

# *Multimodal Analysis and Exploration of English Translation of Pu Opera*

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**Abstract:** Multimodal theory is a theory about human perception and cognition, emphasizing the interaction and integration between sensory channels. It is widely applied in fields such as education, user interface design, healthcare, and rehabilitation. With its further research and development, more and more scholars have applied it to translation studies. Pu Opera, as an important branch of Chinese traditional opera, is a special literary genre that combines literature and stage performance. It is also a typical multimodal discourse, which requires not only the preservation of its literary qualities but also consideration of its performability on stage during translation. Taking the Pu Opera “The Woman Live on the Earthen Kang” adapted from Jia Pingwa’s novel “The Earthen Kang” as an example, this paper conducts a multimodal analysis of Pu Opera from the perspective of the language, visual and auditory modes. It also analyzes and explores the English translation of Pu Opera from cultural, contextual, content, and expressive levels. And it aims to provide a reference for broadening the perspective of Pu Opera translation and publicity, improving the translation quality of Chinese traditional opera in English, and promoting the international dissemination of Chinese opera culture.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rise of China’s international status and the implementation of the strategy of “going out” of Chinese culture, the translation and research of traditional Chinese opera have gradually attracted the attention of academics. Traditional Chinese opera is a treasure of Chinese culture, which is a concentrated manifestation of the cultural connotations of traditional Chinese ethics and morals, literature and performing arts. The president of China once emphasized the important role of opera in shaping the national spirit and fostering socialist core values at the 2019 National Symposium on Literary and Artistic Work, encouraging the opera community to adhere to innovation and development, and to protect and publicize traditional opera. The inheritance of opera requires efforts on several fronts, one of which is to expand the scope of dissemination, including dissemination overseas, so that more international audiences will have the opportunity to come into contact with and experience the charm of traditional opera. As an important branch of Chinese local opera, Pu Opera has gradually attracted attention. The Pu Opera “The Woman Live on the Earthen

Kang” is adapted from Jia Pingwa’s novel “The Earthen Kang”. It was performed by Shanxi Linfen Pu Theater in 2000. The play has a refined structure, simple style, sincere and moving performances, and contains quite high literary and aesthetic values. Pu Opera combines stage effects, lighting and sound, actors' movements, etc., and has the characteristics of multi-modality and multi-symbol system. Therefore, the translation of Pu opera needs to consider its multimodal attributes.

## 2. Development and Research Status of Pu Opera

Pu Opera (also known as Puzhou Bangzi, messy play), originated in the south of Shanxi Province, Yuncheng Puzhou (now Yuncheng Yongji City), is a kind of local traditional drama. The Puzhou Opera was formed around the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty. It is the oldest of the “Four Great Operas of Shanxi”, and is popular in the counties in the south of Shanxi Province, and in parts of Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. In May 2006, Pu Opera was listed in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage in the category of traditional drama.

Previous scholars’ studies on Pu Opera are mainly divided into the following aspects: (1) studies on the tunes, singing styles and singing forms of Pu opera plays themselves; (2) studies on the historical origins and development of Pu opera plays; (3) studies on Pu opera playwrights themselves and their performances; and (4) analytical studies on the characters in the plays of Pu opera plays, or afterthoughts, and so on. Upon inquiry, there are very few studies on the translation of local drama Pu opera by scholars at present. The author searched the China Knowledge Network database with the search terms of “Pu Opera” and “translation/English translation”, and collected one paper, which is a report on the translation practice of the Pu Opera play “Xue Gang Against the Dynasty”.<sup>[1]</sup> The report is about the translation practice of the play “Xue Gang Against the Dynasty” of Pu Opera. The report takes Ying Ruocheng’s theory of theater translation as a guide, and practices the translation of Pu Opera’s script to explore the influence of the principle of performability on the translation of Pu Opera. Other than that, no scholars have studied the translation of Pu Opera scripts from the perspective of multimodality. Pu Opera is a multimodal discourse that combines artistry, performativity, literature, and music. Unlike other literary works, it combines symbolic systems such as stage effects, lighting and sound, and contains not only linguistic modalities but also audio-visual modalities, with the ability to open the channels of all human senses. Therefore, its translation is not equivalent to ordinary literary translation and should be studied from the perspective of multimodality.

