

The Visual Symbolic Expressions and Translation of Kunqu Opera Props from the Perspective of Dynamic Multimodal Discourse: A Case Study of the Props of Kunqu Female Roles

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Abstract: Kunqu Opera, as a gem of traditional Chinese opera art, has unique artistic charm that is not only reflected in the actors' performances and vocal styles but also in the rich use of props. The props in Kunqu Opera are not only important auxiliary tools for stage performance but also an essential part of dynamic multimodal visual symbols. This paper explores the visual symbolic expression of female roles' props in Kunqu Opera and the translation strategies from the perspective of dynamic multimodality.

1. Introduction

This study conducts a comprehensive analysis of the visual symbolic expressions of Kunqu Opera props from the perspective of dynamic multimodal discourse, grounded in the systemic functional linguistics theory put forward by Zhang (2009) [1]. The props in Kunqu Opera interact with the actors' movements, music, lyrics, and stage settings to create a complex symbolic system that conveys profound cultural meanings and artistic value. Additionally, the impact of modal transformation, facilitated by various props, on the translator's choice of discourse modality is explored through an analysis of the episode-Interrupted Dream (Making Up) in the Kunqu Opera Peony Pavilion (youth edition, directed by Bai Xianyong and translated by Li Linde, (2004) [2]. Thus, accurately conveying and translating the multimodal symbolic significance of Kunqu opera props in cross-cultural communication has emerged as a topic that warrants further exploration.

2. Study on the Visual Symbolic Expressions and Translation of Kunqu Opera Props from the Perspective of Dynamic Multimodal Discourse

For the study of visual symbolic expressions of Kunqu opera, research on Kunqu Opera Visual Coding in Interactive Context of Yu and Wang (2024) [3] based on Flusser's theory of 'technical images', explores the encoding methods of Kunqu Opera visual elements in an interactive context, analyzes their spatial, dynamic, and interactive characteristics, and demonstrates them in conjunction with digital interactive practices. Gao (2016) [4] systematically sorts out the visual

elements of Kunqu Opera art, including makeup, costumes, stage props (props and sets), musical instruments, and dynamic images of characters, and explores their symbolic application in modern design in the book *Brocade on Kunqu Opera: A Study on the Application of Kunqu Opera Art Visual Symbols in Home Textile Product Design*. Jia (2021) [5] explores the external absorption paths and internal fine-tuning paths of Kunqu visual symbols by analyzing performance samples of different versions of 'The Peony Pavilion' in the paper *Visual Symbols and Kunqu Opera Stage Culture* pointing out the significant role of Kunqu visual symbols in modern aesthetic and imagery presentation.

For the translation of Kunqu opera props from the perspective of dynamic multimodal discourse, Cheng and Zhang (2017) [6] conducted a research on *The Current Status, Characteristics, and Development Trends of Multimodal Discourse Analysis in China* which summarizes the current state of multimodal discourse analysis research in China and provides methodological support for analyzing the visual symbolic meanings of Kunqu Opera props. Li and Jiang (2022) [7]'s *Multimodal Discourse Studies - Origins, Perspectives, and Trends* explores the multidimensional perspectives of multimodal discourse studies and has reference significance for analyzing the visual symbolic expressions of Kunqu Opera props. *Research on Subtitle Translation of Kunqu Opera Performances from a Multimodal Discourse Analysis Perspective-Taking the Real-Scenery Garden Kunqu The Peony Pavilion as an Example* of Wu (2020) [8], analyzes the strategies of Kunqu subtitle translation from a multimodal perspective, offering insights into the visual symbolic expression and translation of Kunqu props. Zhu (2020) [9]'s *Exploring the Multimodal Perspective of Kunqu Opera The Peony Pavilion Translation into English* provides an in-depth analysis of the cultural connotations of visual symbols such as Kunqu props, costumes, and performances from a multimodal perspective, and explores the symbolic expression of Kunqu in visual and auditory modes and its application in subtitle translation. It also provides reference value for the visual symbolic expression of Kunqu props and their cross-cultural translation.

