

# Multimodal Discourse of Corporate Public Service Advertisements: A Case Study of China UnionPay's "The Fairy Tale of Poetry"

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## Abstract

Multimodal discourse is a crucial method for presenting information in a comprehensive and impactful manner. Public service advertisements, in particular, employ multimodal discourse to convey distinct economic and social significance. This study examines the qualities and effectiveness of corporate public service discourse by analyzing China UnionPay's public service advertisement "The Fairy Tale of Poetry". The video is initially annotated using Elan. The video discourse analysis has three components: ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning, which are all derived from Visual Grammar. The study of text conversation is thereafter conducted via LancsBox and Wordless. Several suggestions are put up to enhance the communication effectiveness of public service advertisements: Regarding video discourse, it proposes developing a strong connection between color, focus, and content. This may be achieved by employing visual storytelling strategies, such as altering backdrops, employing complete and metonymic representation, employing a chronological narrative, and integrating texts and pictures. Within the realm of verbal communication, the deliberate selection of sentence length and structure, together with the frequent use of significant words and the incorporation of a dialect, work together to highlight the significance of core ideas and evoke emotional resonance.

**Keywords:** multimodal discourse, visual grammar, public service advertisement, corporate image, communicative effectiveness

## 1. Background of the Study

In the dynamic social context, individuals' communication is predominantly facilitated by multiple elements, including intonation, speech rate, gestures, and facial expressions. In the age of discernible "visual veracity," when truth is assessed primarily based on images, the need for multimodal methods in interpersonal communication is particularly emphasized. We searched CNKI, the largest repository of scholarly publications in China, using the phrase "multimodal discourse" in the titles as the search item. This search yielded a total of 1,900 publications, encompassing journal articles, PhD dissertations, and MA theses. Figure 1 displays the annual publication trend of the literature, indicating a consistent increase in the number of studies focusing on multimodal discourse.

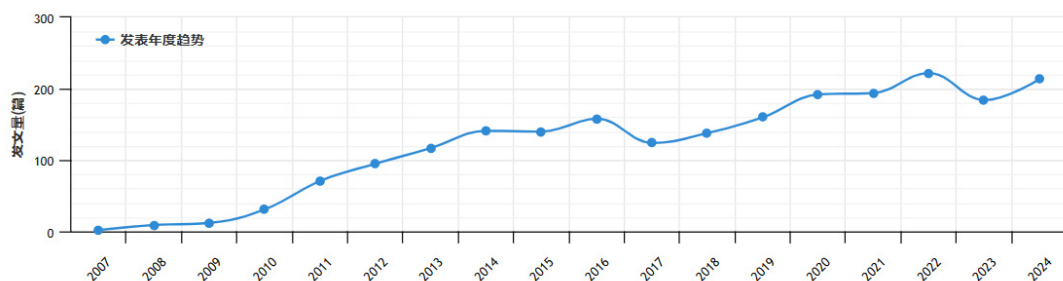


Figure 1. Annual Trend of Literature Publication: Studies with the Keyword "Multimodal Discourse" in the Title (From CNKI Analysis at <https://www.cnki.net/>)

Public service advertisements are non-commercial advertisements that usually disseminate some kind of social values and raise public awareness. Early public service advertisements had the problem of not being able to attract public attention quickly and were mostly limited to the use of text, ignoring the expressive power of other modes such as sound or video. In recent years, China's public service has been further developed with the progress and popularization of Internet technology. In the era of "Internet +", China's public welfare undertakings no longer rely on a single form of transmitting messages, but benefit from the combination of the Internet, the use of text, voice, pictures, video, and other multimodal means, to help the public more comprehensive and rapid understanding of public welfare activities. Therefore, the study on the integration of public service advertisements with multimodal discourse is not only of linguistic significance to deepen insights into language use, but also of social significance to advance public welfare initiatives.

## 2. Research Object

This paper selects China UnionPay's public service advertisement "The Fairy Tale of Poetry" as an example to study how it utilizes multimodal discourse to help construct public service discourse, establish corporate public service image, and promote the development of public service activities.

"The Fairy Tale of Poetry" tells a story about Heizi, a boy living in a fishing village, whose poems are adapted from those written by children in the mountain villages who have been donated by the China UnionPay Poetry POS public service initiative. Since 2019, China UnionPay has persisted in implementing the "Poetry POS" public service activity, allowing children living in the mountainous areas to give full play to their talents, showcase their talents in the mountains, and encourage wider participation in the UnionPay Poetry POS activity. By 2022, more than 70 schools and nearly 5,000 children have benefited from the program.

