

A Social Semiotic Approach to the Attitudinal Meanings in Multimodal Texts*

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Abstract—As a special type of multimodal text, picture books for children are highly valued in the creation of meaning by the integrative use of verbal and visual semiotic resources. Informed by Painter and Martin’s framework of visual narratives, this paper primarily deals with the interpersonal meanings encoded and expressed by the two semiotics (image and verbiage) within the Chinese picture books. It aims to analyse the visual and verbal choices available for writers to establish engagement between various participants. In the hope of investigating the collaboration and interplay of verbal and visual semiotics to construe interpersonal meanings, it examines the attitudinal meanings inscribed or invoked in picture books, exploring the ways in which visual and verbal resources are co-instantiated to encode attitudinal convergence and also divergence.

Index Terms—attitudinal meanings, social semiotics, Chinese picture books, multimodal discourse analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Unlike the more conservative views of text focusing on its linguistic nature, text in recent years is preferentially perceived as a “semiotic object” in which different modes or semiotic resources co-occur to create meanings in combination (Fowler, 1986; Kress, 2000). Children’s picture books as a typical kind of multimodal texts, often serve as a foundational part in the lives of young children. The most evident function that children picture books can serve is to bring the young into the literary world. The factor for picture books as a favourite reading material of children is that “usually the first contact a child has with books is with picture books, which remain the principle literary form up to and beyond the age at which children master literacy for themselves” (Stephens, 1992, p.158). Children are introduced into the literary world by a set of complex strategies such as interacting with texts, apprenticing them to appreciate those texts. However, in most of studies on children’s literary (e.g. Schwarcz, 1982; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001), the visual components within picture books are assumed to be secondary, and relationship between visual elements and verbal texts has been practically ignored. On the basis of Painter and Martin’s (2011) framework, this paper aims to conduct an account of the difference of the two semiotic resources in encoding attitudinal meanings in Chinese children’s picture books, aiming to track the way in which each semiotic system is instantiated to make meanings in multimodal texts.

II. THE STUDY OF STORY AS A GENRE

In exploring the narratives of personal experience, Labov and Waletzky (1967) initiate a comprehensive analytical framework with a sociolinguistic orientation. Later, this initiative model is further developed by Labov in his quantitative sociolinguistic studies (e.g. Labov 1972a, 1972b). As a useful and powerful analytical tool, their framework has been applied in a wide range of linguistic studies on narratives. In their framework, Labov and Waletzky (1967/1997, p. 12) attempt to define narrative informally as “as one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events that actually occurred”. With the definition as the starting point, they further introduce the concepts of “narrative unit”, “restricted clause”, “free clause” and “narrative clause” (Labov & Waletzky 1967/1997, p. 13-26). Based on these concepts, Labov and Waletzky deal with a wide range of tape-recorded narratives derived from two distinct social contexts. One of such two social contexts is the situation in which the narrator is speaking only to the interviewer (the one who does not belong to the narrator’s primary group) in a face-to-face interview. In the second context, the narrator is recorded in talking to other members of the primary group, and even sometimes to a relative outsider on the margins of the primary group (the one who would provide only a part of the stimulus for the narrative). In the analysis of the clause types in a great number of narratives of personal experience, Labov and Waletzky (1967/1997) attempt to map the overall structure of narratives. The overall structure of narratives in respect to personal experience has been summarised in Table 2-1.

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TABLE 2-1

THE STRUCTURE OF NARRATIVES IN RELATION TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE (REPRODUCED FROM LABOV & WALETZKY 1967/1997, P. 27-37)

Orientation	It serves the function of orienting the listener in respect to person, place, time and behavioural situation.
Complication	It is viewed as the main body of narrative clauses which comprises a series of events that may be termed the complication or complicating action.
Evaluation	The evaluation is defined as part of the narrative that reveals the attitude of the narrator towards the narrative by emphasising the relative importance of some narrative units as compared to others.
Resolution	The resolution of the narrative is that portion of the narrative sequence that follows the evaluation. If the evaluation is the last element, then the resolution section coincides with the evaluation.
Coda	The coda is a functional device for returning the verbal perspective to the present moment.

