

## Original Paper

# Multimodal Interpretation Studies in China

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### **Abstract**

*In recent years, interpretation researchers have gradually realized the multimodal nature of interpretation and begun to observe and analyze interpretation activities from a multimodal perspective. This article analyzes high-quality articles on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) from 2012 to 2021 on the topic of multimodal interpretation. It clarifies the current status of multimodal interpretation research in China from three aspects: annual publication volume, main authors, and research hotspots. It also finds that related research has problems such as a small number of publications, a lack of high-quality articles, a single research scope and perspective, and misconceptions. Suggestions were put forward, including clarifying the concept of multimodal interpretation and improving theoretical construction, promoting interdisciplinary research and cooperation, and providing more empirical evidence in order to provide reference for the further development of multimodal interpretation research.*

### **Keywords**

*multimodal interpretation, current status, problems, suggestions*

## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, multimodal theory has expanded to many fields, such as semiotics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, political science, journalism, psychology, law, aesthetics, medicine, etc (Wei, 2009). Scholars conducting translation studies have gradually realized that applying the multimodal theory to translation research is a new direction that should be paid attention to in the field of translation research (Chen et al., 2020). However, through literature review and analysis, the author found that the total amount of multimodal interpretation research in China is small, and there are fewer high-quality articles. It also should be worried about problems such as unclear concepts and lack of continuity in research. This study sorts out articles on multimodal interpretation research on CNKI, hoping to clarify the current status of multimodal interpretation research, explore the problems in China's multimodal interpretation research, and point out its future development direction.

## 2. Definition of Multimodality

In recent years, multimodal studies have increasingly aroused scholars' research interest (Jewitt, 2009). The heated discussion on the definition of multimodality has never stopped since the early 2000s (Tuominen et al., 2018). According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), multimodality represents a combination of meanings from different systematic systems. As a concept in perceptual psychology, it denotes getting information through different senses and making those received communicative resources interact with each other (van Leeuwen, 2011). Jewitt et al. (2016) also defined multimodality as combining various semiotic resources or modes to facilitate communication. In contrast, Gu (2007) asserted that modality refers to how humans interact with the external environment through their sensory organs. "Generally speaking, if two or more senses participate in the interaction, the activity involved is multimodal" (Xu, 2017, p. 41).

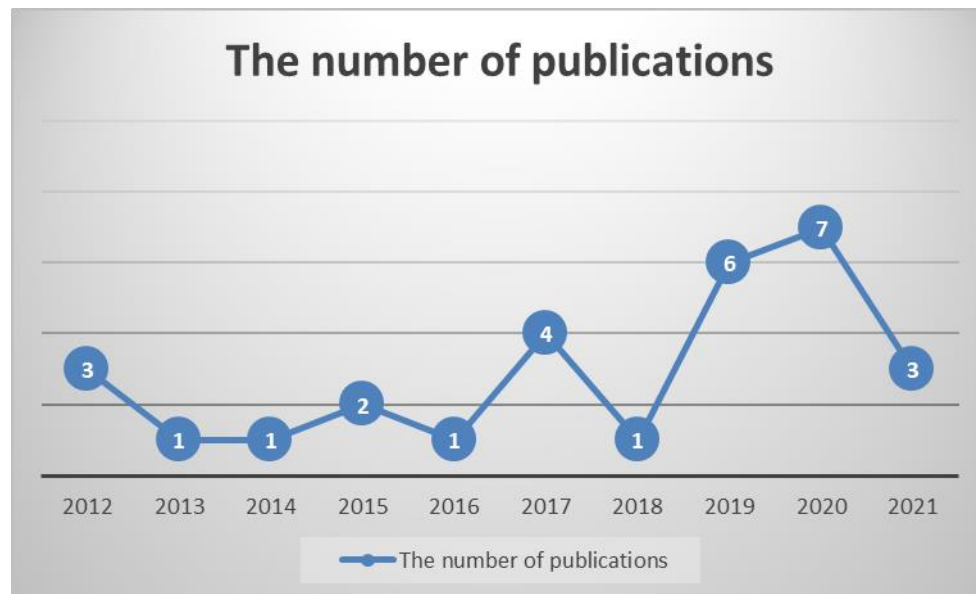
Although the agreement has not been reached, two dominant perspectives exist (Bateman, 2011). One view describes multimodality from the aspect of sensory organs. If the participant receives information through multiple physiological channels, which comprises seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching, the activities involved are multimodal (Lee, 2012; Tuominen et al., 2018). The other view is based on social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Gibbons, 2012; Wang, 2018). It is multimodal as long as an activity witnesses the coexistence of multiple symbol systems, including language, technology, image, color, music, etc. (Zhu, 2007). A definition from Tuominen et al. (2018) even incorporates both opinions. They pointed out that multimodality is a "combination of modes and semiotic resources" (p. 4), that is, communicating through a variety of means and symbols such as language, image, sound, action, etc. (Zhang, 2009).

