

[Special Contribution]

A Study of “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” is one of John Donne’s representative works. It displays the poet’s profound love for his wife by using ingenious conceit and defamiliarization techniques. The poet uses the image of compasses to express his spectacular ideas and his unusual view of love. Based on the theory of multimodal discourse analysis developed by systemic functional linguists, this paper interprets the poem from four aspects: visual mode, auditory mode, verbal mode and multimodal meaning integration, so as to understand the poem from the perspective of form, sound and meaning comprehensively, enriching the connotation of the poem.

Keywords: “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”; John Donne; multimodal discourse analysis

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1. Introduction

The theory of multimodal discourse emphasizes the integration of the meaning of various modes and studies the relationship between different linguistic modes. Meanwhile, multimodal discourse is also a way to transfer the meaning of discourse composed of different symbols. Multimodal discourse analysis is one of the hot topics in the field of discourse analysis. Based on system functional linguistics, Zhang Delu proposed a comprehensive theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis, which has become the theoretical basis of the theory. In this way, based on Zhang Delu’s comprehensive framework of multimodal discourse analysis, Wang Gaidi and Yang Lixue proposed the framework of poetry. Since then, the multimodal discourse analysis of poetry has gained more attention in the academic field (Jiang 2016). Nowadays, the theory is used in poetry research, providing a

new perspective for analyzing poetry.

John Donne (1572–1631) is a famous metaphysical poet of the 17th century. His poems represent the highest achievement of English metaphysical poetry. He uses the artistic technique “defamiliarization” to analyze the theme, form and images of poetry. “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” is an incredibly famous poem. In it, Donne uses one of his famous conceits to depict the steadfast nature of his love. It was not published until after his death, appearing in the collection *Songs and Sonnets*. The image “compass” is important in this poem because it symbolizes not only the strength of their relationship but also the balance that exists between the speaker and his wife. When reading the authors of this article, I found that it is rarely explained from a multimodal perspective. Therefore, this paper analyzes this poem from the multimodal perspective, interpreting it from visual mode, auditory mode and verbal mode, which further deepens the theme of this poem.

2. Theoretical Research

2.1 *Multimodal discourse*

Multimode appeared early but did not become a system until the 19th century. Discourse construction of meaning relies not only on a single discourse but also a multiple-modal meaning of a text as a whole. Multimodal discourse analysis is a new way to discover how different modes can be integrated to construct a text jointly. It applies to all kinds of texts that can be read from different dimensions.

With the rise of interdisciplinary theory, multimodal discourse is increasingly suitable for studying poetry, mainly from the perspective of cognitive discussion. This term refers to the discourses in which language and other semiotic resources coexist to construct meanings in poetry.

2.2 *Multimodal discourse analysis*

The main theoretical basis of multimodal discourse analysis theory is systemic functional linguistics, founded by Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday (1925–2018). Hu Zhuanglin, Zhang Delu, Zhu Yongsheng and Li Zhanzi have analyzed the theory of systemic functional linguistics in detail in *An Introduction to System-Functional Linguistics* (2017), which laid the foundation for the formation of the theory of multimodal discourse analysis. This theory is thus expounded:

Specifically, multimodal discourse analysis accepts the view that language is social meaning and meaning potential from systemic functional linguistics and believes that other sign systems other than language are also the source of meaning. The system theory is accepted and the multimodal discourse itself is also systematic. The Metafunction hypothesis is accepted, and it is believed that multimodal discourse, like the discourse containing linguistic signs, is also multi-functional. That is, it has a conceptual function, interpersonal function and discourse function at the same time. Accepting register theory, it is believed that context factors are inextricably linked to the fingertip of meaning interpretation of multimodal discourse.

(Zhu 2017: 84)

Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen developed the theory of systemic functional linguistics further. Based on the study of other symbols (pictures, colors, sounds, etc.), they established a multimodal discourse analysis



framework consisting of the representation, interaction and composition of the three major meaning functions. This framework further constituted the relationship of structure among elements or among multi-modes to interpret multimodal discourse (Li 2003). Roland Barthes is the first scholar to systematically analyze this kind of multimodal discourse, and he also explained the interactive relationship between images and words in terms of meaning expression in multimodal discourse.

It can be seen that multimodal is the comprehensive embodiment of multiple modes, such as visual mode, auditory mode, verbal mode and so on, which integrate thinking in different senses. It can understand the reader's thinking cognitively and understand the theme of this poem better (Jiao & Dai 2014).

2.3 Multimodal discourse analysis of poetry

The book *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (Peter 2002) greatly promoted the development of the study of cognitive poetry. We can study poetry in terms of its many modes (Liu Lihua & Liu Shisheng 2006). When using some specific images, it reflects the psychological space of the author's thoughts so that the creation technique of the poem "conceit" can be fully expressed so that readers can understand the poem better.

