

Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Cultural Symbol Construction: A Case Study of Shaanxi History Museum

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Abstract: This study takes the Shaanxi History Museum as a case and employs the theory of multimodal discourse analysis to explore the construction mechanism of cultural symbols. The research focuses on various multimodal resources such as the exhibition space design within the museum, the presentation of cultural relics and artifacts, multimedia interactive installations, and the visual identification system. By analyzing the collaborative operation of symbol modalities such as images, text, spatial layout, and dynamic images, this study reveals how the museum achieves the production of cultural symbol meanings and the transmission of value through multimodal discourse strategies. The research finds that the Shaanxi History Museum has constructed a cultural symbol system that combines historical depth and modern dissemination power through hierarchical spatial narrative design (such as the time-space corridor in the entrance hall and the thematic zoning of exhibition halls), the integration of cultural relics and digital technology (such as AR restoration and holographic projection), and the semiotic translation of visual symbols (such as the modern design application of bronze artifact patterns). This study provides theoretical references for multimodal discourse practices in museum cultural dissemination and offers empirical evidence for the contemporary construction of regional cultural symbols.

Keywords: Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Cultural Symbol Construction; Shaanxi History Museum; Exhibition Design

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1.Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Currently, the integration of digitalization and media has become a prominent feature of the development of our times. Information dissemination is no longer limited to a single form; instead, it presents a multi-modal collaborative trend involving language, images, space, and digital technologies. The emergence of this multi-modal discourse has profoundly changed the landscape and methods of cultural dissemination.

Cultural symbols, as important markers of culture, carry rich historical connotations and spiritual values. In the process of globalization, cultural exchanges and dissemination have become increasingly frequent. How to ensure the better inheritance and promotion of local cultural symbols in the new era has become a key issue in cultural development. Museums, as the forefront of cultural inheritance, have a significant responsibility in the construction of cultural symbols. The Shaanxi History Museum, with a profound historical cultural heritage, is actively exploring multi-modal forms for the construction of cultural symbols under the wave of digitalization and media integration, providing a vivid and typical sample for research.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to apply the theory of multimodal discourse analysis to deeply explore the construction mechanism of cultural symbols in the Shaanxi History Museum. As an important carrier of cultural dissemination, the museum's exhibition space, the presentation of cultural relics, the application of multimedia technology, and other multimodal elements interweave with each other, jointly shaping the connotation and value of cultural symbols. Through a systematic analysis of the collaborative operation methods of multimodal symbols such as images, text, spatial layout, and dynamic images, this study investigates how the museum realizes the production of meaning and the transmission of value through multimodal discourse strategies, and thereby reveals the construction rules and practical paths of regional cultural symbols in the modern context, providing a theoretical perspective for

understanding the internal logic of museum cultural dissemination.

2.Literature Review

Multimodal discourse analysis, as an emerging field in linguistics research, has witnessed significant development in recent years. Numerous scholars have proposed a series of theoretical frameworks, laying a solid foundation for this field.

Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday, 1978) is an important theoretical cornerstone of multimodal discourse analysis. It divides language functions into conceptual, interpersonal, and textual functions, emphasizing the social symbolic attributes of language, providing a basic perspective for the analysis of multimodal discourse meaning construction. Barthes (1977) was the first to regard images, sounds, etc. as "symbolic elements", explaining concepts such as anchoring and illustration, laying the foundation for subsequent research. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) proposed visual grammar, extending the pure logical function ideas of systemic functional linguistics to visual patterns, constructing a visual image grammar framework through "re-presentational meaning", "interactive meaning", and "graphic meaning", and explaining the way images convey meaning. Norris (2004) proposed the theory of multimodal interaction analysis, focusing on how people integrate various modal resources in interaction and exploring the generation mechanism of meaning in dynamic interaction. Jewitt (2009) believes that meaning is multimodal and can be constructed through various modes such as text, image, sound, gesture, and layout, and that different modes interacting can create new meanings.

In China, Zhu Yongsheng (2007) expounded the theoretical basis and research methods of multimodal discourse analysis, analyzing its breakthroughs in overcoming the limitations of traditional discourse analysis. Zhang Delu (2009) constructed a comprehensive theoretical framework covering culture, context, semantics, form, and medium dimensions, promoting the systematic development of this field. Tian Hailong and Pan Yanyan (2019) compiled the research results, presenting the development trajectory of multimodal discourse analysis in China from the theoretical and practical perspectives, with theoretical exploration covering perspectives such as systemic functional grammar and social semiotics.