Interpreting has the nature of multimodality with dual meanings. On the one hand, interpreters use auditory and visual channels to retrieve information. On the other hand, the cues interpreters receive from one channel can be various (Stachowiak-Szymczak, 2019; Su et al., 2021). For instance, interpreters can obtain diversified visual information, such as the speaker's facial expressions, gestures, head movements, lip movements, audience, venue layout, and PowerPoint and images, etc. Thus, interpreting is a typical multimodal activity (Seeber, 2017; Boria & Tomalin, 2020; Li & Fan, 2020), requiring interpreters to acquire useful messages through multiple senses and different symbolic resources, and then convey processed information in another language.

## 3. Research Status

The author used the "Advanced Search" function in the full-text journal database of Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure Databases (CNKI), conducting a topic search by entering "Subject" = "Multimodal Interpretation" with a limited search time from 2012 to 2021. Then 93 papers were obtained. When the author limited the source of literature to "CSSCI", "SCI", "EI" and "core journals of Peking University", and manually selected papers that focus on English and Chinese pairs and are related to the multimodal interpretation, only 29 valid articles were ultimately obtained.

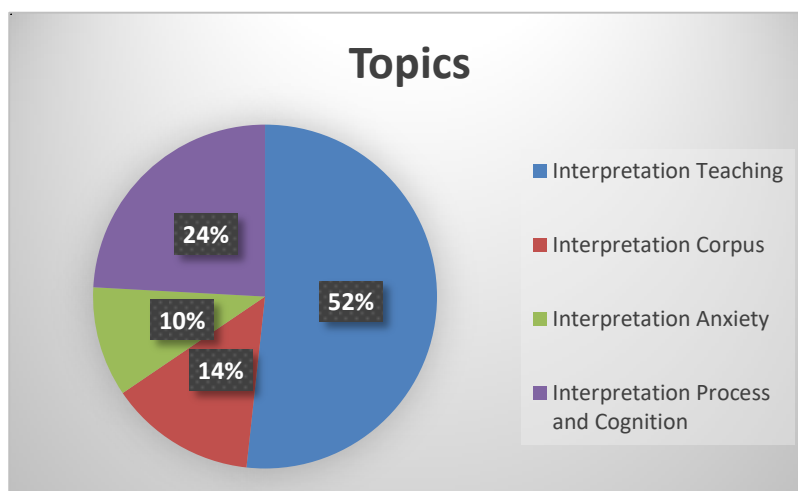
### 3.1 Annual Publication Volume



**Figure 1. The Number of Publications**

According to Figure 1, the number of publications has shown a trend of fluctuating upward from 2013 to 2020, while witnessing a drop from 2012 to 2013 and from 2020 to 2021. Although the annual publication volume has witnessed several ups and downs during the past ten years, we can see a general increase. This indicates that more scholars have shifted their attention from analyzing interpretation from the traditional mono-modal perspective to adopting a multimodal perspective. However, when the annual number of articles peaked in 2020, only 7 were published, which means not many authors are concerned about multimodal interpretation. Besides, the fact that only 29 out of 93 papers were from high-level journals indicates the problem of insufficient high-quality articles on this topic.