In examining the overall structure, Labov and Waletzky have found that there is a generalised structure with which those narratives of personal experience may unfold. Generally speaking, the narratives would progress alongside the stages of Orientation, Complication, Evaluation, Resolution and Coda. Among the different stages in a narrative, the stage of Evaluation is seen as a fundamental component constituting the overall structure of a narrative, without which the narrative is not complete (Labov & Waletzky 1967/1997). The importance of the stage of Evaluation lies in its function as a useful interlude linking the stage of Complication and the stage of Resolution. According to Labov and Waletzky (1967/1997), it is important and necessary for the narrator “to delineate the structure of the narrative by emphasizing the point where the complication has reached a maximum: the break between the complication and the result...[and thus]...most narratives contain an evaluation section that carries out this function” (p. 32). It is revealed from the overall structure of the narratives proposed by them that the stage of Evaluation is highlighted with great emphasis put on its significance. However, sometimes it would be problematic in the restriction of the Evaluation stage as being a discrete one that is different from other stages.

Therefore, Labov (e.g. Labov 1972a) in his later research of narrative modifies the earlier scheme (Labov & Waletzky 1967/1997) of narrative by indicating evaluation as the focus of waves since evaluative devices are distributed throughout the narrative. The prosodic dispersal of evaluative meaning proposed by Labov (1972a) is illustrated in Figure 2-1.

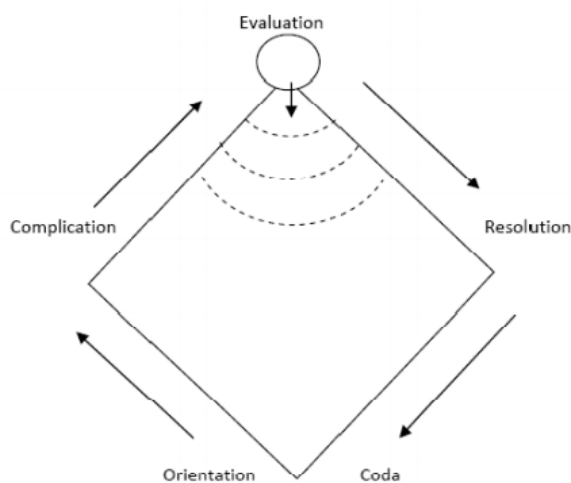


Figure 2-1 Dispersed evaluation in narrative (Labov 1972a, p. 369)

By the modifying paradigm, Labov (1972a) explores how the penetration of evaluative meanings is accomplished through the whole internal structure of narratives. However, this paradigm impairs the measuring function of Evaluation in distinguishing the stage of Complication from Resolution, because the evaluative meanings are regarded as distributed throughout the narrative (Labov 1972a). With regard to the distinction of evaluation, Plum (e.g. Plum 1988, Martin & Plum 1997) brings forth a theoretical framework for analysing a set of different genres of story. The data collected from a sociolinguistic interview is “designed to ‘elicit’ particular genres, including narratives’ (Martin & Plum, 1997, p. 299).” Besides the type of recount in relation to story initiated by Martin, Plum (1988) puts forwards several distinct types of narrative texts, namely, anecdote, exemplum and observation. Although there are a number of differences between those types of narrative, all of them place an emphasis on the significant role of evaluation in demarcating types of story genre.

Drawing upon Labov and Waletzky’s (1967/1997) research on the narratives of personal experience and Plum’s (1988) work on the types of narrative texts, Martin and Rose (2008) develop the concept of “story family” to explore the typology of texts related to the genre of story. According to Martin and Rose (2008), the differentiated types of

stories can be basically distinguished into five categories: recount, anecdote, exemplum, observation and narrative.