Heizi, a child left behind in a village by his parents who seek a livelihood in a city, desires to reunite with his parents but encounters opposition from Mr. Luo. Mr. Luo hopes that Heizi can keep writing poems and tells him that "Poetry is the greatest treasure". Hei Zi starts to use poetry as currency to trade in the village. The villagers, in their efforts to safeguard Heizi's innocence and passion for poetry, accept Heizi's poems as a form of money. Later, they are also influenced by this passion for poetry such that they begin to write poems and organize poetry recitals. Eventually, Heizi's book of poems is published and he embarks on a new journey.

Compared to most commercials, this public service film adopts a "silent" approach to introduce this public service project. Children are chosen as the main characters, observing the natural world with a keen eye and writing poems with sincere feelings. Through the children's poems, the audience can better appreciate the emotions and be touched from the bottom of their hearts, so that they can join the "Poetry POS" public service project, guarding the spiritual home of the children in the mountains, as well as preserving their poetic sensibilities and benevolence.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Rooted in M.A. K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006, 2010) created the initial Visual Grammar, and Painter et al. (1996) advanced the new type of Visual Grammar. The new visual grammar presents refinements in areas such as the analysis of image meaning. It emphasizes interpersonal relationships in the narrative, which highlights the involvement of the audience, and also on narrative continuity, emphasizing the extension of the focus on individual images to the focus on related groups of images.

The research using Visual Grammar to analyze multimodal discourse has gained momentum in China, with related studies such as Zhang and Jia (2012), Dezheng Feng's (2015) review on the Visual Grammar framework, Wang's (2019) analysis of governmental discourse, and Teng and Miao's (2018) discussion on children's picture books. Nonetheless, the types of discourse utilized by Visual Grammar still show limitations, and the theoretical explanatory power remains to be developed.

Based on the theory of Visual Grammar proposed by Painter et al. (1996), this study analyzes the contribution of modalities, such as images and words in discourse narrative, as well as the interaction and combination of meanings and modalities, in terms of three dimensions: interpersonal meaning, conceptual meaning, and group meaning. Among them, interpersonal meaning is divided into focalization system, pathos/affects system, and ambiance system; conceptual meaning includes the analysis of the manifestations of characters, events, and background and the sequence of events; textual meaning focuses on the integrated or complementary arrangement of layout, framing, and focus.

Visual Grammar is chosen as the research framework for this study mainly because, firstly, the high value placed on interpersonal relationships and discourse construction in Visual Grammar is exactly in line with the content characteristics and promotion of our research object, a public service advertisement. The objective of the public service advertisement is to optimize the impact of public service promotion by evoking emotional resonance

among the audience via the use of several modes of communication and urging them to endorse public welfare activities. Secondly, Visual Grammar attaches much attention to the continuity of images, which helps explore the overall narrative characteristics and techniques of the story. Third, there is a lack of research on the use of Visual Grammar for multimodal discourse analysis in public service advertisements, and our findings also seek to provide a reference for the construction of public service discourse and the creation of corporate public service images.

#### 4. Research Method

This study is conducted separately from video discourse and text discourse. First, video discourse is analyzed by using Elan to label the statistical nodes of the video and obtain the percentage of the total duration for the use of various symbols, to assess the role of video symbols in conveying information and creating meaning. Subsequently, the text conversation was subjected to analysis using LancsBox (Note 1) and Wordless (Note 2) to examine word frequency, collocation, sentence patterns, and other relevant factors. The findings of both qualitative and quantitative research are then summarized, and the generalized experience of effectively creating public service discourse employing multimodality is examined to investigate the process of developing corporate public service discourse and corporate image.

#### 5. Data and Discussion

##### 5.1 Analysis of Visual Discourse

In the following section, the content and composition of the discourse presented in the video will be explained in terms of interpersonal, ideational, and textual meanings.

