

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Posters-Based on Visual Grammar

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Abstract

The 19th Asian Games was held in Hangzhou in September 2023, and the official posters for the 19th Asian Games Hangzhou 2022 are an important vehicle to display the cultural characteristics and concepts of China and Hangzhou. In this paper, Kress & Van Leeuwen's visual grammar was the basis for the multimodal discourse analysis of the official posters for the 19th Asian Games Hangzhou 2022, and they interpreted how the different modal symbols in the official posters are interconnected with each other from the perspectives of representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, which together construct the meaning of the image discourse and convey the information. Empirical evidence is presented for the practicability of visual grammar in analyzing posters, which aids viewers in comprehending them more thoroughly and has significant implications for enhancing the perception of modal discourse.

Keywords: Multinodal discourse analysis, Visual grammar, Posters, The 19th Asian Games Hangzhou 2022

1. Introduction

In today's age of digitalization and globalization, information transmission is no longer dependent on a single medium or mode. On the contrary, multimodal communication is increasingly prevalent in people's daily lives. Multimodal discourse involves words, images, sounds, and other perceptual elements that enable us to understand and communicate more fully. Therefore, discourse can no longer be thoroughly analyzed and studied from a solely linguistic perspective. Based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar, Kress and Van

Leeuwen proposed the theory of visual grammar. They believed that every semiotic system could project the social relations between speakers and receivers (1996). Posters express information by combining images, colors, and phrases with other modal signals. In this context, visual grammar as a theoretical framework provides a powerful tool for interpreting posters and visual elements. Studying the official posters of the Asian Games enables a more comprehensive analysis of the event, including its themes and meaning. By using the theoretical framework of visual grammar, this study conducted a detailed multimodal discourse analysis of the official posters for the Asian Games Hangzhou. This study intends to investigate the cultural symbols embedded in these posters, the messages transmitted, and the function of multimodal discourse in this visual expression through in-depth analysis of these posters.

Poster design is a visual communication method that aims to grab people's attention and create an immediate impact through the arrangement of different elements such as pictures, text, color, and space. It is used to present promotional information in a suitable format. The Asian Games is the largest comprehensive sports event in Asia that promotes sportsmanship, showcases Asian culture, fosters friendship and unity, and enhances the level of competitive sports in the region. The 19th Asian Games will take place in Hangzhou City, Zhejiang Province, and the official poster will be an important visual representation of the event. It will reflect the cultural characteristics of the host country and city and convey the message of hosting the Games. Cultural expression is essential to understanding social and cultural change. Therefore, this study analyzed how designers use visual elements to convey cultural messages and explore the potential cultural connotations of these posters. This study not only contributes to the theory of visual syntax but also provides empirical support for the theory of visual grammar.

This study expects to enhance our comprehension of the correlation between multimodal discourse and cultural expression. Additionally, it seeks to offer theoretical and practical insights into the field of sports event posters, promoting design innovation by exploring cultural symbols in-depth.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Visual Grammar

Multimodal discourse analysis focuses on the interaction of multiple modalities, such as language, image, and sound, and aims to gain a deeper understanding and explanation of the complexity of multimedia messages. One of the earliest researchers in multimodal discourse analysis was R. Barthes, who explored the interaction between images and language in the expression of meaning in his paper *Rhetoric of the Image*. After that, Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001) provided an important theoretical foundation for the study of multimodal discourse. They emphasized the complexity of multimodal discourse and how the various modalities interact with each other to co-construct meaning.

Visual grammar is the study of how people, objects, and things in images combine to form a meaningful whole and how images encode social behaviors and interactions (Li, 2013). The

theory serves as a theoretical framework for the structure of images and visual elements, providing researchers with a set of tools to analyze the structure and organization of images and visual elements. In previous studies in this field, Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996) studied the relationship between modality and media and specifically explored the phenomenon of multimodal phenomena in the regular expression of meaning, including visual images, color grammar, the role of newspaper layout and different media, etc. In addition, Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) constructed a theoretical framework for the analysis of imagery in visual grammar in their book, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Painter et al. (2014) proposed a meta-functional framework for the systematic analysis of visual narratives consisting of multiple images based on Kress & van Leeuwen's (2006) framework for the analysis of single images in their book *Interpreting Visual Narratives*. This publication enhanced the study of visual grammar by expanding the scope of the research and refining the theoretical framework. The theory has a wide range of applications in analyzing cultural symbols and messaging in visual representations such as images and posters.

Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) proposed that images also have three major meta-functions, namely, representational, interactive, and compositional meaning. In visual grammar, the representational meaning of an image means that any semiotic modality can reproduce objective things and their relationship with the external world. Representational meaning corresponds to the conceptual function in systemic functional linguistics and reproduced meaning can be divided into narrative process and conceptual process. The criterion for distinguishing between the two is that there are vectors consisting of diagonal lines between image elements in the narrative structure, while there will not be any in the conceptual structure (Zhang & Jia, 2012). Similar to interpersonal relations in systemic-functional grammar, interactive meaning in visual grammar aims to explore the relationship between the image maker, the world presented by the image, and the image viewer, as well as to express the attitudes that the image viewer should hold towards the represented thing (Feng, 2015). The elements of contact, social distance, attitude, and modality are integral constituents of the interpretation of interaction. Compositional meaning corresponds to discourse meaning in Systemic Functional Grammar. Compositional meaning refers to how an image integrates its reproduction and interaction meanings to form a meaningful whole. Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) proposed that compositional meaning contains information value, salience, and framing.

2.2 Visual Grammar in Posters

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on the development of visual grammar and its implications for multimodal readings of cartoons and posters. To illustrate this, Prendergast (2017) conducted a multimodal analysis of Argentinean political cartoons, utilizing visual grammar and semiotics to explore their role in challenging dictatorships. Martínez-Lirola (2023) analyzed the parallels between the depiction of Irish party leaders in political posters for the 2016 and 2020 general elections in Ireland through visual grammar. Scholars in the field of film posters are increasingly using visual analysis to conduct a multimodal discourse analysis of posters. For instance, Peng (2019) performed a multimodal analysis of the movie poster *Hi, Mom*, based on the visual grammar of Kress & Van Leeuwen.

Similarly, Zhang (2019) analyzed the film posters of three English-language movies using visual grammar to conduct a multimodal discourse analysis, offering a comprehensive viewpoint on film poster appreciation.

Gradually, in the field of sports culture, there are also scholars focusing on the study of its multimodal discourse analysis. For example, Theodoropoulou & Alos (2018) conducted a multimodal analysis of various types of advertisements for sporting events held in Doha, the capital of Qatar, between 2006 and 2022 from the critical perspectives of modal discourse analysis and social semiotics, parsing how Qatar builds up its distinctive tourism brand image through visual communication. Furthermore, Ismail et al. (2022) employed a corpus-assisted multimodal discourse analysis approach to conduct a multimodal critical discourse analysis of all 47 articles from the 2012 and 2016 Paralympic Games, where textual and pictorial texts were analyzed separately, and the results surfaced differences in the gender portrayal and affective expression of people with disabilities in these news stories, and succeeded in revealing how pictorial elements successfully convey emotional information about athletes. The existing literature review indicates that although there are some multimodal discourse analyses related to sports events, the number is very limited and there are relatively few studies on the specific application of combining visual grammar with multimodal discourse analysis, especially in the field of sports event posters. Sports event posters are an important visual cultural product that plays an important role in conveying information and triggering emotional resonance among viewers and is worthy of multimodal analysis. Considering this, this study will try to fill this research gap based on existing studies and dig deeper into the cultural expression and information transmission of the official posters of Hangzhou Asian Games.

These studies above have made a great contribution to the knowledge of multimodal discourse analysis and have further enriched visual grammar. However, most studies have focused on political cartoons and posters, as well as film posters, and there is a gap in the multimodal analysis of sports event posters, especially in combination with the specific use of visual grammar. For this reason, this study is based on visual grammar to analyze the cultural elements as well as the message conveyed in the Hangzhou Asian Games posters from three perspectives.