Among domestic studies on multimodal discourse analysis, it is necessary to mention the research of Zhang Delu. Based on previous studies, he summarizes the theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis, which is divided into four levels: cultural level, content level, context level and expression level. Each level has a complementary but independent relationship. We can clarify the form and relation of multimodal discourse from the media system advised by Zhang Delu. The main research topic is to discover how different modes of media are related to each other to express the speaker's meaning. The formal system of multimodal discourse analysis is mainly divided into form and relation. This article mainly studies this poem from the level of the form: language, picture, sound, sense. These four aspects correspond to four modes: verbal mode, visual mode, auditory mode and multimodal meaning integration.

Based on the study of systemic functional linguistics, Zhang Delu constructs a diagram of multimodal discourse analysis applicable for poetry to analyze the full discourse meaning of the text.

Multimodal discourse analysis is shown as follows:

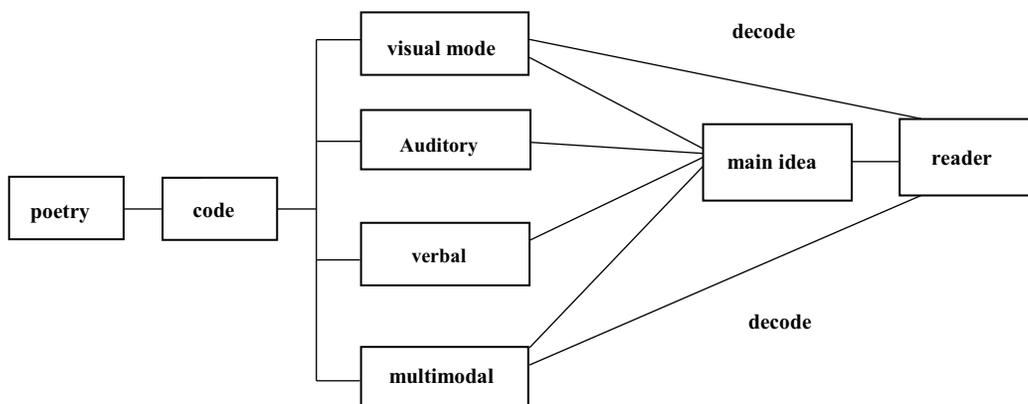


Figure 1 A multimodal diagram of poetry

As shown from Figure 1, multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) is a process from the text to the audience, among which the four basic levels are the parts that need to be paid attention to in the whole poetry. The diagram



first analyzes the structure of poetry from outside to inside of the text. The poem is objective, while the thought of the author is subjective. The poet encodes this poem to form a whole frame, which constitutes a multimodal discourse form system. The verbal modes of poetry are presented through the clever use of grammatical structures of images. The visual mode is expressed through the structure of poetry, meaning construction, which is projected into the mind of readers and finally produces a psychological space. The auditory mode is mainly manifested in the form of sound and sound grammar. The senses in this system are defined as a multimodal integration of meanings that form a theme in the poem for the reader to decode further. Next, we will interpret Donne's poem by using this theory from these four aspects.

3. The Application of Multimodal Discourse Analysis in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”

3.1 *Visual mode*

The poem is rich in using images, such as the “death”, “earthquake”, and “celestial earthquakes”, “compass” rotation, and so on. When the poet describes them in detail, there are always diagrams to connect the poem's overall meaning. When we can see these images, there is a shift of thought, as in the third stanza of the poem:

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
T' were profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

(Coffin 1994: 38)

By using “No tear-flood”, the poet wants to say: Let us not shed tears like floods as other laymen do. To shed tears so that the laymen will know is to profane the joy of his and his wife. This stanza means that there is no need to disturb the outside world.

Celestial vibrations are bigger than earthquakes but are not harmful to them two. The poet assures his wife that there is no need to be panic about their temporary separation. In Stanza 3, the speaker compares the earth's motion to the “tremor of the sphere”, citing the ancient astronomical theory that the universe is made up of a series of concentric circles. On the earth, things grow, change and die within the limits of what is considered to exist “on earth”. The outer spheres are eternal, and their movements are regular, circular and perfectly arranged.

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

(Coffin 1994: 38)

In the third stanza, the sphere symbolizes the speaker's relationship with his wife, the female mock listener. Their love is unaffected by small changes such as temporary separation in the world (Hu Jialuan 1991). These images are rich in connotation and convey the poet's psychological process.

Here is the image diagram:

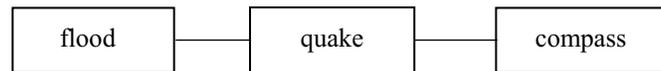


Figure 2 image decomposition map

Whatever the image, the reader will be able to understand the feeling after the feedback to the inner message. These three images jump again for the reader to understand and interpret new dimensions.

3.2 *Auditory mode*

Look at the first stanza.

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No;

(Coffin 1994: 38)

The meaning of the first stanza is: Sad friends are talking. Some say they have no breath, and others say they have. We can hear the voice: “Whilst some of their sad friends do say / The breath goes now, and some say, No.”