##### 5.1.1 Construction of Interpersonal Meaning

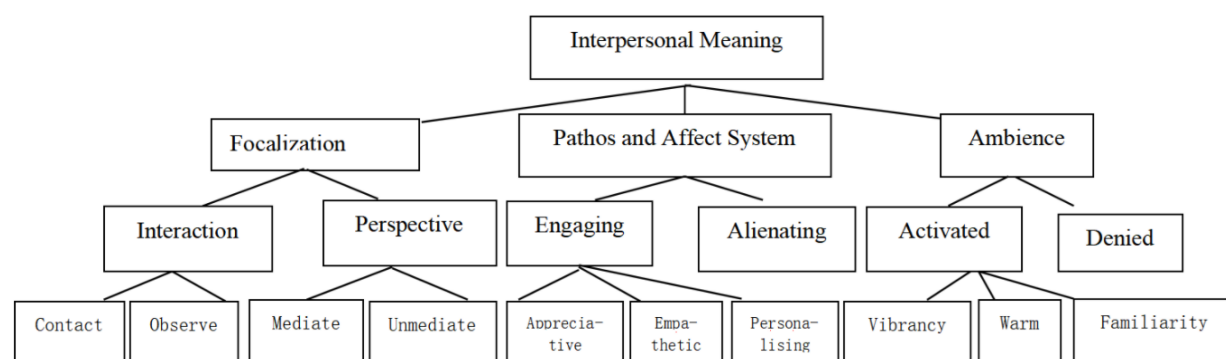


Figure 2. Interpersonal meaning in Visual Grammar (based on Painter et al. 2013, Note 3)

Table 1. Statistics on the construction of interpersonal meaning

Systems		Percentage
Focalization	Observe	78.72%
	Contact	4.67%
Pathos and Affect	Empathetic	4.81%

According to the content and characteristics of the video, the proportion of the total duration of the corpus accounted for by “Observe” and “Contact” in the focalization system and “empathetic” in the pathos and affect system. In this way, the above statistics are obtained. In the total time of the video, the proportion of the “Observe” stance is 78.72%, which is significantly used in the discourse; the proportions of the “Contact” stance and the “Emphatic” pathos are 4.67% and 4.81%, respectively. The duration of the “Observe” stance is noticeably longer, to enhance the truthfulness of the narrative through the audience’s perspective. The audience can objectively go into Heizi’s living environment and then his story (Figure 3).

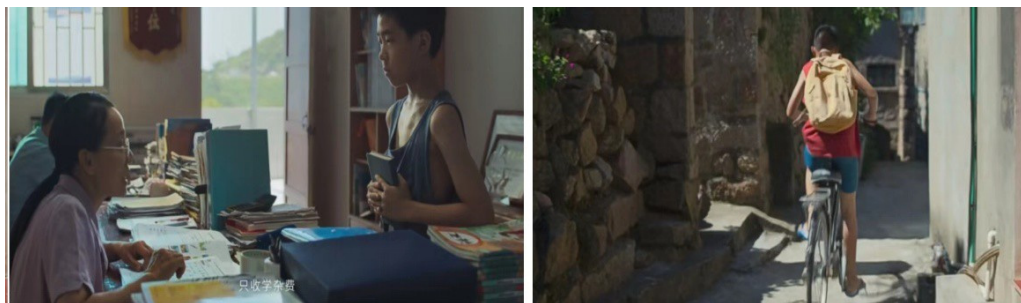


Figure 3. Images from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”

Emotional echoing is based on objective observation. To elicit empathy, the audience must be brought into the story’s context within a particular discourse framework. This is made possible by allocating time for both Contact and Empathy. For example, Figure 4 shows the image of the bicycle repairman holding Heizi’s poem in his hand. From showing the half body of the repairman in the previous scene to showing his two hands, it will prompt the audience to look at the surroundings around them through the eyes of the repairman. This will help the audience to feel as though they were part of the story being told in the scenario.

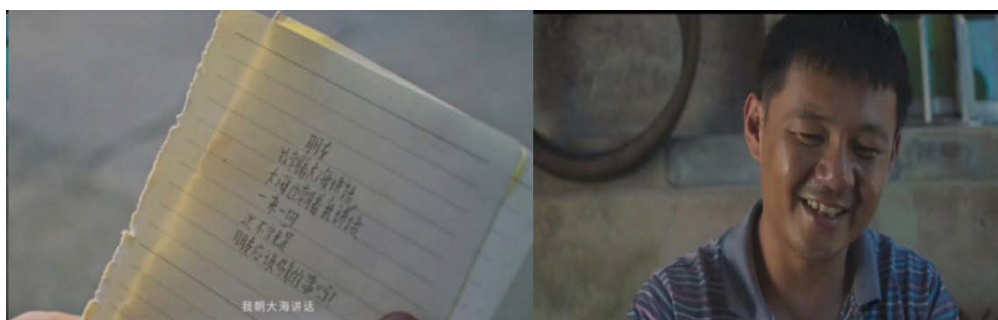


Figure 4. Images from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”

