Original Paper

A Multimodal Stylistic Analysis of the English Poster: *Dune*

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Abstract

Movie poster is an integration of multimodal meaning containing verbal mode, image, font, layout and color. Compared with monomodal text, the interaction between multiple modes can more efficiently convey the information of a film to the audience, attracting the audience's attention. In the paper, the English poster of the film Dune is selected as the object of study. Based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and Kress and Leeuwen's Visual Grammar (VG), as well as with reference to the multimodal stylistic analysis path of Lei Qian and Zhang Delu, this paper explores foregrounding features' significance of multiple modes in a poster and their intermodal relationships for the overall construction of multimodal text. The results show that there is a synergistic relationship between different modes, and that the foregrounding features of font, layout, image and color contribute to the poster's meaning construction.

Keywords

multimodality, foregrounding features, meaning construction, systemic functional grammar, visual grammar

1. Introduction

A movie poster as a kind of multimodal text is not only an important promotional method for film distributors, but also one of the basic ways for audiences to know about the film. The English poster *Dune* takes the culture of native English speakers' country as its context, with verbal and visual modes synergizing to attract viewers' attention. Through its releasing, distributors inform audiences of film's showing, and imply them to buy tickets to watch. Adapted from Frank Herbert's novel of the same name, *Dune* is a science fiction film directed by Denis Villeneuve, which premiered on 3 September 2021 at the Venice International Film Festival in Italy. It tells a story of the Eutredi family controlling precious resources, whereas after a betrayal the family's heir Paolo, decides to accept his destiny to defend his family and his people.

Multimodal stylistics is a relative new direction in discourse analysis. It notes the important role of non-linguistic factors such as image, color, typography, font, etc., which are often neglected during information transmission. Based on the data from CNKI, it is found that there are fewer studies related to multimodal stylistic analysis of film posters. In view of this, the paper explores the synergistic relationship among modes in a multimodal text, aiming to answer the following two questions:

(1)   What are the foregrounded features in each mode?

(2)   How are they synergized with each other to contribute to meaning construction?

2. An Overview of Multimodal Stylistic Theory

Multimodal stylistics is based on Halliday's theory (1978) that "language is one of the social semiotics which convey meaning", focusing on the role of visual modes, such as image, layout, color, type, music, gesture, etc., as well as the interrelationships between these modes in meaning construction. Multimodal stylistic analysis concerns three main questions, i.e., how different modes reflect the whole meaning, what role each mode plays in reflecting the meaning, which feature of which mode is prominent and are foregrounded (Lei, 2018). The feature can be a linguistic feature, an image one, or both (Zhang & Mu, 2012). The concept VG was postulated by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) in their book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Images*. In 2012, domestic scholars Zhang Delu and Mu Zhigang proposed an analytical framework for multimodal functional stylistics involving verbal and visual modes. In 2015, Lei Qian and Zhang Delu added typography, layout and color to the previous one.

Based on the framework (Lei & Zhang, 2015), the analysis includes three steps: firstly, objectively describe image, font, color, layout and verbal mode as well as their prominent features. Then, combine cultural and situational contexts, i.e., field, tenor, mode, with communicative purpose to determine foregrounded features and meaning of the poster. Finally, analyze the synergistic relationship of different modes and their stylistic effects.

3. The Multimodal Analysis

Like most other movie posters, the *Dune* uses primarily verbal and visual modes to construct meaning, with other modes such as layout, color and font playing a supporting role.

3.1 Verbal Mode

The verbal mode includes the names of the film, director, actors and actresses, the release date of the film, a short review, the film companies that released it, etc., conveying the main information of the film. According to SFG, this section explores the contribution of font, color, and layout to the whole meaning, and the incongruity features of them.

In the poster, the name, *Dune*, is uncharacteristically used in lower case, therefore contrasting with the rest of the capitalized words to emphasize movie name. Meanwhile, readers can speculate the location where the film's story takes place from the ideational function of the word *Dune*. It is also highlighted by its font size and font color, with the former being quite large and the latter extremely unique, compared

to the rest of the words. Its sandy color stands out against the background, thus, accentuating the place where the story happens. Moreover, other words and sentences have nothing to do with the theme, but indicate some background information. For example, the sentence directly above *Dune*, IT BEIGINS, is a statement belonging to declarative in MOOD system, aiming to give information about the film that "The movie is about to start. You can come and watch it." Then, the next highlighted font size shown by OCTOBER 22 with white color indicates the release date of the film.