There are also scholars in China who study the translation of traditional Chinese operas from a multimodal perspective, for example, Zhu Ling (2015) analyzes the English translations of *The Peony Pavilion* by five translators, explores the multimodality of Kun opera and constructs a framework for the translation of Kun opera under the multimodal perspective<sup>[2]</sup>; and Shang Ximei (2019) analyzes the relationship between linguistic textual symbol resources and visual image resources in the original language text of multimodal opera from a pragmatic optimal correlation perspective, based on Halliday’s theory of Systemic Functional Grammar, Kress and Van Leeuwen’s Visual Image Grammar and Pastra’s Theory of Intermodal Interaction as the theoretical basis, analyzing the relationship between linguistic textual symbolic resources and visual image resources in multimodal original language texts of opera from the optimal correlation perspective of pragmatics<sup>[3]</sup>; Xiang Zijie (2021) takes Ying Ruocheng’s English translation of *Nirvana of the Dog* as an example, and explores the interaction between multimodality in theater translation from the levels of linguistic mode, visual mode, and auditory mode. The interaction between multimodalities and the overall meaning reconstruction are discussed from the three levels of linguistic modality and auditive modality<sup>[4]</sup>. Pu Opera is a local traditional culture, which is still facing some difficulties in the process of “going out”, therefore, there is a gap in the research of foreign scholars on it. The above studies confirm the feasibility of applying multimodal theory to the translation research of Chinese traditional operas.

### 3. Development of Multimodal Theory

The Prague School was the first to study multimodality. In the 1930s and 1940s, this school turned linguistic attention to nonverbal modalities, such as the visual arts and theater. The term “multimodality” was first coined by Halliday. Multimodal discourse analysis takes the theoretical starting point of “language is a social symbol” put forward by Halliday, and takes systemic functional linguistics as its theoretical framework. Its emergence represents a new progress in the field of discourse analysis research, breaking through the previous discourse analysis mode which was only based on language, and transferring the focus to the actual use of natural state of communication. In addition, it takes other symbols besides language, including sound, picture, action, etc., as carriers of meaning, and incorporates them into the system of meaning construction, which greatly promoting the process of discourse analysis research. The three major meta-functions of systemic functional linguistics proposed by Halliday are conceptual function, interpersonal function and discourse function, which provide the basis for the definition of the function of non-verbal modality.<sup>[5]</sup>

In 1996, Gunther Kress and van Leeuwen applied Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar to image analysis, and proposed a theoretical framework of visual grammar centered on the concepts of “representational meaning”, “interactive meaning” and “compositional meanings”. According to them, conceptual function, interpersonal function and discourse function correspond to “representational meaning”, “interactive meaning” and “compositional meaning” respectively in visual modal discourse analysis.<sup>[6]</sup> On this basis, van Leeuwen has proposed a theoretical framework of auditory grammar, which considers speech, music and sound as sound symbols with meaning potential, and unfolds in six aspects: sound perspective, soundtime, sound interaction, tune, sound timbre, and the mood shaped by sound<sup>[7]</sup>.

### 4. Multimodal Analysis and Translation Exploration of Pu Opera

At present, more mature theories and frameworks about multimodal discourse analysis have been constructed at home and abroad, and the most widely used theoretical framework is the comprehensive theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis proposed by Zhang Delu, who explored the comprehensive theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis on the basis of the two discourse analysis frameworks, namely, Halliday’s research on cultural context and Martin. J. R.’s (1992) proposed system composed of five levels: the cultural level, the contextual level, the meaning level, the formal level and the media level system proposed by Martin. J. R.<sup>[8]</sup>, he explored a comprehensive theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis, which consists of four levels: cultural level, contextual level, content level, and expression level.

Pu Opera is a synthesis of character singing, dialog, music, stage set, etc., which is a typical multimodal discourse. In the process of opera performance, the four levels work almost simultaneously, and everyone is indispensable. Therefore, this paper explores the translation of Pu Opera on the basis of this framework, combining visual and auditory grammar theories.