In terms of the focalization system, although eye contact does not account for a high percentage of the whole discourse, the camera focuses on Heizi’s face for about 20 seconds at the end (Figure 5). In this scenario, Heizi wishes to use his poetry as payment for a train ticket to Guangzhou, where he can reunite with his parents. Heizi’s clear eyes look directly at the audience, and the close-up puts the audience in a more intimate relationship with Heizi, in which the audience can easily empathize with Heizi, feel his predicament, and then develop a stronger will to help him. Again, the direct eye contact with the smiling fisherman can bring the audience closer to the fishermen, so that the audience can naturally experience the simplicity and warmth of the fishermen (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Image from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”





Figure 6. Image from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”

In terms of color, the overall ambient colors of the film are dark, and the darkness corresponds to the plight of Heizi. However, Heizi’s red top, the fishermen’s bright fishing clothes, the red flags, and the sunlight are then able to stand out and foreshadow the happy ending of the story (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Images from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”

The elaborate use of colors is also seen in its alteration: This film is primarily darker in brightness, but brightens up when Heizi rides his bicycle into the city for the first time, capturing Heizi’s joyful emotions at that time (Figure 8).

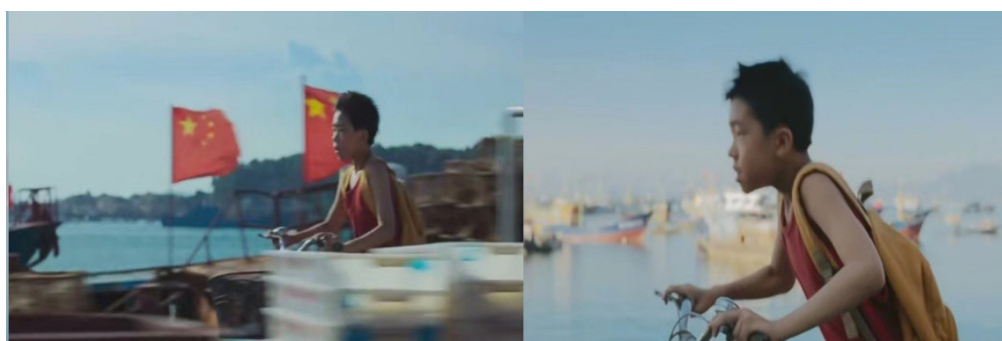


Figure 8. Images from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”

In addition, the incorporation of various colors in the film effortlessly engenders a sense of familiarity among the audiences while increasing the authenticity and liveliness of the narrative, creating a feeling of the story unfolding in the actual world (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Image from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”

### 5.1.2 Construction of Conceptual Meaning

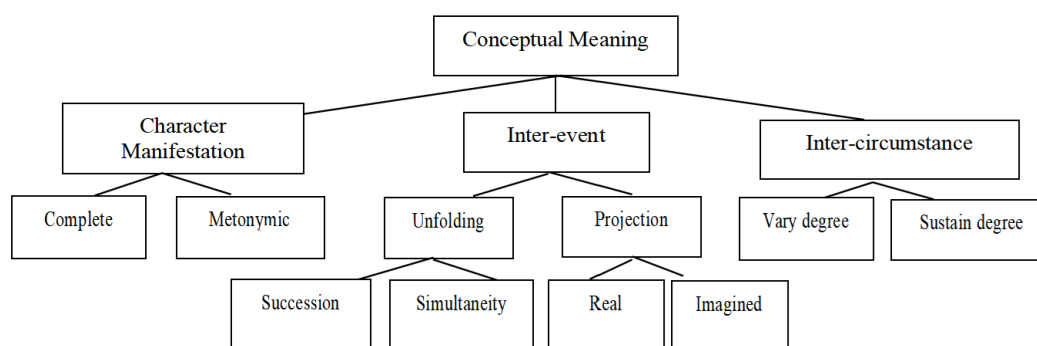


Figure 10. Conceptual meaning in Visual Grammar 3 (based on Painter et al., 2013)

In the conceptual system, the advertisement mainly shows events using a combination of genuine and imagined elements. Regarding the link between the occurrences of these events, it follows the successive order in which they occur one after the other.