However, the word *Dune* is in fact a spelling mistake or not even an English word. From the perspective of functional stylistics, it can be seen as incongruity. The *Dune* is in a wrong spelling with the first and last letter incorrect and acquires its graphological prominence at the cross-strata level - the word level. At the letter level, we can find that the first letter D without the vertical line and the last letter E without the central horizontal line, leading to the fact that all the four letters are identical in their shape, "U", but in different directions. Compared letter-space with other words, the space between the four letters D-U-N-E is so large that it does not look like a single word. Therefore, the unusual large space belongs to the graphological prominence of letters due to the breaking of the conventional use of letter space in a word. As for the U shape, it implies the footsteps people made in dune, curved like U not a straight line normally. In the desert the story happens, people had to walk like dancing, making their footsteps sound like flowing sand to avoid the attack made by a gigantic worm in the sand. Besides, in the last letter, the central horizontal line is replaced by a planet and its planetary rings. It suggests the planet being fought over by all the major powers in the film who scramble for "spice" resources in the planet. As a whole, except for *Dune* using the lower case in the last three letters, all the other words are spelled in upper case bringing about another stylistic effect - deflection, thus giving prominence to *Dune*. Hence, the *Dune* is foregrounded by its letter prominence, word level prominence and the prominence endowed by the other words.

The misspelling *Dune*, its relative center position, lower case, large font and different color seem to attract viewers' attention, continuously emphasizing where the story happens in the film and what main event the story revolves around: it takes place on a planet filled with yellow sand, where the plot unfolding is about controlling the dune or specifically the "spice" in the dune.

3.2 Image

Concerning non-verbal modes, Kress and Van Leeuwen's VG (i.e., representational, interactive and compositional meaning), corresponding to Halliday's three meanings (i.e., ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings) are applied to analyze these modes' effect.

3.2.1 Representational meaning

In terms of representation, there are two types of meaning: narrative and conceptual meaning, with the former containing action, mental and verbal processes, and the latter including classificational, analytical and symbolic processes. These subtypes are used to explore the deflection features of the image.

The upper part of the image is identified with four different processes. Firstly, in a classificational process, eight people are the Subordinate to the class of 'performers', which can be seen as Covert Taxonomy.

They are shown against a blue sky-like background and arranged in a symmetrical fashion, a circle, which corresponds with the half globe among the crowd. Secondly, there are many analytical processes in which each person is a Carrier in relation to their Possessive Attributes, like skin color, hair color and kind, eyes color, items of clothing. These attributes create a visual concept of the roles that these performers play. From hair color and kind, readers may infer that the man located in the central young boy's right side and the woman below the boy are the young boy's parents, in that the boy shares the same hair color of the woman and the same curly hair of the man. For eyes color, observant readers might notice that the young woman in the young boy's left side, the woman on the diagonal lower right and the man at the bottom all have a pair of blue eyes that other people do not have. This indicates that the three characters probably belong to a certain kind of ethnic group. When it comes to items of clothing, it is obvious that wearing sand-colored cloaks with their hair covered, the young woman and the man show their identity of a mysterious group. Moreover, the other two men wearing battle suits with light and dark gray are skillful fighters. Thirdly, a symbolic process in which the blue globe, half shown and half hidden, is a conventional symbol with strong associations. The circle formed by these performers is placed in the foreground of the poster, and the image of the central young boy is twice the size of the other people. It seems that all the other people forming a dense shield to protect the young, or for the purpose of helping and protecting him these people start uniting. Thus, the young boy, the protagonist in the film, is prominent in terms of size and position. Fourthly, all the eight characters are looking at someone or something in the distance, and viewers do not know the Phenomenon that these characters' eyeline directed. Hence, there are eight non-transactional reaction processes with the eight characters as the Reactor and their eyeline as the Vector.

At the lower part, the protagonist looks like he is walking forward, forming an action process in which the protagonist is the Actor, and his legs are seen as the Vector. Without a Goal, this process is called a non-transactional process. Meanwhile, the protagonist lowers his head as if searching for something in dune. It belongs to the transactional reaction in which the protagonist is the Reactor, his eyeline forms the Vector, and the sand he is looking at is called the Phenomenon. In fact, these processes provide information about "spice", a kind of precious resource like sand. Thus, the young man may be just thinking or probably look for the "spice".

From the above analysis, we can see that there are eight analytical, one classificational, one symbolic, eight non-transactional reaction, one transactional reaction and one action processes. Therefore, there is a deflection among these processes since the number of analytical and non-transactional reaction processes are much greater than that of other processes.

3.2.2 Interactive Meaning

Regarding interactive meaning, there are three parameters used, i.e., contact, social distance and attitude, to analyze the relationship between represented participants and viewers.