#### 4.1. Cultural level

The cultural level is the key dimension that makes multimodal communication possible. The traditions, forms and techniques of communication are determined by it. Without this dimension, situational contexts have no explanatory power. This level includes the ideology composed of human thinking patterns, philosophies of dealing with the world, habits of life, and all the subtle rules of society, and the communicative procedures or structural potentials that can concretely realize this ideology, called genres. The translation of Pu Opera and other traditional Chinese operas needs to deal with the relationship between the cultures of different countries, find the common ground

between the cultures, and adopt different translation strategies in order to accurately express the cultural connotations embedded in the language, and thus help foreign friends to better understand traditional Chinese operas.

Table 1: Example 1

Multi-modality	Meaning construction
Language modality	Translation: All your life, you'd rather live on the earthen kang All your life, you foster children for others All your life, you put others before yourself All your life, you are diligent without complaints All your life, you make others happy without grievances All your life, you live in poverty without regrets All your life, you do favors without expecting benefits
Visual modality	Representational meaning: The narrative reproduces the old village chief's sympathy and compassion for Sanniu's illness, but also laments that she still misses her daughter and granddaughter far away in the city even if she is ill Interactive meaning: Close-up presentation, front view Compositional meaning: The old village chief is standing in the center of the stage, singing more and more excited, and from time to time looked back at Sanniu lying on the earth kang, which shows his concerns about Sanniu
Auditive modality	Sound perspective: Close-up sound, intimate distance Soundtime: The soundtime is not measurable, it is undulating and continuous, there are pauses Sound interaction: Solo Tune: The tune is getting higher and higher, the sound faster and faster Sound timbre: Trills and drags occur Mood: It shows the old village chief's concern for Sanniu's illness, and his admiration for her kind and sacrifice

In Example 1, the visual and auditory modes only provide background information and highlight the linguistic modes. The passage takes place after Sanniu's daughter Maomao is vindicated and picks up her daughter Xiuxiu, who was entrusted to Sanniu, and Sanniu lives alone again. Then when she is seriously ill with no one to take care of her, the village chief visits her and arranges for her to go to a nursing home for her old age, which she refuses because she doesn't want to cause any trouble to others. As shown in Table 1, for auditory modality, the village chief's voice is getting higher and higher, the speed of speech is getting faster and faster, and the emotion is getting more and more excited, accompanied by vibrato and dragging sound, this kind of gradually high and urgent auditory sense conveys to the audience the singer's mood changes; for visual modality, the village chief is standing in the center of the stage, looking back at Sanniu lying on the earthen kang from time to time, and the amplitude of the movement is gradually getting bigger and bigger. In terms of verbal modality, the village chief's words are progressive and gradually sublimated, and the visual and auditory modalities echo this.

"La er yu nv" refers to the hard work of raising children, also known as "la er yu nv". In the "Dream of Red Mansions", in the eighty-eighth chapter there is also an expression about "raising": "It is not in vain that your elder brother died, your sister-in-law raised him for a long time." Words that express the meaning of "yang yu" include "foster" and "raise". Upon checking the Collins

English-Chinese Dictionary, “foster” means “If you foster a child, you take it into your family for a period of time, without becoming its legal parent.” While “raise” means “Someone who raises a child takes care of it until it is grown up”. In this opera, Sanniu is not Maomao’s biological mother, but her foster mother. So here it translates as “foster”. The words “chou” and “xi” in the song “gei ren chi chou ni he xi” are concepts that describe the consistency or density of an object or substance. “chou” refers to an object or substance that is highly concentrated, dense, and has a high degree of viscosity or stickiness. For example, a thick soup refers to a thick stock that is more viscous and less liquid. “xi” on the other hand, refers to an object or substance that is low in concentration and density and has a low viscosity or stickiness. Here it refers to the revolutionary period due to poverty and backwardness, has not yet solved the problem of food and clothing. When they ate thin rice or noodles, etc., thick for others, the rest of the soup for her own. The derivation of the meaning is in fact to praise Sanniu putting others before herself. The expression of the meaning of “xian ren hou ji” are “put others before oneself”, “think of others first” and “service before self”. Combined with COCA corpus query, “put others before oneself” is the most frequently used, and it is also the most frequently used in movies, colloquialisms and blogs, which is more in line with the context here.