Table 2. Statistics of conceptual meaning

Systems	Description of the screen	percentage
Character manifestations	Complete	53.10%
	Metonymic	46.90%
Inter-circumstances	Sustain degree	80.90%
	Vary degree	19.10%

As shown in Table 2, the time allocated for Character Manifestation and Inter-circumstances was counted in the total duration of the film, and 53.1% of the time was used for Complete Manifestation and 46.9% was for Metonymic Manifestation. Regarding Inter-circumstances, 80.9% and 19.1% of the time were used for Sustain Degree (with unchanged background) and Vary Degree (with changed background), respectively.

The film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry” mainly focuses on Heizi as the main character, and centers on the idea that “Poetry is the greatest treasure”, and advances in dialogues with the teacher, villagers, and grandfather. As shown

in Table 2, the film utilizes both complete and metonymic representation. The complete representation mainly depicts the facial expressions of the characters to emphasize their emotions and arouse the audience's emotional resonance. For example, Figure 6 provides a complete depiction of the fishermen's joyful smiles. On the other hand, Figure 11 is a metonymic portrayal that primarily depicts the characters' actions. The only thing that happens when Mr. Luo, the bicycle repairman, the schoolteacher, and the others read the poem is that they pick up the paper with their hands and the text is enlarged, drawing the audience in as though they are the ones reading it. This illustrates the villagers' gradual appreciation of the poem and their deep understanding of the "fairy tale" that they have created for Heizi.

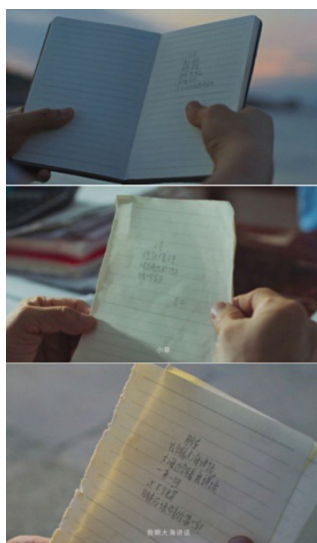


Figure 11. Images from the film "The Fairy Tale of Poetry"

The second part is the connection between events and context. Contextual setting consistency is demonstrated, as in Figure 12, by the fact that there is no change in the scene from the teacher reading the poem on the beach to his departure in the boat, which makes the plot more coherent. In this film, most of the background shifts utilize contextual shifts. Contextual shifts are a key aspect of this film that allows for more information to be conveyed by including more contexts of the event within a limited amount of time. As shown in Figure 13, at the beginning of the film, there is a scene of Heizi riding his bicycle. The camera shifts to different angles by combining near and far, partial and panoramic views, in order to convey contextual meanings.

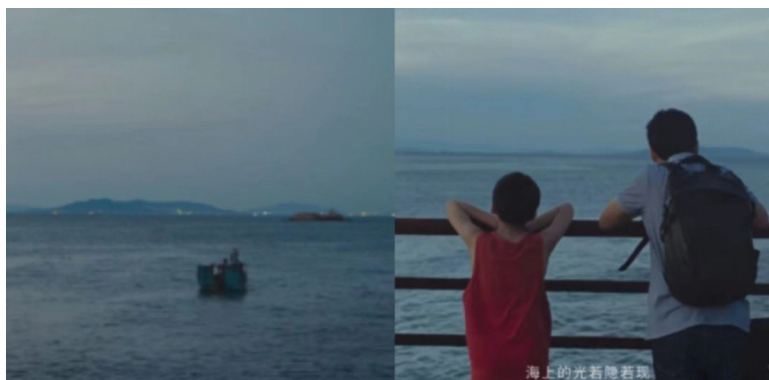


Figure 12. Images from the film "The Fairy Tale of Poetry"



Figure 13. Images from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”

The chronology is shown in this film, which has the following sections: The teacher stopped Heizi from going to the city, so he traded his poems for goods in the fishing village. The villagers were then inspired to write poems and held a poetry reading recital. Heizi then attempted to exchange his poems for a ticket to the city, and the teacher read aloud Heizi’s published poems to the class as well as an introduction to this public service project. The film is arranged chronologically, with Mr. Luo’s persuasion of Heizi to remain in the fishing village and continue writing poetry serving as the cause of the subsequent events. The project’s introduction is an elevated version of the preceding five sections. Heizi’s narrative is a representation of many “poets in the mountains”. By spreading awareness of the charity program through this film, more people will be able to help more children in the mountains.