In relation to contact, five represented participants in the upper part give a frontal look to the viewer and the rest three look at other sides. The former is called the 'demand': the participant's gaze demands

something from the viewer, where the viewer engage into some kind of imaginary relationship with him or her. The latter is called the 'offer': it offers the represented participants to viewers as items of information, object of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case. At the lower part, the protagonist is seen as an 'offer' by looking at the sand. In terms of size of frame, he is in a close-up shot, whereas the other characters are in a medium shot. For social distance, the youth is at an intimate distance in that we can see his face or head only, whereas the rest of the performers are at a close or far personal distance since their heads and shoulders or the part from their waist up all can be seen. However, at the bottom part, the protagonist is given a long shot at public distance. With reference to attitude, among the five characters who have eye contact with viewers, they all use the frontal angle to show a kind of involvement, that is "what you see here is part of our world, something we are involved with". Meanwhile, the poster is at the eye level, sharing equality with viewers, hence, there is no power difference involved.

To conclude, these characters try to interact with viewers by 'demanding', and the medium distance is more often used to show the social relations between represented participants and viewers. In attitude, the deflection is applied in that all characters, even the protagonist in the highest position, looking at viewers equally without power imbalance. It implies that the characters want to communicate with and show their respect to viewers equally to bring both sides closer.

3.2.3 Compositional Meaning

According to VG, there are three interrelated systems in analyzing compositional meaning: information value, salience, and framing. The composition of the whole means the representational and interactive elements relating to each other, that is, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole.

Information value is about different information that each part of the poster carries. The poster *Dune* can be seen as a center-periphery structure, with a salient circle formed by characters in the central position, and with blue sky and sandy land as the periphery. The depicted characters are key information in the poster because it conveys the messages of the protagonist and character relationships. The poster can also be seen as an ideal-real structure, with the top as the ideal and the bottom as the real. In this structure, color is an element of great importance. The sky and land color belong to different color systems and represent different information. The top the blue sky represents ideal world, and the bottom the sandy land, the real situation. Besides, the blue color accounts for four fifths of the whole poster whereas the sandy color accounts for only one-fifth. Thus, there is a deflection in color suggesting that the poster prefers to convey is the ideal world rather the real. As for salience, it refers to the element catches viewers' attention most easily. In normal, the foregrounded elements are more salient than the elements in the background. For example, the crowd circle is foregrounded and the blue sky, its background. As for framing, the stronger the framing, the more independent the information. At the junction of sky and land in the poster, there is a vague framing line in between. Thus, above the line everything is ideal, indicating that all the characters around the protagonist will protect and help him, while below the line is the protagonist's real situation that he is walking in the sand lonely.

4. Results

For the above two questions in introduction, here are the answers. In verbal mode (i.e., the title, name, release date, starring cast and director), the name *Dune*, is the most foregrounded one at the letter and word level. The conceptual meaning of *Dune* relates to its sand color emphasizing the location of the film story. In visual one, the central circle formed by the eight characters and the central young boy are of great significance, which are foregrounded by their position in the poster and their size compared with the rest of other elements.

In *Dune* poster, visual and verbal modes complement each other, presenting an augmented and reinforced relationship, which has a good effect on the promotion of the film. These visual modes expand the information not mentioned in verbal mode and enrich the content of the poster, such as the circle showing possible relationship between the characters. Moreover, the enlargement of the *Dune* Font elaborates and reinforces the conceptual meaning expressed in the language itself. The font thus stands out in relation to the verbal mode. Through its innovative design, it aims to attract the viewer's attention and arouse their curiosity about where the dune is, what happened in the dune. Hence, these modes complement each other in a synergistic way, making the multimodal text more coherent, presenting the main message and bringing visual impact. Together, the location and the topic of the film's story – dune is conveyed and reinforced.

5. Discussion

Based on the theory of multimodal functional stylistics, this paper carries out a multimodal stylistic study on image, verbal mode, font, color and layout of the poster *Dune*. Firstly, the various modes in the poster are synergistic with each other, highlighting the location of the film's story and the events around which it revolves. The foregrounding of analytical process in conceptual representation is conducive to the depiction of character relationships; the foregrounding of non-transactional reaction in narrative representation shows characters' sensitivity to the surrounding environment and their concerns about the future, thus, it makes viewers wonder what they are looking at as well as why they seem so worried; the action process in narrative one provides a more detailed portrayal of the psychology of the protagonist, leaving the audience curious about what the protagonist is thinking and searching for as he walks through the dunes. Besides, verbal mode provides the audience with objective and concrete information. The enlarged, bold and layout modes are designed to enhance the visual impact of the title and release date, which contribute to expanding the scope of the film's audience.

This paper further validates the effectiveness of multimodal functional stylistics in poster interpretation, but the analyses in terms of color, font, and layout are not comprehensive enough. It is hoped that future research will pay more attention to these modes from functional stylistics in multimodal texts.

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Appendix