### 3.2 Research Themes



**Figure 2. Topics of Multimodal Interpretation Studies**

Based on the themes of the selected articles, I divided them into several groups. If some papers covered more than one theme, I would classify them according to the more important theme. Ultimately, four groups were obtained, interpretation teaching, interpretation corpus, interpretation anxiety, and interpretation process and cognition. From Figure 2, we can see that interpretation teaching is the most dominant topic, accounting for 52%, followed by interpretation process and cognition (24%) and interpretation corpus (14%). However, interpretation anxiety (10%) is a relatively less discussed topic.

### 3.3 Core authors of the Article

**Table 1. Core Authors of Publications**

Rank	Name of the Author	Number of Publications
1	Zhifeng Kang	5
2	Jian Liu	3
3	Kaibao Hu	2

According to Table 1, Zhifeng Kang, Jian Liu, and Kaibao Hu are the Top 3 authors in terms of publication volume. As the author with the most publications, Zhifeng Kang mainly talked about theoretical construction and empirical research on multimodal interpretation anxiety in 2012-2013, and proposed a multimodal embedded research path for interpreting cognition in 2021. Jian Liu published three articles in 2015, 2017, and 2020, in terms of construction and application of multimodal interpretation corpus and exploration of multimodal corpus interpretation teaching model. Similarly, Kaibao Hu was also concerned about combining multimodal corpus and interpretation studies.

## 4. Research Hotspots

### 4.1 Interpretation Teaching

According to Jewitt (2008), multimodal teaching means the use of “multiple” representation modes, including printing, visual images and design, “to create learning situations, increase classroom interaction, and strengthen students’ participation” (Guo et al., 2020, p. 218). Applying this approach to interpretation represents multimodal interpretation teaching. In this field, hot topics include the multimodality of teaching materials and tools (Chen & Wu, 2019; Gao & Fan, 2020), multi-media and modern technology (Smith & Kennett, 2017; Zhai, 2019; Mei & Zhu, 2019), and suggestions for instructors to adopt a multimodality approach when teaching interpretation (Xu, 2017).

More than a decade ago, Mingxing Yang first proposed the shortcomings of the traditional teaching mode and advanced the concept of Multimodal Situational Teaching. Yang (2011) pointed out that it was necessary to shift the teaching mode from the traditional “Textbooks-Blackboard-Chalk” to a multimodal model, using both text and non-text modes, including images, videos, audio, anime, environment, etc., to create a multi-dimensional, dynamic, authentic, and intuitive language and cultural environment, as well as interactive communication classes with multi-sensory participation.

In response to his call, other scholars have also begun to study multimodality in interpretation education. On the one hand, studies on the teaching mode are related to the multimodality of interpretation textbooks, the multimodality of the interpretation teaching process, and the multimodal interpretation evaluation system. In reality, most researchers have just made efforts in theoretical construction, advocating that the teaching resources and process should be multi-dimensional in a multimodal context with the help of various tools and technologies (Chen, 2014; Guo, et al., 2020) without providing empirical basis for proving the effectiveness of their methods (Zhai, 2019). For example, Lv (2015) asserted that three-dimensional teaching materials should replace traditional monomodal textbooks. Besides, based on the All-Encompassing theory, Kang (2012) put forward the “1+4” Modern All-Encompassing Interpretation Teaching with Multimodalities and proposed a formula, “Virtual Space+Virtual Reality+Three-Dimensional Space+Internet=Interpreting”. With regard to evaluating interpretation, Dai (2019) constructed a multimodal interactive evaluation system to encourage students to use this model for mutual evaluation and self-evaluation, improving their ability to identify, process and use multimodal information.

Obviously, the implementation of multimodal modes in interpreting teaching can not be separated from the assistance of modern technology. Relevant studies have mentioned traditional multi-media, such as videos and PowerPoints (Chen, 2014; Guo, et al., 2020), as well as advanced technologies, including Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR) and Mixed Reality (MR), providing an immersive experience for students in interpreting training in attempt to improve students’ interpreting competence (Kang, 2012; Mei & Zhu, 2019; Zhai, 2019). Among several studies, the responses Zhai (2019) received through a questionnaire survey proved that the highly simulated scenarios provided by VR technology could help interpreters become familiar with real interpretation scenarios and exercise their

psychological qualities and on-site reaction abilities.