In summary, the visual symbolic expression and translation study of Kunqu opera props possess significant academic value and practical significance. This study will conduct an in-depth analysis of the visual symbolic expressions of Kunqu Opera props from the perspective of dynamic multimodal discourse and provide targeted strategies for opera translation.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The dynamic multimodal discourse analysis framework based on systemic functional linguistics theory was introduced by Zhang (2009) to analyze the dynamic interplay among images, words, and discourses inside multimodal discourse. This framework encompasses four levels: cultural context, situational context, content, and expression.

According to this framework, within specific cultural contexts, the expression of the speaker's intended meaning in discourse should be constrained by the prevailing ideologies and genre systems. Moreover, the meaning conveyed through discourse should be carefully selected based on the situational context and the communicative purpose. As time evolves, the relationships among different modal discourses shift dynamically. In some cases, language serves as the primary mode of communication, with other modes like gestures, postures, and music playing a supporting role to enhance the linguistic message. Conversely, in other situations, these non-linguistic modes may take precedence. The dynamic relationship between visual and auditory modalities is particularly crucial in shaping the overall construction of the discourse.

The analytical framework for Dynamic Multimodal Discourse is depicted as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

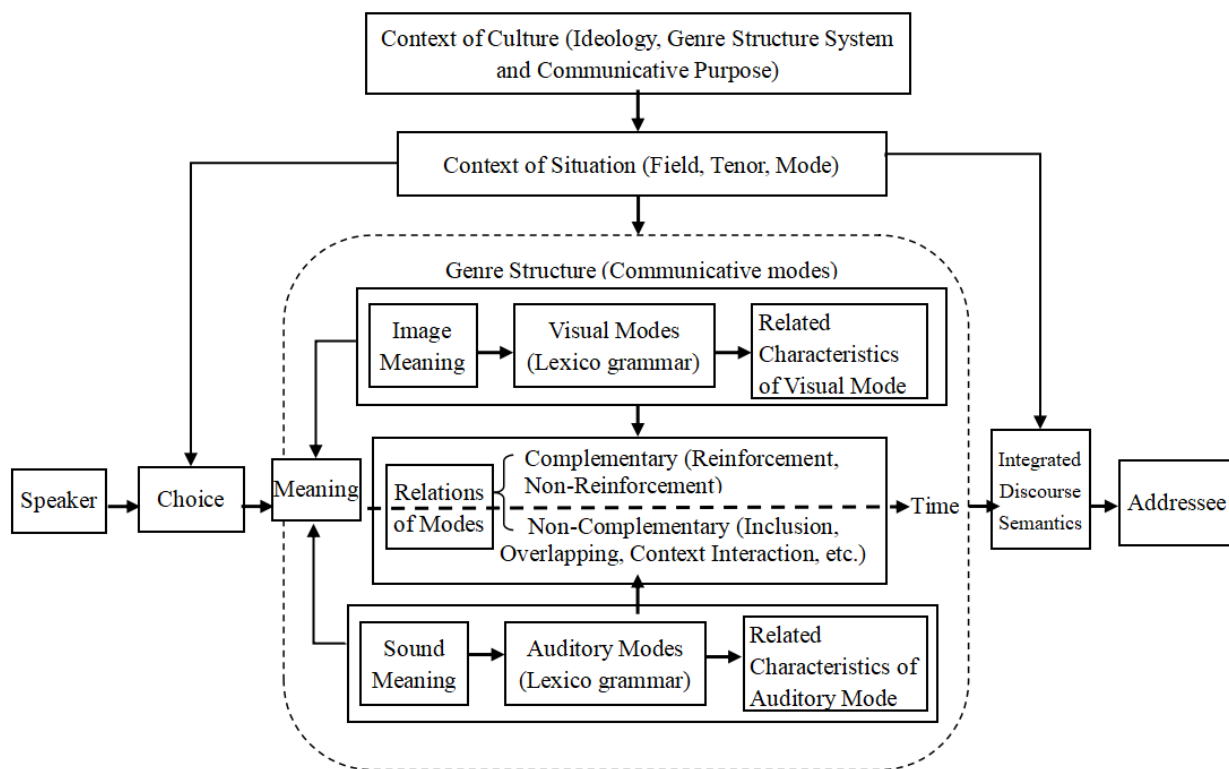


Figure 1 Analysis Framework of Dynamic Multimodal Discourse (Zhang, 2009)