Apart from the type of recounts, other members included in the story family, such as anecdote, exemplum, observation and narrative, share some similarities in that they involve a disruption. The narrative is different from the anecdote, exemplum and observation in that it places a particular focus on the action carried out by the protagonist to look for a solution to bring equilibrium back to the story when the story is confronted with disruption. However, among the other three types, events are merely evaluated without action taken to bring back the equilibrium.

In examining the structural potential for the nursery tales, Hasan (1984/1996) proposes the notion of the Generic Structure Potential (SP or GSP for short, thus GSP henceforth) to discuss the semiotic structure of the genre of nursery tales. As an essential concept in Systemic Functional Linguistics, genre is regarded as an aspect of mode (Halliday 1978/2001), and a certain genre may serve as “the specific semiotic functions of text that have social value in the culture” (Halliday 1978/2001, p. 145). In SFL, genre is closely related with the semiotic structure of the context of situation, which can be understood as a short form for the more elaborate phrase “genre-specific semantic potential”, bearing a logic relation to contextual configuration (Hasan, 1985, p. 108). In this respect, the textual potential of a particular text belonging to a specified genre includes a repertoire of a wide range of optional or obligatory elements which are organised in a linear order.

Therefore, the main objective that GSP model seeks to achieve is to explore both the representations of the obligatory and optional elements in a certain genre of texts and also to discuss the structural order in which these elements (obligatory or optional) may occur in a given type of genre. A GSP meeting all these conditions would depict the total potential of the texture structures of a given genre, while the actual structure of an instance of the specific genre would perform a particular schematic configuration permitted by the GSP. The three aspects of text structure are concerned with different elements involved in a given genre. Taking into account all these aspects, Hasan (1984/1996) illustrates the structural potential of the genre of nursery tales on the basis of a wide range of data:



Figure 2-2 GSP of the nursery tale (Hasan 1984/1996, p. 54)

As demonstrated in Figure 2-2, the elements framed in round brackets are optional elements, including Placement, Finale and Moral. Except from these elements, the other elements (e.g. Initiating Event, Sequence Event and Final event) are labeled as obligatory elements. In other words, a nursery tale without these obligatory elements is not regarded as a complete and generic one. Moreover, Placement and Initiating Event are enclosed in a square bracket and the same as that of Finale and Moral. And the angled brackets which enclose Placement can be interpreted in a way that the lexico-grammatical realisations of Placement are likely to be included or interspersed with the realisations of Initiating Event. The carat sign ^ accounts for the irreversible order of the elements. That is to say, the left element of the carat sign ^ cannot be preceded by the element on the left side of the sign. On the contrary, the raised dot used between Finale and Moral refers to the reversibility of the order of the two elements.

III. THE APPRAISAL FRAMEWORK IN DISCOURSE SEMANTICS

In order to gain a better understanding on the language of evaluation, a group of systemic functional linguists in Sydney have proposed and developed the Appraisal theory (Martin 2003; Martin & White 2005) which provides a useful tool for analysing evaluation in different types of discourse. The pioneer work for developing Appraisal framework can be traced back to the project of “Write it Right”. The project was undertaken by the Sydney group led by J. R. Martin, with its initial concern on the language of evaluation in the genre of narration (Martin & Plum 1997). In the innovative research, Martin (1992) describes and explains a range of gradable systems in which meanings “enter into oppositions concerned with the evaluation of experience” (p. 336). The past four decades have witnessed a fast growth in the theoretical construct of the Appraisal theory at the discourse semantic level (Martin & White, 2005).

In recent years, the APPRAISAL framework as an effective tool has been applied to a wide range of different genres of discourse. It also has been extended to the analysis of the genre of writing, with a focus on children’s writing in secondary school (e.g. Rothery & Stenglin, 1997), and on the evaluation of language in academic writing (e.g. Hood, 2008).