In Stanza 8, we can also hear the sound:

And though it in the centersit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

(Coffin 1994: 39)

The poet's wife, the fixed foot, “leans and hearkens” after the traveler, the moving foot, until the moving leg grows erect when it comes home. Whenever it goes and comes, the sound is heard in the imagination of the readers. The sounds are not described directly in the text, but we always seem to hear these sounds. There is an imagined sound and in it, and we can feel the poet's emotion.

Hearing is a medium that the poet hears, which can be shared, perceived, and ultimately serves the context. The voice is active and gives the reader space to think and also embodies conceptual, interpersonal and textual meaning. The interaction of this mode and visual image extends the imagination space of poetry.

3.3 *Verbal mode*

Here, language is a social symbol and interacts with other symbols to form an entity. According to

Halliday's theory of systemic functional grammar, language is used to express meaning. In this poem, the poet uses vocabulary and grammar to construct the poem's theme. We can see it from various images of emotional expressions, such as "earthquake", "soul", "compass", etc. We can feel the poet's heart of loyalty to love. This image "compass" is a symbol of love, and it can walk freely. Lover's firmness makes the circle complete and brings the poet back to the beginning or end where he began. (Li & Liu 2014)

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Liketh' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

(Coffin 1994: 39)

The speech modes in stanza 9 are shown as follows:

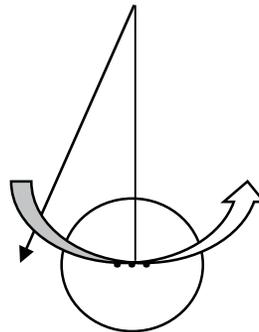


Figure 3 Image decomposition of compasses

Stanza 9 is the climax of the poem. By using the image of the circle, the poet makes this love remain complete and fresh, reflecting the clear eternal feeling. This expression is unconventional. The image is unusual but thought-provoking. The compass, as a social symbol, has a variety of functions. For example, in terms of conceptual function, it refers to the deep affection between the poet and his wife. As for interpersonal function, it is a persuasive pattern diagram constructed by the poet and his wife, which will form a kind of thinking diagram for the reader. About the textual function, the poet uses the "conceit" to compare the operation of "compass" to the eternal love of the poet to his wife.

3.4 Integration of multimodal meaning

Modern semiotic studies are often attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). There are differences between their views, but they both believe that language is a system of signs with images, signs and symbols.

There have been four main perspectives of multimodal research in recent years: an interactive sociological perspective, cognitive perspective, stylistic perspective, and functional semiotic perspective (Zhang 2009). From the cognitive perspective, scholars are concerned about how conceptualization theories choose different modal combinations to communicate coherently, focusing on how source and goal are simultaneously represented in more than one mode in the ideal cognitive model. In addition, Peter Stockwell also did relevant research and be-

lieved that different modes showed different characteristics in symbolic attributes, cognitive orientation and semantic potential.

The poem also uses the knowledge of melody and figure of speech to enrich the connotation of the poem. In addition, the poem's visual mode and speech mode form a complementary relationship, and the visual effect makes up for the lack of speech very well. Through images, punctuation, and other symbols, the poet uses the interactive mode between images and text to better convey the implied meaning of the poem and expand the connotation of the poem. Just like this, metaphysical poetry is gradually systematized and stylized, making people read with great emotion and become unforgettable.

And though it in the center it,
Yet when the other far doth come,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

(Coffin 1994: 39)

In the Stanza 8 of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", the movement of the fixed foot is described further. Initially, it is in the center of their world: Everything revolves around it. Then, if the other leg, the one compared to Donne, decides to "roam" far into the distance, it leans. This is the only movement that his wife makes. When he travels, she "hearkens" after him. She then straightens up again or "grows erect" when he comes home or returns to the fixed point.

This strange compass constitutes a conceptual metaphor, symbolizing the spiritual love between the poet and his lover. All of these visual images, "center" "grow erect", show that the poet uses the technique of defamiliarization to construct readers' psychological space. As far as a meter is concerned, interlaced rhymes have eight syllables in each line. In a word, the poem reflects the profound affection between the poet and his lover and the poet's view of death, from sound, form, and meaning.

Analyzed with the four modes of the poem, visual mode, auditory mode, verbal mode and multimodal meaning integration, the text is comprehensively analyzed, and finally, the classical poetry is interpreted through the integration of the meanings of the multiple modes. Although these modes can come together, they carry different functions and ultimately serve the discourse.

4. Conclusion

By employing the multimodal discourse analysis theory based on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, this paper explores the meaning of the single modal construction. It reveals the relationship between its visual mode, auditory mode, speech mode and the multimodal meaning integration of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning". Through a comprehensive analysis of the theme, we find that poets can convey creative intention effectively with an interaction of images and texts. At the same time, we can find the role of each mode in the text and the artistic conception and beauty of the overall expression of the text easily. This analysis helps us to understand poetry from sound, form and meaning. After analyzing the poem, we can feel the overall effect of various

images of the poet's devotion to love. Concerning love, Donne spent the majority of the text trying to define what his love is through a series of images and analogies. We do this in the hope of exploring a new approach for the interpretation of Donne's poetry and even for the interpretation of more multimodal literary texts.

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