#### 4.2. Contextual level

Table 2: Example 2

Multi-modality	Meaning construction
Language modality	Translation: The news came crashing down like thunder on my head The sudden weakness in my legs made me stumble Everything turns dark before my eyes I feel as if needles are pricking my heart
Visual modality	Representational meaning: Narrative reproduction Sanniu is suffering a great blow after she gets the news that her husband Mudun sacrificed in the front-line stretcher team in order to save others. She even cries silent, indicating her extreme sadness. Interactive meaning: Close-range presentation, provide Sanniu’s psychological activity information; The positive perspective makes the audience feel Sanniu’s sadness more. Compositional meaning: Sanniu is standing on the steps at the back of the stage, and the stage lights turns blue as a whole to show her sadness and promote the development of the plot
Auditive modality	Sound perspective: Close-up sound, intimate distance Soundtime: The soundtime is not measurable, it is undulating and continuous, there are pauses Sound interaction: Solo and singing without music accompaniment for the first three lines, but the accompaniment starts at the end of each line Tune: The voice is devastated. The first two sentences sound low, and the last two sentences gradually become higher, and the pitch of the accompaniment gradually became higher and faster Sound timbre: The last two sentences appear to roar, and the accompaniment is gradually fierce Mood: It shows Sanniu’s grief because of her husband’s death

In a specific context (Example 2 shown in Table 2), communication is subject to contextual factors,

including those determined by the scope of the discourse, the tone of the discourse, and the manner of the discourse. At the same time, the process has to realize the chosen genre in a certain mode of communication. Compared with the translation of written discourse, the translation of Pu Opera emphasizes more on the sense of picture as well as the actor's behavior that complements and completes the performance. Therefore, the translator should give full consideration to the coordination before and after the lines as well as the suitability of the translation to the picture environment in the translation process.

The scene takes place when Sanniu learns that her husband, Mudun, died for saving others in a stretcher-bearer group on the front lines of the war, and she is overwhelmed with grief and has a hard time accepting the situation for a while. The visual and auditory modes only provide background information and highlight the linguistic modes. On the whole, the translation fits the meaning expressed by the visual and auditory modes. The first sentence begins with “Tian shang da lei”. Visually, Sanniu is standing on the steps at the center back of the stage, expressionless, frozen, and the stage lights turn blue; auditorily, there is silence first, and then a thunderclap, which is a true portrayal of Sanniu's psychological changes. In addition to combining the audiovisual modality, the translation of the first sentence should also take the context into full consideration. The thunder in the sky here is not a real thunder, but the news of her husband's death is like a thunderbolt from the sky. So the translation of the first sentence will be “The news came crashing down like thunder on my head” matches the information provided by the audio-visual modality; the next three lines are still a reflection of Sanniu's reaction; visually, Sanniu is standing still and motionless until she cries out in the last line; from the auditory modality, the first two lines are singing without instruments accompaniments, with which starting at the end of each line. While the last two lines are almost hissing, with a voice of grief and a higher and higher melody. Emotionally, this is also in line with human nature, when learning the bad news, Sanniu is first in a state of confusion, after the reaction to the emotional outburst, tearing the lungs. The actual description of the last three sentences is the news of her husband's death is too great a blow to her, making her weak and trembling.

### 4.3. Contextual level

The content level includes the meaning level and the form level. At the level of discourse meaning, it includes conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning and plotting meaning. On the formal level, the formal features of different modes are interrelated and jointly reflect the discourse meaning, mainly manifested in the visual or auditory modes such as solo singing, movements, dialogues, stage presentation, background music, and so on, of each actor.