In systemic functional framework, APPRAISAL theory is concerned with the evaluative resources in diverse types of discourse, aiming to explore “the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings involved and the ways in which values are sourced and readers aligned” (Martin & Rose 2003, p. 25). In other words, the theory is applied to examine the linguistic resources in a number of texts which express (both explicitly and implicitly) a text/speaker/writer’s social stance, attitudes and feelings. Regarded as a discourse semantic resource which construes interpersonal meanings, APPRAISAL is constituted by some interacting domains of realisations, namely, attitude, engagement, and graduation.

IV. THE ANALYSIS OF INTERPERSONAL MEANING IN CHINESE PICTURE BOOKS

The APPRAISAL framework has also been extended to the analysis of visual images, providing an effective and comprehensive tool for analysing how attitudes, feeling, values are encoded and expressed in different types of images. The pioneering studies on the appraisal analysis of visual mode indicate the attitudinal repertoire embedded in images and the important role that images play in construing evaluative stance in a multimodal discourse (e.g. Economou, 2009; Tian, 2011).

This paper is mainly concerned with the attitudinal meanings that are encoded in Chinese children's books. Thus, an analysis of attitudinal meaning in visuals is exemplified in Illustration 4-1. The example is excerpted from *The Spring Festival* (Hua 2013) which is a typical use of cartoons in picture books for narrating story events. As illustrated in the image, there are a number of depicted characters sitting in a table. Besides a female character with ambiguous affect on her face, each of the depicted characters in the image represents an expressive feeling of delight and happiness, which can be shown by their facial expression of laughing (with eyes closed and mouth open) and their bodily behaviour. As shown in the image, the depicted participants are sitting together around a table to make Chinese dumplings, and one participant (the boy) is feeding his mother a dumpling. It is important to note that both human faces and bodily behaviour may serve as the part of visual ideation (or visual experience) and can be most easily recognised by the viewers. Therefore, some kinds of depicted facial expressions and gestures can be viewed as the types of universally shared visual lexicon of emotions, or as the values of "primary affect" (Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000). For instance, sensations and feelings of the depicted participants expressed by facial emotions such as a smile or frown, or via depicted bodily behaviours like weeping or laughing can be unambiguously visually represented as "visual affect inscriptions" (Economou, 2009, p. 111). On the one hand, the depicted character of a particular kind of emotion (expressed by the facial depicted expressions and bodily behaviours) is identified as the "Emoter". On the other, the identified or implied cause of the depicted emotion is termed as the "Trigger" that may be represented in the image or not (see Martin & White, 2005; and Economou, 2009). Therefore, in this example a positive affect meaning is unambiguously and directly inscribed in the image with the depicted characters (exactly three women characters and a little boy) as Emoters and the family activities (making Chinese dumplings together) as the Trigger.



Illustration 4-1 from *On the Spring Festival* (2012)

In order to achieve a nuanced examination of the attitudinal meanings (in this case AFFECT) encoded in Chinese picture books, we would draw on Martin and White's (2005, p. 46-52) categorisations of AFFECT in terms of six parameters. These six factors are explicated as follows: (i) whether the feelings are construed by the culture as positive or negative; (ii) whether the feelings are realised as a surge of emotion involving some kind of behavioural manifestations, or as an internal state and mental process; (iii) whether the emotions are construed as reactions to a specific emotional Trigger, or as a general ongoing mood; (iv) how the feelings are graded along the scale of intensity ranging from higher value to lower value; (v) whether the emotions involve an intension with respect to a stimulus that is unrealis (e.g. *the captain feared leaving*), or involve a reaction to a certain stimulus that is realis (e.g. *the captain disliked leaving*); and (vi) whether the emotions are concerned with "affairs of the heart" (un/happiness), or the "ecosocial well-being" (in/security), or the "pursuit of goals" (dis/satisfaction).