Although the existing research results are abundant, in the aspect of cultural symbol construction in museum culture, the depth and breadth of research on multimodal discourse analysis are still insufficient, and the innovation of research methods needs to be improved. This study focuses on the Shaanxi History Museum, deeply exploring the unique mechanism of the collaborative construction of cultural symbols by multiple multimodal elements, and using new technologies such as image recognition and spatial analysis to assist in the research, hoping to provide new perspectives and methods for this field of research and further enrich the application of multimodal discourse analysis in the field of linguistics.

3.Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Cultural Symbol Construction

During the observation of the exhibition design and layout of the Shaanxi History Museum, it was found that it made full use of multimodal discourse. The Shaanxi History Museum, through the comprehensive application of multimodal discourse (including visual modalities such as exhibit displays and virtual reality technology, auditory modalities such as cultural relic introduction and explanation videos, and tactile modalities such as sliding display blocks and braille sections for cultural relic explanations), has constructed a unified multi-modal experience (including vision, hearing, and touch). Through multimodal discourse, it shapes cultural symbols. This enables visitors to experience the exhibition design of the museum as if they were actually there, engaging in immersive learning.

3.1 Visual Modality: Symbolization and Historical Narrative Construction

The visual modality serves as the fundamental medium for the shaping of cultural symbols. According to the visual grammar theory (Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T.,1996), the Shaanxi History Museum transforms abstract

cultural symbols into visual language through spatial layout, exhibit display, and digital technology. In the "Ancient Civilization of Shaanxi" basic exhibition, the exhibition route is sequentially connected by time periods, such as prehistoric, Zhou, Qin, Han, and Tang dynasties, using gradient color changes in the space (e.g., from the simple earthy yellow to the brilliant golden color) to metaphorically represent the evolution of civilization. For instance, the Qin and Han exhibition area showcases the grand display of the army of terra cotta warriors to demonstrate the imperial grandeur, with the orderly formation of the pottery figures, the stern facial expressions, and the spatial arrangement of the military formation, reinforcing the cultural symbol of "unified rule". Additionally, the VR technology is used to restore the architectural style of Chang'an City during the Tang Dynasty, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the prosperity of Zhuque Street through head-mounted devices, converting the abstract concept of "Prosperous Tang Dynasty" into a perceptible visual scene. Moreover, the focused lighting of the exhibition cabinets and the background blurring enhance the exquisite patterns of bronze artifacts

and gold and silver wares, transforming the craftsmanship aesthetics into a visual focal point, and conveying the cultural symbol of ancient craftsmanship spirit.

3.2 Auditory Modality: Sound Narration and Cultural Emotional Resonance

The auditory mode deepens the emotional dimension of cultural symbols through the combination and arrangement of sound symbols. From the research on multimodal auditory symbols (Zhu Yongsheng, 2007), Shaanxi History Museum employs elements such as sounds, music, and sound effects to construct cultural narratives. The audio - guided tour system within the museum adopts a soft and soothing tone, combined with professional explanations of historical scenes. For instance, in the "Tang Dynasty Treasures Exhibition", it narrates the discovery process and cultural value of the Huajingcun Hoard. By presenting cultural relics in the form of stories, it endows gold and silver vessels as well as jade articles with historical and cultural connotations, thereby strengthening the cultural symbol of "treasures of the prosperous era".

Meanwhile, the choice of background music is highly consistent with the exhibition scenes. In the prehistoric exhibition area, primitive musical instrument - simulated sounds are played to create an ancient and mysterious atmosphere. In the Han and Tang Dynasties exhibition area, the tolling of bells is employed to set a grand and magnificent cultural tone. Additionally, in the multimedia film shown in the special exhibition hall, original voiceovers of historical figures and environmental sounds (such as the jingling of camel bells and the hustle and bustle of the market) are utilized to recreate the trade scenes along the Silk Road. This makes the cultural symbol of "the starting point of the Silk Road" more appealing, evoking emotional resonance and cultural identity among the audience.