3.2 Research Methods

The phase, Making Up, will serve as the primary subject of analysis in this study. There are four phases of “making up”, “visiting garden”, “meeting in dream” and “wakening from the dream” of Interrupted Dream. It is evident that each phase comprises multiple sub-phases, which can further be divided into several episodes. Each episode is broken down into various events, and these events are represented by images, with each image signifying a discourse unit. There are 12 sub-phases (episodes), 16 events and 16 images in the video text of Interrupted Dream. In the following tables each song represents a scenario (sub-phase/episode), and the following classifications and analysis can be made based on the name of the songs.

4. Dynamic Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Interrupted Dream-Making Up in Kunqu Opera Peony Pavilion

4.1 Cultural Context

Cultural context comprises cultural practices and social conventions, and denotes the socio-cultural environment associated with spoken communication. In the Peony Pavilion performance video, vocal language functions as the dominant mode of expression, while body language serves as a supplementary tool. Props and background settings are also employed to fully realize the thematic content of the performance, narrate the storyline, convey emotions, and achieve the intended propaganda effect.

The cultural context of the Interrupted Dream video text is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Cultural Context of Interrupted Dream Video Text-Making Up

Discourse	Sub-phase	Event	The Purpose of Discourse Communication
Phase 1 Making up	Episode 1 Raochiyou	Event 1	Illustrating Du Liniang's disapproval of the status quo and her keen perception of love.
	Episode 2 Bubujiao	Event 2	Depicting Du Liniang's act of putting on makeup in front of the mirror before going to the garden.
	Episode 3 Zuifugui	Event 3	Portraying Du Liniang as being fully engrossed in the appreciation of the exquisite costumes and remarkable beauty.

4.2 Dynamic Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Beginning of Interrupted Dream in Kunqu Opera Peony Pavilion-Making Up

The three pieces of dramas of “Raochiyou”, “Bubujiao” and “Zuifugui” in the phase-making up mainly depict the psychological activities of Du Liniang before she visited the garden through the movements, expressions and gestures of the characters. It first describes the lonely courtyard, the wasted youth time, the scenery in spring is charming; then make up on the mirror, hesitation, sadness and longing for love.

At the beginning of the video, the actress of Du Liniang walked slowly in front of the stage in a pink cloak, then the performer passed the language modality, accompanied by gesture modality (both hands crossed before and after the chest) and sighed “How spring this year is more affecting my feelings than last year?” From this song, Du Liniang’s dissatisfaction with the situation and her desire of love can be felt and understood. The gesture at this time is an auxiliary means and belongs to the secondary mode. At this time, the visual modality is a table and three paintings reflected indoor. When Du Liniang came out, it was accompanied by a musical modality. At this time, the auditory modality and the visual modality jointly express the overall meaning of the Event 1 communication, none is dispensable. And the physical visual modal gestures, the non-physical visual modal scenes and music constitute a typical coordinated mode.

[Raochiyou]:

Summoned from dream, by oriole’s song.

Sparkling light of the new year,

Fills this “cloistered courtyard” where I stand.