3. Multimodal Discourse Analysis in the 19th Asian Games Posters

This section analyzed the posters used during the 19th Hangzhou Asian Games as multimodal texts that combine both written and visual elements to convey meaning. Before conducting an in-depth poster analysis, contextualization is necessary. The Asian Organising Committee issued a worldwide invitation for the creation of official posters for the Hangzhou Asian Games, and after several rounds of evaluations, a selection of official posters was finally chosen for display. The official posters of the Hangzhou Asian Games will feature prominently in various aspects of the event, including visual representation, social ambiance, and media publicity. These posters serve as a medium to communicate with the world and narrate China's story. This investigation analyzed the significance of representation, interaction, and composition in two highly representative posters and elucidated how to

convey the profound meaning of multimodal text.

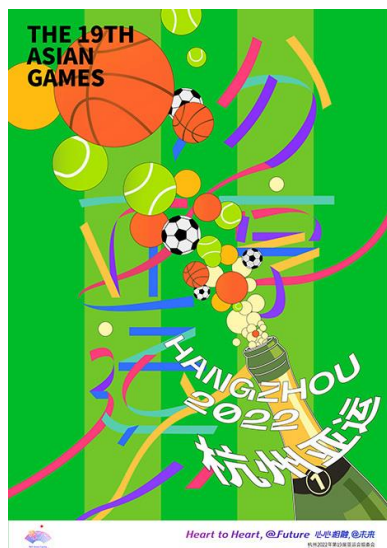


Figure 1. Share the Asian Games



Figure 2. Climbing the Peak, Running into the Future

3.1 Representational Meaning

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), the narrative process involves implementing behavioral and dynamic processes to illustrate how an event unfolds through the actions and reactions of participants, as well as material, verbal, and other processes. The action process involves a vector, where the participant sending the vector is called the actor and the participant receiving the vector is called the target. In contrast, the conceptual process is a static process in which the relationships between the participants in an event are revealed by their classifications, analytical process, and symbolic process. The classification and analysis processes are centered on the relationships that exist between the participants, while the symbolic process explores the question of “what the participants are or mean.”

From Figure 1, athletes can be observed engaging in a range of physical activities such as running forward, jumping to catch a badminton ball, and performing gymnastics-related jumps. Each athlete has a forward and upward vector, which displays their vigor and passion. There appears to be no recipient to respond to the actions, but it is evident that the potential audience acts as the recipient for these vectors, forming the process. Figure 2 illustrates that the movement process entails raising the champagne and shifting the diverse balls and ribbons, generating an upward vector that conveys a sense of festivity and elation. The individuals involved in the action are not depicted in the poster, but it targets the same potential audience. The narrative process of the image is significantly based on the direction indicated by the vector to portray the entire action, as it is presented in a static format.

The classification in the conceptual process investigates hierarchical associations; in contrast, the analysis process explores the relationship between the entirety and its constituent parts; and the symbolic process investigates how the participants symbolize. Figure 1 demonstrates

an even distribution of positions and sizes among athletes, reflecting the International Olympic Committee's "athlete-centered" approach. The depictions of athletes in various poses are symbolic representations of the Olympic spirit in conceptual form. They express hopes for future contributions towards the advancement of the Olympic Movement in Asia and globally. The athletes' images are associated with the Asian Games and portrayed through the medium of sports. Figure 2 presents a regional setting with champagne and balls in the foreground and the running track in the background. The words "Share the Asian Games," are composed of ribbons and emphasize the exciting atmosphere of the event. The clinking of glasses and the opening of champagne in the image generate a sense of happiness, while the text is expressed in ribbons to emphasize the exciting atmosphere of the event. Simultaneously, the ball and the track symbolize sports, whereas the ribbon embodies silk, an emblematic element of Hangzhou's regional culture. These elements collectively contribute to the symbolic process.