### 5.1.3 Construction of Textual Meaning

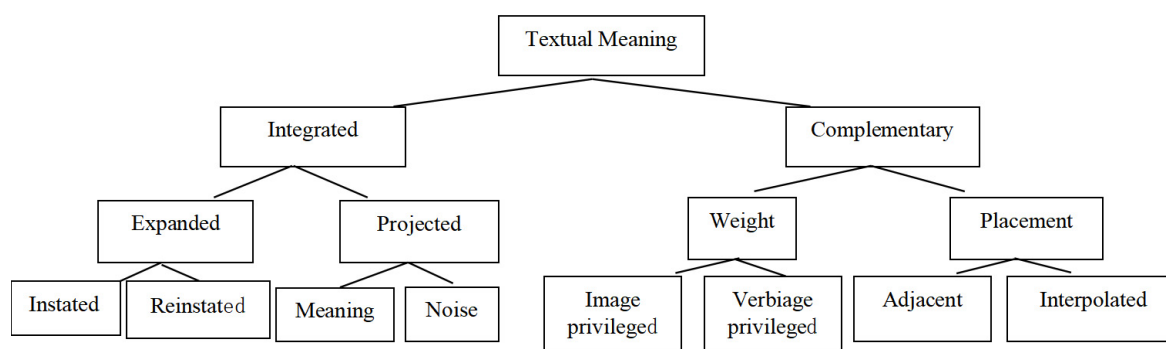


Figure 14. Meaning of groupings in the new Visual Grammar (based on Painter et al., 2013)

Table 3. Statistics of textual meaning

Systems	Description of the screen	percentage
Integrated	Expanded	0.52%
Complementary	Equal privilege	5.57%
	Text privilege	3.13%

The duration of image-text integration and complementarity was counted as a proportion of the total duration of the film to obtain the statistics in the table above. This film achieves modal interaction through the subtitles located at the bottom of the video, which are transcriptions of the characters’ speech. In addition, the video demonstrates a closer and more direct connection between image and text through inter-modal integration such as the use of expansion where text is overlaid on top of an image, and the use of complementarity, where the image and text are given equal or different importance to complement and emphasize the message depending on the focus of the message being conveyed.

At the beginning of the video, the text “The Fairy Tale of Poetry” is overlaid on the image in an expanded way (Figure 16), which makes the text stand out and simultaneously also part of the image, and thus conveys the theme of the video, “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”, to the audience clearly.





Figure 15. Image from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”

The closing section of the film uses a complementary approach, placing the image on the left and the text on the right, both occupying the same amount of space with equal importance (in Figure 16). It is generally accepted that the visual material on the left side gives information that tends to be known to the audience, while the visual material on the right side provides information that is novel and needs to be focused on by the audience. The text on the right side introduces the initiative and achievement of the UnionPay Poetry POS charity program and calls on the audience to pay attention to this program and to protect the children’s hearts and talents.



Figure 16. Image from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”

The ending part of the video is occupied by the text in the center of the screen (Figure 18), switching from the image or the multimodal combination of image or text to the pure text, a single modality, so that the audience gets a different experience and focuses all his attention on the textual content, thinking about the text and getting a sense of it in relation to the content of the full film.



Figure 17. Image from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”



Figure 18. Image from the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”

## 5.2 Analysis of Text Discourse

### 5.2.1 Lexical Features

The number of characters in the text of the film “The Fairy Tale of Poetry” is 836, and this study analyzes types, tokens, lexical densities, and high-frequency vocabulary using Wordless. As shown in Table 4, the number of tokens is 574, the number of types is 276, and the type-token ratio is 48.1%.

