the picturesque scenery of Nanjing, the words of blessing, and the flock of birds flying towards the camera all inspire the viewers’ determination to fight against the epidemic and their expectation and aspiration for a better life after the epidemic.

**Sound Modality**

The sound modality and the image modality complement each other, and the background music with the image content gives the audience a more intuitive and stronger visual and auditory impact (Ni, 2004). In the micro-video “Anti-epidemic Documentary | ‘Epidemic’ Line of Youth”, the background music consists of two sections. The section before the appearance of the title has a slower rhythm, which matches the image modality to show the emptiness and silence of the streets during the epidemic. The second section is more upbeat, matching the fast pace of the volunteers’ work, and continues until the end of the video, showing that the city is recovering and that it is the dedication and solidarity of the people to fight against the epidemic that can put life back on track.

**Analysis of Video Content and Narrative Features**

**Video Rhythm**

The overall rhythm of the micro-video “Anti-epidemic Documentary | ‘Epidemic’ Line of Youth” is well controlled, which enables viewers to grasp the key points of the video and understand the content of the article, and the video images and the background music cooperate to maximize the efficiency of information output. The purpose of the video is to promote the dedication of volunteers during the epidemic and the progressive
attitude of grassroots people in facing the epidemic. Music plays an important role in reflecting the central idea of the video, using the senses to bring out the deepest emotions of people (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006). The second half of the video has a faster rhythm and more repetitive melodies, and the content of the video also focuses on the feelings of the student volunteers themselves and their perception and understanding in the face of the epidemic, which fits the spiritual connotation that the video wants to manifest.

**Video Construction**

The main body of this video is divided into interviews and scenes of volunteer work, using the community as an example to tell China’s story during the epidemic period with video. The video is highly interactive as opposed to the interpersonal function of language, which is the interactive meaning of visual images, showing the complex and subtle interaction between the viewer and the image reproduction content (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006). The sensorial contents of the video are selected from street scenes close to people’s lives, residential houses, vegetable markets, supermarkets, etc., greatly reducing the distance of the video. The video is the third-person point of view, and the characters will interact with the camera to enhance the sense of immersion. Combined with the editing techniques of the documentary, the video reproduces the volunteer work content and interviews with the video characters, highlighting the humanistic feelings of the anti-epidemic volunteers during the epidemic.

**Analysis of interviewing discourse.** The video interviews three university volunteers, from the time they joined the volunteer ranks, their volunteer experience, and their family relationships, to what they saw, did, and felt during the epidemic; hence the audience can see the profound meaning of volunteer service from the interview. The video illustrates these realistic interviews and uses humanism as the cornerstone to create an atmosphere of mutual help and solidarity among neighbors and people under the management of grassroots organizations.

The video starts with an interview and ends with an interview, and the interview at the end sublimates the theme to be thought-provoking. Understanding, support, and tolerance are the key spiritual connotations emphasized in this micro-video, and most of the interview contents are explained and illustrated around the volunteers themselves, so the viewers will have a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the work of volunteers after watching the interviews.

**Scene reproduction.** The significance of scene reproduction is to present the state of characters by restoring their activities. Scene reproduction enhances the interactivity of the video content (Li & Xiang, 2007). The use of the camera in the video makes the scene reproduction more realistic. The elevated camera shoots the street scene, the oblique camera shoots the volunteers installing door magnets, and the close-up camera shoots the clerical work in the volunteers’ office. The diverse camera language conveys to the audience not only the objective facts but also the humanistic sentiment that helping each other is a beautiful characteristic of the Chinese people.

**Compositional meaning.** Compositional meaning of multimodality is concerned with the composition of three aspects: information value, saliency, and framing (Koutsikou & Christidou, 2019). Information values are realized by the analysis of various constituent element components in the spatial layout. Prominence refers to
the prominence of various compositional element components in attracting viewers’ attention, while framing is from the subordination of various combined elements. The following will analyze the one minute to one minute and four seconds of the micro-video “Anti-epidemic Documentary | ‘Epidemic’ Line of Youth” focusing on community volunteers.

Starting from the analysis of the information value, the composition of the whole video can be divided into the subsequent parts: the empty street, the trees on both sides, and the long road in the middle. Two volunteers on the electric bicycle, appearing from the left side of the camera to the right side, occupy the main part of the picture. The two volunteers, one in blue and one in red, form a sharp contrast with the surrounding empty streets. At the same time, compared with the circumjacent static scenery, the dynamic image of the volunteers can better catch the viewers’ eyes, and the prominence can be well reflected. The filmmaker chose such a static dynamic contrast and color brightness contrast to explain that volunteers face up to the difficulties of the epidemic, and strive to do the best volunteer task even under the scorching sun, so that the audience can empathize with the hard work of the volunteers.

To summarize, the micro-video “Anti-epidemic Documentary | ‘Epidemic’ Line of Youth” focuses on community volunteers and tells a good story of China, emphasizing the humanistic sentiment of Chinese people who do not compromise or give up in the face of the epidemic, actively fight the epidemic, and understand each other. It is a multi-angle, multi-layered, and multi-method film that highlights the unity of the whole country and inspires the public to face the epidemic with positive connotation.

Conclusion

In the current era when self-media are a major mode of communication, micro-videos can quickly and effectively deliver the message and promote the spirit that the mainstream society is likely to convey to the audience. Through a variety of modalities of text, sound, and images, the micro-video “Anti-epidemic Documentary | ‘Epidemic’ Line of Youth” focuses on community volunteers and successfully conveys the positive energy that it wants to promote, and by focusing on volunteers, it allows viewers to see the life in the pandemic that they may have taken for granted from another perspective. Through the analysis, we can find that video rhythm and video construction also play a significant role in the dissemination of information, and show the feasibility of multimodal discourse analysis of micro-videos. The ultimate purpose of the arrangement and combination of different modes is to express the original intention of the video creator more effectively and present it to the audience in the clearest way. Every step of this process to reach the expectation needs in-depth exploration, so as to realize the gradual maturity of multimodal discourse analysis.

References