3.2 Interactive Meaning

Contact, social distance, attitude, and modality comprise four essential elements that construct interactive meaning. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, contact is a perceived connection between an image participant and the viewer established through the gaze. Social distance plays a significant role in establishing the connection between image participants and viewers, which can reflect the nature of their social relationships. The attitude of the image viewer towards the image participant is what defines attitude in the interactive meaning. Modality, on the other hand, highlights the level of accuracy of the image world in representing the real world. This mostly hinges on factors such as color saturation, illumination, luminance, and contextualization.

In Figure 1, the athletes do not make eye contact with the audience, and there is no interactive behavior, suggesting that the participants are primarily conveying offer information. At the social distance level, the athletes are in a medium shot to display a sense of personal connection with the viewers. This suggests that the social distance between the athletes and viewers is close and emphasizes the message that the Asian Games is more than just a competitive arena. Rather, it serves as a vital platform for communication and forging friendship. In terms of attitude, the poster employs a low-angle view to further emphasize the athletes' sportsmanlike mentality of actively participating and striving for victory. The poster evokes emotions of joy and integration through its bright and colorful display of "rainbow purple," the dominant color of the "Tides Surging" emblem of Hangzhou Asian Games, a color implying reunion and unity, vibrancy and innovation. It conveys positive connotations of joy and good fortune, and plays a vital role in creating a distinctive visual identity for the Hangzhou Asian Games.

Comparably, none of the participants in Figure 2 make direct eye contact with the viewers, which would indicate that they are offering information. Furthermore, the close-up angle of the balls and champagne suggests a tight social distance for the audience. This implies that the Hangzhou Asian Games and the sports events that surround it have a close relationship with the audience and may encourage everyone to be keen on exercise. The dominant color

showcased in Figure 2 is “lake and mountain green,” conveying the hues of green mountains and environmentalism and reflecting the theme of a green Asian Games. These colors are rendered in a highly saturated and vivid style.

3.3 Compositional Meaning

Compositional meaning refers to the composition of all the components that demonstrate the full meaning of a picture (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). It consists of three elements, namely Information value, Saliency and Framing.

Based on Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (1996) framework, the center of a picture is the most important location for conveying visual information value. Therefore, the athletes and “Hangzhou 2022” in Figure 1 are placed in the central position of the poster, which highlights their saliency and the key message of the Hangzhou Asian Games and sports. The slogan and organizer of the Asian Games, as well as some descriptive text information, are placed in the lower right corner in an inconspicuous “marginal information-giving zone,” which indicates that this text information is not the mainstream information that the visual producers want to pass on to the viewers, but it is the information that cannot be missed. In Fig. 2, the ball games and the words “Share the Asian Games” are in the center of the poster, indicating their importance. Significance is also indicated by various elements in the image, such as the thickness of the lines and the intensity of the colors. The words “19th Asian Games” and “Hangzhou Asian Games” are placed in the top left and bottom right corners of the poster respectively, using thick lines and bright colors, again to highlight the important message of the poster and to attract the audience's attention. The slogan of the Hangzhou Asian Games and other information are at the bottom of the poster, and its clarity and font size are not as prominent as the other information. These images, words, and other elements complement each other to achieve the function of information transfer.

4. Conclusion

Starting from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis, this paper applied Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of visual grammar to analyze how the 19th Asian Games Hangzhou 2022 poster constructs pictorial meanings and conveys information from three perspectives: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. After analyzing the posters, it was discovered that they require the interconnection of multiple meanings to effectively convey information. Additionally, the posters work in conjunction with each other by rationally arranging modal symbols such as images, colors, words, and their accompanying features. This demonstrates the Hangzhou Asian Games' unwavering commitment to promoting the development of the Olympic Movement and the unity and friendship of the Asian community. Therefore, multimodal discourse analysis of posters based on visual grammar can help readers dig out the deeper meanings of the images and better understand the connotation and promotional functions of posters.

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