Multimodal Ecological Discourse Analysis of the Public Welfare Short Film: Nature is Speaking

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Abstract: Language is an important resource for constructing and reshaping people's ecological beliefs. Our understanding of the world can not only be expressed through language, but also changed and reconstructed through language. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct ecological discourse analysis on ecological discourse in order to discover the impact of different discourse styles on people's ecological awareness. Ecological discourse analysis, as an interdisciplinary field of ecology and linguistics, deeply explains the role and influence of language in the relationship between human and nature. Against the backdrop of increasingly serious ecological problems, more and more scholars are conducting discourse analysis from the perspective of ecological philosophy. This article takes the public welfare short film *Nature is Speaking* as the corpus, conducts a multimodal discourse analysis of the language and image modalities, and combines ecological philosophy to explore the representation and ecological orientation of ecological significance. It also urges human action to construct an ecological concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

1. Introduction

In recent years, prominent ecological issues have attracted the attention of linguists, who hope to improve the ecological environment through language as a medium. Ecological linguists are committed to revealing the relationship between ecology and linguistics. Ecological linguistics and ecological discourse analysis are interdisciplinary disciplines, with a fundamental focus on language and discourse, involving multiple disciplines.[1] Ecological discourse analysis is one of the research areas of ecological linguistics. Alexander and Stibbe (2014) argue that ecological linguistics focuses on issues related to humans, other species, and the environment.[2] Ecolinguistics includes "Haugen model" and "Halliday model".[3] The "Haugen Model" studies the interaction between language and environment, emphasizing the diversity of language.[4] The "Halliday model" focuses on the important role of language in various ecosystems, emphasizes the "social responsibility" of linguists.[5]

The birth of multimodal discourse analysis is traceable, and meaning is not solely generated by language. Language and other symbolic systems collectively reflect meaning. In recent years, multimodal discourse analysis has attracted high attention from scholars in China, gradually shifting from static discourse analysis to dynamic discourse interpretation. However, multimodal discourse analysis in China is still in its infancy and has a long way to go.

This study has important theoretical and practical significance. In theory, this study expands the research field of environmental discourse and broadens the research perspective. It enhances the applicability of multimodal discourse analysis. In previous studies, the main focus was on political discourse, news discourse, and advertising discourse, but there was less research on environmental discourse. Therefore, this study takes multimodal discourse analysis as the basic framework and conducts an ecological analysis of the public welfare short film "Nature is Speaking" under the care of the international ecological philosophy of "diversity, harmony, interaction and symbiosis", in order to enrich the research on ecological discourse from the perspective of multimodal discourse.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, some scholars have analyzed ecological discourse from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics. Xia Rong and Xu Jun (2020) used systemic functional linguistics as a theoretical framework to compare and analyze the corporate social responsibility reports of Geely and Daimler as ecological discourse, explaining the similarities and differences in ecological perspectives between Geely and Daimler;[6] Appraisal theory has also been widely used. For example, based on the appraisal theory proposed by James R. Martin et al., some scholars have interpreted the appraisal system from the perspective of ecological linguistics and integrated it into an analysis model that includes two subsystems: attitude and dialogue space by taking the speech of US President Trump as an example.[7]

Stibbe (2015) constructed a new ecological analysis framework and proposed three types of discourse from the perspectives of ecological philosophy and ecological discourse.[8] Goatly (2006) explored the ecological idea of metaphorical "humans are animals", providing new avenues for research.[9]

Environmental public welfare promotional videos, as a short film that disseminates environmental knowledge, mobilizes public enthusiasm, and increases attention to the environment, are very suitable for the current global context of endangered biodiversity and serious damage to the ecological environment. The environmental public welfare short film "Nature is Speaking" has had a great impact since its release, attracting worldwide attention and helping to increase people's understanding of the world environment, thus taking action to protect the environment. Many scholars have explored various aspects of public service advertising based on multimodal discourse analysis, such as anti-smoking public service advertising, [10] etc. Multimodal discourse research has also been combined with cognitive linguistics, resulting in the study of multimodal metaphors. For example, Liu Man (2022) used epidemic prevention and control posters as corpus, applied conceptual integration theory, and combined poster image composition analysis to examine the types of multimodal metaphors used by mainstream new media in epidemic prevention and control posters.[11] Similarly, the study of multimodal and multimodal discourse analysis based on the public service short film *Nature is Speaking* tends to be rare.