Example 3 (as shown in Table 3) is a scene that takes place on the wedding night of Sanniu and Mudun. It tells the story of Gong Juan, a female Red Army soldier, who was rescued by Sanniu and her husband in the process of being pursued by the enemy. As she did not want to disturb the couple, she was ready to leave, but suddenly had a paroxysm of pain and was about to face delivering, and Sanniu and Mudun tried to find a way to find someone to save her and help her deliver the baby. As shown in the table above, both visual and auditory modalities are involved in the construction of meaning, and both convey some of the information. The visual modality alternates between near and far scenes, with the near scene showing Mudun and Sanniu pacing back and forth in the center of the stage, anxious, discussing what to do to help Gong Juan; and the far scene showing Gong Juan in excruciating pain, tossing and turning in pain on the kang on the right side of the stage. The visual modality is reproduced in a sense that harmonizes with the first two lines of the original sentence, narratively reproducing Gong Juan's unbearable pain as she is about to give birth; the compositional sense harmonizes with the whole section, showing Sanniu and Mudun's anxiety, Gong Juan's pain, and the urgency of the situation. The overall rhythm of the music is accelerated and urgent, creating

a tense and anxious atmosphere; the distant and foreground sounds are switched back and forth, and the voices of Sanniu and Mudun’s discussion are interspersed with Gong Juan’s moans, which harmonizes with the original phrases and accentuates the atmosphere of urgency.

Table 3: Example 3

Multi-modality	Meaning construction
Language modality	Translation: Dajie is pregnant and now she is in intolerable pain Maybe she’s about to give birth in a few moments? At night, gunfire is more often, the situation more critical If the white bandit army come, we will be in great trouble Now, at my wedding night, only I can help her I will deliver her on the earthen kang
Visual modality	Representational meaning: The narrative reproduces the pain of Gong Juan about to give birth Interactive meaning: Near-vision alternation, positive perspective, highlighting the emotions of the characters Compositional meaning: Sanniu and Mudun are standing in the center of the stage to walk back and forth, discussing how to give Gong Juan delivery, highlighting their two anxious; Gong Juan is rolling from side to side in pain on the earthen kang on the right side of the stage, reflecting her unbearable pain
Auditive modality	Sound perspective: The background sound and the foreground sound switch back and forth, the foreground sound is the singing of Sanniu, and the background sound is the groan of Gong Juan; The formal distance switches back and forth with the intimate distance Soundtime: The soundtime is not measurable, and there is no obvious rhythm Sound interaction: There is dialogue between characters and overlapping voices Tune: The voice was urgent, high, and varied in pitch Sound timbre: urgent and forceful Mood: It shows Sanniu’s anxious psychology, and Gong Juan’s unbearable pain

The words “teng tong nan ren” can be translated to “in unbearable pain” and “intolerable pain” in the COCA corpus. “In unbearable pain” is used most frequently, reaching 94 times, and it is used 7 times in the spoken domain, while “intolerable pain” does not appear in the spoken domain and is used less frequently, only 18 times, indicating that “unbearable pain” is more authentic.

The term “lin pen” refers to childbirth. It is so called because in the olden days, delivering took place in a basin. Combined with the visual modality, Gong Juan’s rolling from side to side in pain on the kang, it can be seen that she is about to give birth. Combined with the auditory modality, Gong Juan’s moaning in pain, and the sound of Sanniu and her husband discussing anxiously, all of which emphasize the tense atmosphere of Gong Juan is impending birth, should be translated as “she’s about to give birth in a few moments”. For the last two lines, in terms of form, the visual modality switches back and forth between the anxious discussion between Sanniu and Mudun, and the scene of Gong Juan rolling around on the kang, symbolizing the urgency of the situation. In terms of auditory modality, the accelerated tempo of the background music, accompanied by Gong Juan’s moaning, which also implies that at this moment, the situation is so critical that only Sanniu can help Gong

Juan deliver the baby. On the level of discourse meaning, combining visual and auditory modalities, the translation appropriately subtracts the word “xin niang” and combines the two sentences. The phrase “qiang jiu qin ren” actually refers to help Gong Juan deliver her baby, so it is directly translated as “I will deliver her on the earthen kang” with the help of visual modality. This is a clear and concise translation that allows the audience to quickly grasp the key information.