Based on Martin and White's basic categorisation, different types of AFFECT are analysed and explicated in Table 4-1 below, with the corresponding visual patterns also demonstrated. At the first glance, the reader of this image is easier to be attracted by the use of red and pinkish-orange colours. A comforting and joyful mood is created via the option of [warm] and [vibrant] through the system of AMBIENCE (see Painter et al., 2013). It is not difficult to understand that the use of warm colours can facilitate the reading of the emotions of the depicted characters who are spending New Year with other family members. Another important part in creating social interaction is the differentiation of the use of colours in the image, such as red, pale yellow and pinkish-orange hues adopted in the depiction. Such visual technique provides an engagement between the depicted characters and the child reader. Moreover, the generic style of the depiction of characters used in this example is likely to expect the child readers to be involved in the story world and stand in the character's shoes to perceive themselves as the protagonist. Hence, the

generic style of depiction invites the reader to take an empathetic stance to share the comforting and cheerful emotion with the depicted characters and experience the love between the family members. To complement with those visual techniques employed in the image, a kind of positive AFFECT is represented in the image which can be inferred from a set of apparent visual realisations such as the facial expressions of and bodily manifestations of the depicted characters in this image.

TABLE 4-1
TYPES OF AFFECT IN RELATION TO ILLUSTRATION 4-1

Type of AFFECT	Corresponding visual patterns
positive AFFECT	the facial expression of delight representing a warm and comforting atmosphere
surge of emotion	the extralinguistic manifestation of ebullient gestures showing an strong engagement in the family activity
reaction to Trigger	the feelings expressed towards the ongoing family activity and interactions to other depicted participants
high value	the strong emotions directly inscribed, and the dramatic joyfulness expressed
realis AFFECT	the emotions of the depicted characters involving the reaction to the stimulus of family activity and social interaction between them
happiness	joyfulness and excitement expressed on their faces
security	comfortable in the conducting interaction
satisfaction	involved and satisfied in the family activity

It is clear that the image illustrates a moment (on the Spring Festival) where four depicted characters sitting on a table to participate in family activities (making Chinese dumplings). And the verbal text in this image is depicted on the top of the page is “为了比比谁的运气好，妈妈、大娘和姑姑分别在饺子里包了一枚干净的硬币。” Obviously, the verbal text is primarily concerned with the narration of the story events, including the introduction of the depicted character (exactly by the personal address) and the family activities which they are taking part in (making jiaozi as well as randomly putting a coin into the jiaozi). However, as for the interactive meanings expressed at the lexico-grammatical level, there are no attitudinal meanings inscribed or invoked in the verbal texts. It is difficult for the reader to determine what kinds of attitudes are construed and encoded (e.g. whether the depicted participants are happy or somber, excited or depressed) by merely reading the verbal text. In a nutshell, the verbal text in this example shows no “commitment” (Martin 2008; Martin & White, 2005) of attitudinal meanings. Compared with the verbal text, the visual image commits more affectual meaning, and thus it is through the visual text that attitudinal meanings are conveyed to the reader. The different degrees of meanings committed in the verbal text and visual image are closely related to Painter and Martin’s (2011) framework of “intermodal complementarity”. As Painter and Martin (2011) explicates, the model of intermodal complementarity focuses on “the question of how choices combine across modalities, and how they complement one another” (Painter & Martin, 2011, p. 133) in multimodal texts, and in the current research, in bimodal texts. In examining the different degrees of meaning committed in the process of instantiation, Painter and Martin (2011) focus on “the degree to which each [semiotic] “commits” meaning in a particular instance and the extent to which – for each metafunction – that commitment converges with or diverges from that of the other modality” (p. 132). In other words, when the same meanings are committed both in the verbal text and visual image, an “intersemiotic convergence” is established; on the contrary, the “intersemiotic divergence” occurs when the verbal mode and visual mode commit different meanings of the same semantic domain. This paper adopts Painter and Martin’s (2011) concept of intersemiotic convergence as well as intersemiotic divergence to analyse the attitudinal meanings encoded in Chinese picture books, with a particular interest in the inscribed affect in the visual image and the verbal text.