#### *4.2 Interpretation Process and Cognition*

In recent years, some researchers have found multimodality in the interpretation process and combined multimodal interpreting and cognitive studies.

Among several studies in the past decade, a few scholars pointed out the direction of future research in their literature review. Hu and Li (2016) pointed out that using multimodal interpretation corpora to assist in interpreting cognitive research can obtain nonverbal information such as body language and facial expressions of interpreters, as well as its interaction with linguistic information, thereby analyzing the cognitive activities of interpreters. Su et al. (2021) assumed that considering the multimodality of interpretation and the rise of remote interpretation, further investigation should be conducted on the impact of multimodal processing on cognitive load with eye-tracking technology, in order to find appropriate information input and presentation methods, so that interpreters' cognitive load can be reduced and their interpretation quality can be improved.

Besides, some scholars focus on theoretical construction. For example, based on the multimodal features of interpreting discourse, Wang (2019) regarded the source text as a "three-dimensional discourse" composed of verbal, paralinguistic, and nonverbal information and established multimodal models of information dissemination in consecutive interpretation and simultaneous interpretation. Inspired by multiple disciplines, including cognitive science, cognitive psychology, and cognitive neuroscience, Kang and Li (2021) also proposed a new approach for interpreting cognitive processes, namely, multimodal embedding research path.

What's more, a group of researchers prefer to use theories related to multimodality to analyze the interpretation process. Employing the multimodal critical discourse analysis method, Li (2019) provided a detailed interpretation of the press conference interpretation process from three aspects: visual modality, audio modality and the interaction between the two modes. With the same theory, Jiang and Li (2020), taking an online video conference on medical platforms as an example, explained how to analyze the remote video conference interpretation process from a multimodal perspective.

Only one scholar tried to investigate how input modes affect interpretation. Lang et al. (2019) explored the influence of three input modes, picture-aided, script-aided, and non-slide-aided conditions, on the cognitive processing path of simultaneous interpretation, finding that the higher the consistency between visual and auditory information, the more conducive to the process of simultaneous interpreting.

#### *4.3 Interpretation Corpus*

Stemming from the discussion about interpretation teaching, a unique tool, multimodal interpreting corpus has attracted researchers' attention. According to Liu & Hu (2015), multimodal interpretation corpus is an interpretation corpus that preserves the multimodal information of the corpus by directly segmenting and labeling audio and video. Relevant studies focus on the benefits of multimodal interpretation corpus, its construction and application, and analysis of interpretation products with the

aid of this type of corpus.

Hu and Li (2016) figured out that a multimodal interpretation corpus contains both linguistic and paralinguistic information, enabling a more comprehensive observation of the interpreter's performance and analysis of their psychological and cognitive activities. Wang and Fu (2020) also acknowledged the importance of a multimodal interpretation corpus, arguing that "it can improve the sufficiency of description and interpretation by incorporating various contextual factors" (p. 15).

Given the advantages of the multimodal interpretation corpus, some researchers have talked about how to build a multimodal corpus and take advantage of it in interpretation teaching. Liu and Hu (2015) discussed the steps in detail, including effective collection and quality requirements of corpus, segmentation and transcription of data, multi-level annotation model, alignment around the timeline, reliability evaluation of annotation, etc. Taking ECTSIC-P as an example, Qi and Yang (2020) also introduced the main issues in the process of multimodal interpretation corpus construction, namely, what to notice in the selection and preprocessing of data, multimodal transcription and annotation, the conversion between multimodal corpus and traditional corpus, file structure and so on.

Considering that it might be an effective tool for interpreting teaching, Liu (2017) systematically explained how to apply multimodal interpretation corpora to various interpretation teaching stages. Gao and Fan (2020) used a real case to demonstrate how to use multimodal and interpreting parallel corpora for teaching scientific English translation.

In addition, a few studies probe into the characteristics of interpreting products. For example, Liu and Chen (2020) analyzed features of a non-fluency in interpreting, lengthening, using a multimodal interpretation corpus and discussed possible reasons. Similarly, Qi (2019) built a multimodal corpus on her own to observe pausing in interpreting and learn about the cognitive process of professional English-Chinese simultaneous interpreting.