Therefore, this article will analyze the language and visual modalities in the environmental public welfare short film *Nature is Speaking* and combine them with ecological discourse analysis to reveal the ideology contained in the discourse, so as to promote the implementation of ecological concepts and biodiversity conservation of audience.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of language modality is based on Halliday's three major meta-functions, namely conceptual, interpersonal, and textual functions, and visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen[12], as well as the three discourses under ecological linguistics, namely beneficial discourse, neutral and destructive discourse. The *Mother Nature* section of the public welfare short film *Nature is Speaking*

selected for this article has a duration of 1:58 minutes. The specific research framework of this study is shown in figure 1:
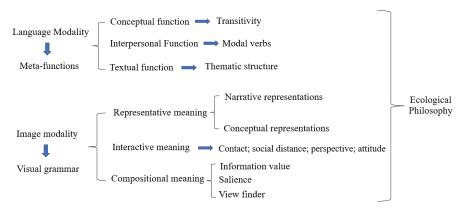

Figure 1: The theoretical framework of the study

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Language Modality

4.1.1. Conceptual Function

This article mainly explores the transitivity aspect of conceptual function, which mainly includes six major processes: material process, behavioral process, relational process, psychological process, verbal process, and existential process. Through statistical analysis of language materials, it has been found that in promotional short films, the most involved are material processes, followed by relational and existential processes, while verbal and psychological processes are not involved.

Example 1: I have fed species greater than you. And I have starved species greater than you.

Example 2: One way or the other, your action will determine your fate.

Example 3: I don't really need people. But people need me.

Examples 1 to 3 all belong to material processes. In example 1, the initiator of the action is "I", that is, nature, and the target of the action is "specifications"; The mover in Example 2 is "your action" and the goal is "your fate". Similarly, in Example 3, the previous mover is "I", which means natural, and the last mover is "people". In Example 1, it is mainly emphasized that nature, as a subject, has made far greater contributions to the Earth with its immense power than humanity; Example 2 aims to illustrate that human destiny is in one's own hands, and human behavior and activities are related to one's own destiny. Example 3 emphasizes the importance of nature for the development of the human world, aiming to warn people to live in harmony with nature and not to confront it.

Example 4: I'm nature I will go on, I am prepared to evolve, are you?

Example 4 belongs to a relational process. The relational process can be divided into two categories: attributive and identifying. "I'm nature" belongs to the identifying category. This sentence shows that the whole short film is initiated with nature as the subject. The use of "is" to express an affirmative tone, which enhances the objectivity of the discourse and further emphasizes the permanence and invincibility of nature. The second half of the sentence uses antonymous interrogative to sublimate feelings, so as to mobilize the viewers' emotions.

Example 5: I've been here for over four and half billion years, 22500 times longer than you.

Example 5 belongs to the process of existence, which represents the existence of something. The commonly used verb is "be", in addition to "exist", "arise", and so on. In every process of existence, there must be a "being".

4.1.2. Interpersonal Function

Modal verbs are an important part of exploring interpersonal functions. The degree of speaker's mood can be determined by the distinction between high, medium and low modality. In the selected corpus, the speaker is nature. According to statistics, the high value modal verb "need" has been used four times in the whole short film, while the low value modal verb "can" has been used once, which indicates that in dispute discourse, the tone portrayed with nature as the speaker is somewhat forceful, aimed at alerting people to treat nature correctly and not attempt to challenge it.

4.1.3. Textual Function

Example 6: When I thrive, you thrive, when I falter, you falter.
The textual functions mainly include thematic structure, lexical cohesion, and other means. This paper mainly discusses the structure of marked theme and unmarked theme. The unmarked theme is widely used in the short film. In Example 6, the time Adverbial clause guided by "when" is used to depict the fact that human beings and nature are inseparable and closely related.

4.1.4. Analysis of Language Modality from the Perspective of Ecological Philosophy

According to Stibbe (2015), there are three types of discourse in ecological linguistics, including beneficial discourse, neutral discourse, and destructive discourse, but the distinction between these three types is not absolute.[8] Through analyzing the discourse in the short film, it was found that there is no particularly clear indication of the three types of discourse structures. However, overall, all discourse in the short film tends to be beneficial. The main purpose of constructing a beneficial discourse system is to promote social fairness and just development through the positive influence of discourse, and fully leverage the influence of beneficial discourse in social and cultural construction, thus achieving the effect of discourse construction.