The interaction between the affectual meaning encoded in verbal and visual system is also examined by Tian (2011), focusing on the interaction between visual AFFECT and verbal AFFECT. She proposes a model (see Table 4-2) for the analysis of the convergence and divergence in intersemiotic affectual meanings. If a certain kind of affectual meaning is committed via the visual display of a depicted character’s facial expression without a corresponding commitment in the verbal text, it is regarded as intersemiotic divergence. And when the affectual meanings are committed in the verbal text and visual image realised in a contradictory direction (e.g. positive versus negative), it is seen as intersemiotic divergence. However, if both visual and verbal models realise the same kind, or neither of them commit any kind of meaning, it is defined as intersemiotic convergence.

TABLE 4-2¹
INTERSEMIOTIC CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN AFFECTUAL MEANING (REPRESENTED FROM TIAN, 2011, P. 62)

Verbal	Visual	Intersemiotic relation
affect		divergence
	affect	divergence
positive affect	negative affect	divergence
positive affect	positive affect	convergence
		convergence

¹ Dark shading in the cells signals that no such meaning is realised.

Therefore, Illustration 4-1 can be considered as an instance of intersemiotic divergence, where positive facial affect is committed in the depiction of several characters and no affect committed in the verbal. An example of intersemiotic convergence is presented in the first spread of *The Monster Nian* (see Illustration 4-2). As illustrated in this image, it is an introduction to the main protagonist of the story, with a depiction of a monster Nian. The face of the depicted character is illustrated with four eyes (the lower two of them are directed downward), and the bodily gesture illustrated as squatting on a mountain and curling up with his claws hidden. Thus a negative affect is inscribed in this illustration, though it is not specified what kind of the negative affect is. The monster Nian depicted with a dark background may be depressed, lonely, or fearful. The verbal text written at the bottom specifies the exact negative affect encoded in the visual image. The verbal text is demonstrated as follows:

很久很久以前，有一个很孤独的怪物，他的名字叫做“年”。

他住在高高的山上，从来没有人和他玩。

Once upon a time, there is a lonely monster whose name is ‘Nian’.

He lives on a high mountain and nobody ever played with him before.

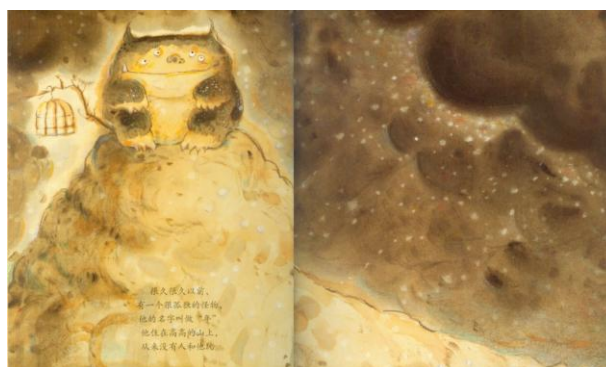


Illustration 4-2 from *The Monster Nian* (2007)

Aside from the facial expression and bodily gesture, there are other visual techniques used here to reinforce the loneliness of the depicted character in this image. The use of colour in this story-page is represented via the [muted] and [cool] option which creates a depressed and distressed mood, showing a lonely and desolate story world to the reader. In addition, the depicted character is gazing out directly at the reader, aiming to strongly invite the reader to be engaged in the imaginary world to play with him since he has always been alone in the story world. In a nutshell, the intersemiotic convergence of attitudinal meaning is construed in this case with the verbiage amplifying the particular negative affectual meaning, and thus shaping intermodally a lonely character and enhancing reader's impression of him.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper carries out a systematic analysis of interpersonal meanings encoded and expressed by the two semiotics (image and verbiage) within the Chinese picture books. Specifically, from the perspective of interpersonal meaning, it probes into the inscribed or invoked meanings in the two different semiotic systems, discussing the ways in which image and verbiage are deployed to construe attitudinal meanings. And it also investigates the cohesive relations between the two modalities which are mainly realised through the attitudinal congruence and attitudinal divergence.

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