#### *4.4 Interpretation Anxiety*

From 2012 to 2013, a series of explorations were conducted on multimodal interpretation anxiety. Guided by Cassady and Johnson's testing anxiety model theory, Kang (2012) advanced three levels of multimodal interpretation anxiety and listening anxiety in interpretation, higher anxiety mode (HAM), medium anxiety mode (MAM), and lower anxiety mode (LAM), and discovered the effects of these modes on interpretation. Later, Kang (2013) tried to construct memes of interpreting anxiety with multimodalities, exploring which mode can enable interpreters to perform best.

In reality, the same researcher only investigated multimodal interpretation anxiety ten years ago. No one has studied related topics since Zhifeng Kang. Apart from that, the concept of "multimodality" in his article differs from the notion in most articles, which refers to different levels of interpretation anxiety, instead of various modes of information or symbols obtained from different senses.

## 5. Problems and Prospect

Through literature review and analysis, the author has realized several problems in multimodal interpretation studies. To start with, the total amount of relevant literature is small, and high-quality articles are insufficient. From 2012 to 2021, only 93 journal articles about multimodal interpretation were published. It is evident that multimodal interpretation has not attracted enough attention compared to other research topics. Among these less than 100 articles, only 29 were from high-quality journals, from which we can see almost 69% of papers were of low quality. Besides, limited research scope and perspectives are also a problem. In the few articles, researchers mainly study multimodal interpretation from four perspectives, including interpretation teaching, interpretation process and cognition, corpus and interpreting anxiety. Also, there is a tendency to abuse the concept of multimodality. Although “multimodal” or “multimodality” appeared in the title, some articles did not address its core meaning or analysis of multimodality. Another issue is a lack of continuity in research. For example, Zhifeng Kang only carried out studies about interpretation anxiety in 2012 and 2013, after which no one published high-quality articles about this topic. What’s more, most articles lean towards qualitative research and theoretical construction, while empirical studies are scarce. Whether multimodal interpretation helps with interpretation training and whether gaining information from various channels benefits the interpreting process requires more empirical evidence.

Taken these issues into account, the author supposes that research on multimodal interpretation needs to be improved in the following three aspects.

(1) Clarify the concept of multimodality and strengthen the theoretical construction of multimodal interpretation research. The research on multimodal interpretation in China is still in its infancy, and there still needs to be more exploration of the relevant theories, research methods, and paths of multimodal interpretation. Researchers should first unify the definition of multimodality and relevant terms in an attempt to avoid misusing concepts. It is hoped that scholars develop a relatively systematic and mature theoretical guidance for research and practice.

(2) Strengthen interdisciplinary research and cooperation. According to Li (2019), translation is a cognitive activity in which various symbolic resources participate in meaning construction, which determines its interdisciplinary nature. Borrowing theories, research methods and approaches from other fields may expand research scopes and perspectives. Promoting communication and cooperation among experts in various disciplines also helps researchers find more suitable multimodal theories and research frameworks to assist multimodal interpretation research.

(3) Carry out more empirical studies. Theoretical speculation and analysis alone are not persuasive. Scholars had better provide more empirical evidence to prove whether multimodal interpretation teaching mode can improve students’ interpretation skills, whether multimodal interpretation increase or decrease the cognitive load of interpreters, and whether it would be better to analyze the interpretation process and products with a multimodal interpretation corpus. Only by providing data to support the assertion can we further promote multimodal interpretation research.



## 6. Conclusion

This study analyzes the current research status of multimodal interpretation in China from 2012 to 2021 by organizing literature on multimodal interpretation research in the past decade. It explores four hot topics, including multimodal interpretation teaching, multimodal interpretation process and cognition, multimodal interpretation corpus, and multimodal interpretation anxiety, from three aspects: annual publication volume, research topics, and core authors. It points out the problems in the field of multimodal interpretation research and puts forward relevant suggestions. I hope more scholars can conduct interpretation research from a multimodal perspective, strengthen the construction of multimodal interpretation theory, and promote interdisciplinary communication and cooperation, thereby enhancing the development of multimodal interpretation research and accelerating progress in translation research.

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