Table 4. Statistics of tokens, types and characters

Types	The text of <i>The Fairy Tale of Poetry</i>
Count of sentences	149
Count of tokens	574
Count of types	276
Number of characters	836
Type-token ratio	0.481

Word frequency statistics is also a means in analyzing the text. Through the Words function of LanksBox, the top 10 high-frequency words in the text of “The Fairy Tale of Poetry” were counted, see Table 5. It can be seen that, in addition to the structural word used to form a nominal phrase (的), the sentence-final particle used for an exclamation (啊) and personal pronouns (such as “你 (you)”, “我 (I)”), words such as “Heizi (the main character’s name)”, “诗歌 (poetry)”, “进城 (go in the city)”, “买 (buy)” appear more frequently, which fit with the main content of the film and enhance publicity. “Heizi”, the main character in the film, represents many children who are also eager to get out of the mountains. “诗歌(poetry)” is not only the embodiment of the children’s innocence and imagination but also the medium of communication with the outside world, which encodes the core meaning of the story. “进城 (go to the city)” acts as a thread in the development of the story, connecting the beginning with the end of the story. “诗歌(poetry)”, together with “买 (buy)”, is a reflection of the theme in the film: “Poetry is the greatest treasure”.

Table 5. Top 10 high-frequency words in the text of “The Fairy Tale of Poetry”

Word	FREQUENCY	TYPE	FREQUENCY
的 (used to form a nominal phrase)	18	我 (“I”)	4
黑子 (“Heizi”, a name)	12	是 (copular verb “be”)	4
诗歌 (“poetry”)	7	走出 (“go out”)	4
你 (“you”)	7	大海 (“the sea”)	4
买 (“buy”)	5	啊 (an interjection)	4
进城 (“go to the city”)	5	去 (“go”)	4
啦 (an interjection)	5	诗 (“poetry”)	4

*Note.* The number in the table refers to the occurrences of the corresponding word.

Words with a high frequency of collocation with the theme word “poetry” include “可以(can)”, “买 (buy)”, “财富 (treasure)”, etc. Around this main line, Heizi uses poetry to pay school tuition, repair his bicycle, and “buy” sneakers and fishing nets, through which the film builds up a logical chain between poetry and treasure. As shown in Figure 19, a LanksBox analysis helps demonstrate the logic of this film.

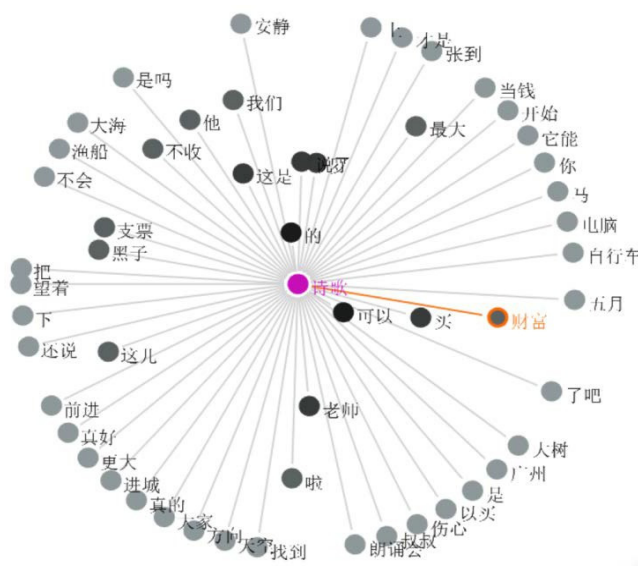


Figure 19. GraphColl visualization mapping with “poetry” as a node word

*Note.* The figure shows a context which, with “poetry” as a node word, contains 5 words on its left and 5 words on its right (i.e. Span: 5 left - 5 right). The four keywords on and near the red line are 诗歌 (“poetry”), 可以 (“can”), 买 (“buy”), 财富 (“treasure”).

### 5.2.2 Sentence Features

The total number of sentences in the film is 149. The average sentence length and sentence characteristics of the text are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Statistics of sentence length

Types	The text of <i>The Fairy Tale of Poetry</i>
Sentence Length in Tokens (Mean)	3.852
Sentence Length in Tokens (Standard Deviation)	2.212
Sentence Length in Tokens (Variance)	4.891
Sentence Length in Tokens (Minimum)	1
Sentence Length in Tokens (Median)	3.000
Sentence Length in Tokens (Maximum)	10
Sentence Length in Tokens (Modes)	3

From the above table, it can be seen that there are 149 sentences in the film of 9 minutes and 35 seconds, with an average of about 16 sentences per minute; the average sentence length is 3.85; and the standard deviation of sentence length is 2.212. The film effectively combines sentences and images, with a relatively small quantity and duration of sentences. As a result, the audience avoids experiencing auditory fatigue and is provided ample opportunity for contemplation.