(Li Linde, 2004: Section I 00:36:32-00:37:32)

Event 1 “Raochiyou” is mainly based on the auditory modality. This sentence says that the singing of oriole has awakened Du Liniang from her dream. The singing of oriole is a symbol of the arrival of spring. “the new year” means spring, and “sparkling” means diverse and confused. “light” is a supplementary word for aggravating tone. This expressed Du Liniang’s unique feelings about spring scenery. The author did not simply use “wake up from dream” when translating, meaning that people wake up from sleep, but use the passive “summoned” to put emphasis on the beginning of the sentence, indicating that Du Liniang’s feeling is awakened by the singing of oriole, which was more vivid and in line with its state of mind. The “cloistered courtyard” is the place where Du Liniang lives. The word “cloistered” indicates that the world of life is extremely narrow. This is a cold environment that binds freedom of life and suffocates youth. The translator used the following expressions of “Sparkling light of the new year”, “Fills” and “cloistered courtyard” to vividly depict the scene when Du Liniang stands in her yard which is surrounded by beautiful scenery. It is also more appropriate to reflect Du Liniang’s confused mood. Putting “Fills” at the beginning of a sentence can make people associate. The original meaning of “cloister” refers to the cloister, using its adjective form to express its isolation, which further reflects the real situation of Du Liniang. At

this time, the spring is just like hope, and it has a strong contrast with this claustrophobic deep courtyard, and it can reflect the heroin's emotion at this time.

[Bubujiao]:

Strands of sunlight breeze
Into this quite courtyard,
Swaying threads of spring.
Pausing awhile,
straightening my hairpin
Contemplating the mirror
That stole my silhouette.
Cloud-like tresses trail
To one side.
Pacing my chamber
dare I step outside?

(Li Linde, 2004: Section I 00:40:08-00:42:40)

From the Event 2, the audience feels the inner activity of Du Liniang by the major modality of auditory when make up in front of mirror before visiting the garden. "Strands of sunlight breeze" describes after the rejuvenation of the earth, all kinds of hibernating insects have awakened, and spit out fine hairspring, floating in the air, only when in sunny weather can it be seen. "Strands of sunlight breeze" refers to this kind of swaying, erratic spring silk, but also into this cold courtyard. The author does not write peach, willow or butterfly, but only chooses the slender hairspring, which has a lot of new ideas. Du Liniang is a lady living in deep boudoir. As a young girl, spring has touched her feelings, but only in this way will she have this careful and focused observation. The hairspring is very thin, and people with careless mood are hard to find it. Therefore, these two sentences are consistent with the character of the person. "sunlight" and "emotion", "strands" and "miss" are homophonic in Chinese, so "Strands of sunlight" is a pun. It refers to the gossamer in the clear sky, and the lingering love of the heroine. Therefore, the translator uses "Strands of sunlight breeze. Into this quite courtyard, Swaying threads of spring. Pausing awhile," which depicts both the spring scenery of the gossamer and the lingering feeling of the heroine in spring. This "sentimental thought" is just like the "Strands of sunlight", which is slender and weak, drifting with the wind, and no orientation (love goal). Therefore, the author uses the rhetorical techniques to make the feelings and the scenes in harmony.

The translator used the form of "Pacing my chamber dare I step outside?" to write both the shame and embarrassment of Du Liniang and the serious restraint of the feudal ethics on the woman. This song stunned the character's complex mood on paper. With the body gestures of Du Liniang and Chunxiang, audience can feel the mood.

[Zuifugui]:

You say that red skirt and gown are prettiest;
Sparkling eight-jeweled hairpin most precious.
You know that all my life
It's my nature to love beauty
But I'm like
the spring that no one sees.
At my sight, fish dive deep,
Swans land, and birds take flight.
Flowers blush, the moon hides,
And blossoms tremble.

(Li Linde, 2004: Section I 00:42:41-00:44:50)

From the Event 3, the performer's voice modality and gesture modality and the non-physical visual modality of the set are mutually coordinated, and together serve the communication event to show Du Liniang's self-appreciation of gorgeous costumes and amazing beauty. The relationship between the three is a non-enhanced coordination relationship.