#### 4.4. Expressive level

The expressive level consists of linguistic and non-linguistic media. In the verbal media level, it is divided into pure language and accompanying language, and the media form of accompanying language plays an auxiliary role in the transmission of verbal meaning. On the other hand, the actor’s body movements, facial expressions, etc., as well as the sound, stage layout, etc. all belong to the non-verbal media level. The collocation aspect of verbal and non-verbal media is crucial in Pu Opera performances, where the modalities are closely integrated and coordinated with each other, greatly enriching the connotation and discourse meaning of the opera stage.

Table 4: Example 4

Multi-modality	Meaning construction
Language modality	Translation: The loess yo, all over the mountain The kiln yo, around the sloping hill The large earthen kang yo, wide and tall I love it more and more Passing down this song, the Earthen Kang Ballad
Visual modality	Representational meaning: At this point, the story is over, and as the ending song, it summarizes and sublimates the content of the whole play Interactive meaning: Near-far vision alternations, positive perspective, cause empathy of the audience, let the audience intuitively feel the sadness of Sanniu’s death Compositional meaning: Sanniu died on the earthen kang, because of her kindness, a lot of villagers came to visit her. Her daughter Maomao and Granddaughter Xiuxiu who she missed very much also came back; The stage light is turning red and falling with the maple leaf, representing Sanniu’s death; It reflects the villagers’ sadness for her death.
Auditive modality	Sound perspective: background sound Soundtime: The soundtime is not measurable Sound interaction: Solo with harmonies Tune: The tune is high and the pitch gets higher and higher Sound timbre: slow and beautiful Mood: sad but powerful

This section is the last scene of the play (Example 4 shown in Table 4), where Sanniu dies on the earthen kang, and the townspeople, as well as her daughter and granddaughter, are by her side. From the visual modality, Sanniu is half lying on the kang, everyone is surrounding her, the stage light is switched to red, accompanied by the falling maple leaves, which emphasizes the sad atmosphere of Sanniu’s death; from the auditory modality, the background sound is a solo, accompanied by harmonies, with a high melody, and the tone is gradually getting higher, and the lyrics describe the living environment of the northern Shaanxi province where Sanniu lives, with mountains full of loess, and kilns on the slopes, where she has lived her whole life without ever leaving her home, echoing the title of the play, “The Woman Lives on the Earthen Kang”. The two nonverbal modes, auditory

and visual, together with the verbal modes, create a sad atmosphere of Sanniu's passing away, so that the audience, in the process of listening to this ballad, will be able to have a sense of the picture and review Sanniu's life on the earthen kang.

Unlike the other cadences, this section is sung in the form of a ballad, so attention should be paid to the changed nonverbal patterns here. In the process of translating the ballad, more attention is paid to whether it is catchy or not, so it mostly adopts the form of short sentences, and also retains the translation of "yo" in the ballad, while the fourth sentence actually expresses the dependence on and love for the earthen kang. In this multimodal scene, combining the atmosphere created by visual and auditory modes, and through the combination of verbal and non-verbal media, it vividly expresses the pain of her daughter and granddaughter, and the townspeople because of Sanniu's death, which deeply touches the audience, and allows the audience to immerse themselves in the scene, and to feel sad for Sanniu's death. At the same time, they can also look back on her life in the music, and marvel at her ordinary but greatness

## 5. Conclusions

Based on the theoretical framework of visual and auditory grammar, this paper analyzes and discusses the multimodalization and meaning construction of Pu Opera by taking "The Woman lives on the Earthen Kang" as an example. Combined with the comprehensive theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis proposed by Zhang Delu, this paper explores and studies the English translation of Pu Opera from four levels: cultural level, contextual level, content level and expression level. It is concluded that when translating Pu opera, translators should consider the multimodal elements in the opera, pay attention to both in-text research at the micro-linguistic level and out-of-text multimodal fusion research at the macro-level, so as to ensure that the translation is easy to read. Their dual mission is to accurately convey the original message while helping foreign audiences fully understand the spiritual connotation of the opera. At the same time, it is necessary to expand the scope of research on traditional Chinese opera to meet the multimodal characteristics of opera outreach in the new era, promoting the dissemination and development of traditional Chinese operas such as Pu Opera.

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