The use of various sentence patterns amplifies the range of emotions and the vibrancy of language in verbal communication. The film has exactly 16 interrogative sentences, accounting for 10.74% of the total 149 sentences. These interrogative sentences enhance the characters' dialogues and narrative progression, while also encouraging thinking and fostering empathy in the audience.

### 5.2.3 Dialectal Features

Mandarin and dialects, with their respective expressions and functions, should be in dynamic harmony. The promotion of Mandarin does not mean the elimination of dialects, which are of great value in interpersonal communication (Yu, 2009). In film and television works, the use of dialect and Mandarin reflects the diversified culture of China (Wang, 2010). Regional dialects, serving as the carriers of regional culture, have different regional attributes and operate as the social connection between literary works and the audience (Liu, 2007). Dialects possess distinctive qualities, enabling them to produce a particular expressive impact (Wang, 2016).

In addition to the use of Mandarin to present the main characters and contents, the use of dialect also occurs many times in "The Fairy Tale of Poetry", from the exchanges of the fishermen, and from the poetry recitals in the fishing village. It skillfully utilizes the power of widespread promotion of Mandarin, as well as the emotional appeal of a dialect, making the whole narrative real and vivid, and thus achieving better expression and inspirational effects.

## 6. Conclusion

From the perspectives of video and text discourse analysis, we explore the use of multimodal discourse to maximize the communication benefits of public service advertisements and to establish the image of corporate public welfare.

Firstly, when telling a story, the first thing to consider is whether the content is real or fictional, which plays a crucial role in setting the basic color atmosphere and emotional tone to present different content. According to different video contents, we should make proper use of complete representation and metonymic representation to highlight the main character.

Then, according to the different types of language content of the characters, the video screen can also choose between complete representation and metonymic representation, so that the video content is more consistent with the language content. In addition to the content of the video itself, how to better obtain the attention of the audience is also important, through the changes of neighboring image environments so that the audience is not only focused on one-sided content, which can prevent the audience from generating a sense of fatigue. It can also be used to enhance the interaction and integration of texts and images to efficiently supplement and highlight the theme of the video.

From the point of view of the text itself, the low number of sentences in the text helps to realize the combination of texts and images; the use of shorter sentences is more suitable for the natural, life-like scenes, which is helpful to the audience's understanding; the use of a variety of sentence patterns will get rid of a single tone of statement, adding diversity of tone and vividness of texts.

In terms of the interaction between text and other modalities, subtitles often appear below the image, while other texts are combined with the image in an integrated and complementary manner. Chinese and English subtitles will facilitate the international dissemination of stories. Text in the form of integrated mode covers the top of the image, which can effectively attract the audience's attention; text in the form of complementary mode occupies the same proportion of space as the image, which can convey the meaning explicitly, together with the image.

From the point of view of dialectal use, the felicitous use of dialect and its unique function in social and emotional contexts can help public welfare promotion activities to activate empathy and promote practice.

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## Authors' contributions

Professor Li Fan is the corresponding author of this paper. The project's principal investigator is Prof. Li Fan.

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**Competing interests**

Not applicable.

**Informed consent**

Obtained.

**Ethics approval**

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal’s policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

**Provenance and peer review**

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

**Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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*Foreign Languages*, 41(06), 731–743.

Zhang, J. Y., & Jia, P. P. (2012). Reflections on Visual Grammar. *Contemporary Foreign Language Studies*, 3, 38–42, 160.

## Notes

Note 1. LancsBox was developed by V. Brezina and his colleagues at Lancaster University, UK. Related information is giving below:

Brezina, V., Weill-Tessier, P., & McEnery, A. (2020). #LancsBox v. 5.x. [software]. Retrieved from <http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/lancsbox>.

Brezina, V., Timperley, M., & McEnery, T. (2018). #LancsBox v. 4.x [software]. Retrieved from <http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/lancsbox>.

Brezina, V., McEnery, T., & Wattam, S. (2015). Collocations in context: a new perspective on collocation networks. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 20(2), 139-173.

Note 2. Wordless was developed by Lei Ye, Institute of Corpus Research, Shanghai International Studies University.

Note 3. All the figures in this paper regarding the Visual Grammar analysis framework are drawn upon the work of Painter et al. (1996) and other researchers. The same note on this source will not be repeated.

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