"It's my nature to love beauty" means loving beauty is the nature of my life. It is the "eye of the song" in this tune, the key sentence. This is the author's exploration of her inner spirit of loving beauty. The translator emphasizes the inner nature of the heroine with "It's my nature to love beauty". The term "nature" refers not only to "natural" but to the "nature" of the heroine. "Beauty of spring" is a metaphor for the beautiful appearance of youth. The term "making the fish sink and wild geese fall" describes the amazing beauty of women, same of the term "so beautiful as to cause the flowers to blush and the moon to hide". Anthropomorphic techniques are used here. Translator uses a parallel sentence:

At my sight, fish dive deep,
Swans land, and birds take flight.
Flowers blush, the moon hides,
And blossoms tremble.

Depicting in this suffocating living environment, whoever appreciates the fact that the heroine has the special beauty. These three sentences describe the beauty of Du Liniang, showing the self-respect, self-satisfaction and self-sacrifice of the girl from government official family. The translation method uses the way of literal translation that the audience can understand in a short time, and the words are in reasonable use and easy to understand same as the translation in Event 1 and Event 2.

The communicative mode patterns of the monologue corpus are described down below in Table 2.

Table 2 Dynamic Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Beginning of Interrupted Dream - Making Up

Dynamic Multimodal Discourse Analysis – Making Up	Textual Meaning	Auditory Mode	Visual Mode	Other Modes	Foregrounded Multimodal Features	Props
	Event 1: Raochiyou	Main mode	Image (non-enhanced coordination)	Gesture; Music modality (non-enhanced coordination)	Auditory mode	A table, Three paintings, Cloistered courtyard, Mirror, Makeup stage, Pink cloak
	Event 2: Bubujiao	Main mode	Image (non-enhanced coordination)	Gesture (secondary mode)	Auditory mode	Mirror, Hairpin, Gorgeous costumes Exquisite garden props
	Event 3: Zuifugui	Strengthening and highlighting	Image(main mode)	Gesture (secondary mode)	Visual mode	Mirror, Hairpin, Fan, Gorgeous costumes Exquisite garden props

4.3 Visual symbolic expression of Kunqu opera props

Regarding its cultural background and symbolic importance, Kunqu opera, as a treasure of traditional Chinese performing arts, serves not only as a means of stage performance but also embodies profound cultural connotations and symbolism. For example, in the Peony Pavilion, Du Linian's composition stage and the peony flower in the garden are not only the layout of the scene, but also the externalization of the characters' emotions and inner world.

In a multi-dimensional exploration of visual representation, this study examines the interaction of Kunqu props with other modes employed by actors, including movements, music, and lyrics, from the perspective of dynamic multimodal discourse analysis, collectively shaping the overall meaning of the stage. The visual elements such as the color, shape and placement of the props, together with the body language and stage scenery of the actors, cooperate to form a unique visual grammar.

For the transmission of emotion and artistic conception, the props can enhance the audience's understanding and emotional resonance of the plot through visual symbols. In the Peony Pavilion Garden, for instance, the lovely costumes and exquisite garden props not only display Du Linian, which is a yearning for a better life, but also use visual comparison to show her inner loneliness.

5. Conclusion

When translating Kunqu opera props, the translator needs to fully consider the cultural context behind them. The symbolic significance of props is often closely related to Chinese traditional culture. Therefore, it is essential to identify a mode of expression that can communicate the same or similar cultural meanings in the target language during translation. Moreover, since Kunqu Opera is a multi-modal art form, the visual symbolic meaning of props needs to be combined with other modalities (such as music and lyrics). During the process of translation, the translator needs to balance the relationship between the different modalities to ensure that the visual and auditory synergistic expression can be achieved in the target language. In addition, according to the dynamic multi-modal discourse analysis framework, translation of Kunqu Opera props can employ literal translation, amplification, or omission methods. For instance, when the visual symbolic meaning of a prop is quite intuitive, literal translation can be adopted; if there's a need to provide additional cultural context, appropriate amplification can be applied.

To sum up, the visual symbolic expression and translation of Kunqu props has great academic value and practical significance. Future research can investigate how audiences comprehend and accept the symbolic significance of Kunqu opera props across various cultural contexts, which will help develop more tailored strategies for opera translation.

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