4.2. Image Modality

4.2.1. Representative Meaning

Figure 2: Sun shining through the dense forest

The meaning of reproduction can be divided into two types: narrative representations and conceptual representations, with the difference being the presence or absence of vectors in the image. Most of the entire short film uses conceptual reproduction, such as; Figure 2 applies the symbolic process in the concept reproduction. The sun shines in the dense forest in the image, which symbolizes the eternity of nature and never decays. It is also intended to remind viewers not to fight against nature. The human world may not be eternal, but nature is eternal.

4.2.2. Interactive Meaning

Figure 3: Waterfall   Figure 4: Sea of clouds   Figure 5: Glacier

The Social distance is mainly reflected by the distance of the shooting lens. In figure 3, the lens close-up the waterfall flying down from far to near, so that the viewer can be closer to the waterfall, feel the magnificent beauty of the rushing waterfall, causing a shock to the soul. Attitude is determined by viewpoint, and in the entire short film, the shooting viewpoint of head up view almost occupies the entire film. In figure 4, the photographer uses a head up shooting perspective, from far to near, passing between two mountains until the sea of clouds, reflecting the intention of the photographer to immerse the viewer in the beautiful atmosphere of nature. Modal elements can be divided into three categories based on color saturation: high, medium, and low. In figure 5, the bright white iceberg catches the eye and allows readers to experience the wonder and grandeur of nature.

4.2.3. Compositional Meaning

Figure 6: The Planet written with "PEOPLE NEED NATURE."

The information value is reflected by the orientation of the components contained in the image, and the components placed in the central position are the most important.[13] In figure 6, the central position is "PEOPLE NEED NATURE", which indicates that this is the message that the producer wants to convey to the viewer most, that is, the human world needs nature, and without nature as a support, human beings will not survive, further warning human beings to protect nature.

Through the analysis of image modalities, it is found that all the images in the short film involve all the natural landscape on the earth, such as waterfalls, icebergs, etc. Not involving human activities, only using a combination of images and text at the end of the short film to end and elevate all content. The reason is that the use of different scenes of nature can first allow viewers to immerse themselves, experience the charm of nature, and make viewers aware of the grandeur of nature; Secondly, it intends to make the viewers have a sense of crisis. Once the beautiful natural landscape is destroyed by human activities, it will face the risk of disappearing, and even threaten human life, thus alerting mankind to protect the natural environment on which we live.

5. Conclusion

This study conducted a multimodal ecological discourse analysis of the language and image modalities in the first part of the public welfare short film "Nature is Speaking", combined with an ecological philosophy perspective. In the analysis of language modalities, it was found that the three types of discourse based on ecological philosophy were not clearly distinguished in the short film's language modality. However, overall, all discourse tended to be positive, calling for human protection

Respect nature, live in harmony with it, and do not confront it. In the image modality, through the analysis of various elements, it is found that the short film focuses on depicting various landscapes of nature, with the aim of highlighting the natural landscape and creating an immersive feeling for viewers to further alert humanity to protect nature.

This study combines multimodal discourse analysis with ecological philosophy to analyze environmental public welfare short films, further enriching the research on multimodal ecological discourse analysis, but there are also many limitations. This study only explores the first part of public welfare short films and does not cover all parts of the short films; When analyzing modalities, there is some subjectivity and the relationship between language modalities and image modalities has not been explored. Therefore, in future research, a more in-depth exploration can be conducted from the perspective of modal relationships combined with ecological discourse analysis.

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Appendix

Some call me nature. Others call me "mother nature". I've been here for over four and half billion years, 22500 times longer than you. I don't really need people. But people need me. Yes, your future depends on me. When I thrive, you thrive, when I falter, you falter. But I've been here for eons. I have fed species greater than you. And I have starved species greater than you. My oceans, my soil, my flowing streams, my forests, they all can take you or leave you. How you choose to live each day, whether you regard or disregard me, doesn't really matter to me. One way or the other, your action will determine your fate. Not mine, I'm nature. I will go on, I am prepared to evolve, are you?

Nature doesn't need people. People need nature.