3.3 Tactile Modality: Body Perception and Cultural Symbol Internalization

The tactile modality realizes the embodied cognition of cultural symbols through interaction between the body and the exhibits. According to multimodal interaction theory (Zhang Delu, 2009), the Shaanxi History Museum transforms cultural symbols into bodily experience through touchable exhibits and interactive devices. In the accessibility area, Braille display boards and three-dimensional models of bronze artifacts are combined, allowing visually impaired individuals to perceive the solemn shape and pattern meanings of bronze ritual vessels from the contours and raised patterns of the artifacts, transforming the abstract concept of "Ritual Civilization" into tactile memory. In the interactive experience area, viewers can turn over the replicas of pottery objects to feel their rough texture and handcrafted marks, intuitively understanding the ancient pottery-making techniques; the touch-sensitive screen allows viewers to zoom in on the artifact images, explore detailed features, such as the flowing texture of the glaze color of Tang Sancai, strengthening the cultural symbol cognition of "Ceramic Art". This tactile participation breaks the traditional viewing distance, enabling viewers to deepen their understanding and memory of cultural symbols through physical practice, achieving the transformation from visual cognition to bodily internalization.

3.4 Multimodal Integration: Symbol System Construction and Cultural Identity Reinforcement

The collaborative employment of multimodal discourse enables the Shaanxi History Museum to construct a complete system of cultural symbols. Taking the "Exhibition of Tang Dynasty Mural Treasures" as an example, visually, low-reflection glass display cases are used to protect the murals, and precise lighting highlights the lines and colors; aurally, headphone-guided tours explain the ritual systems and artistic techniques in the murals; haptically, replicated textures of mural fragments allow visitors to physically perceive the brushstroke details. The three modal discourses complement each other: the visual discourse presents artistic values, the auditory discourse interprets cultural connotations, and the tactile discourse enhances emotional connections. Together, they shape the composite cultural symbols of "Tang Dynasty Aristocratic Life" and "Funerary Mural Art".

4. Conclusion

This study takes the Shaanxi History Museum as a case and employs the theory of multimodal discourse analysis to explore the construction mechanism of its cultural symbols. The research found that the museum successfully created a rich system of cultural symbols through the coordinated use of multiple modalities such as vision, hearing, and touch. At the visual level, it transformed abstract cultural concepts into concrete visual language through spatial layout, artifact display, and digital technology; at the auditory level, it deepened the emotional resonance of cultural symbols through voice-guided tours, background music, and scene sound effects; at the tactile level, it achieved the physical experience of cultural symbols by using touchable exhibits and interactive devices; the comprehensive use of multiple modalities constructed a complete system of cultural symbols, such as the complementary use of three modalities in the exhibition of Tang Dynasty mural treasures, jointly shaping a composite cultural symbol. This study provides theoretical references for the multimodal discourse practice of museum cultural dissemination and offers empirical evidence for the contemporary construction of regional cultural symbols. In the future, further exploration of the application of new technologies in multimodal discourse can be conducted to enhance the effectiveness of cultural symbol dissemination.

5. Limitations

5.1 The case coverage is limited:

This study only takes the Shaanxi History Museum as a single case, which enables in-depth analysis of multimodal discourse practices in a specific scenario. However, it lacks comparative research with other regional museums (such as the Palace Museum), making it difficult to comprehensively reveal the common patterns and difference features of museum cultural symbol construction under different cultural backgrounds. The universality of the research conclusions is subject to certain limitations.

5.2 The depth of modality analysis is insufficient

Although the current research covers the main modalities such as vision, hearing, and touch, it pays relatively less attention to some specific sub-modalities, resulting in the interpretation of the collaborative mechanism of multimodal discourse remaining at the qualitative description level and lacking more precise theoretical construction.

5.3 The audience feedback mechanism is missing

This study is mainly based on the objective analysis of exhibition design, and does not systematically incorporate empirical data on the audience's cognitive experience (such as obtaining the audience's acceptance and understanding deviations of multimodal symbols through questionnaire surveys). This makes it difficult to verify the actual communication effect of multimodal discourse strategies and leaves a theoretical gap in the interpretation of the audience dimension of cultural symbol construction.

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