

A study on the digital discourse meaning construction of English learners in Ningxia Universities

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Abstract: This study examines the videos published on a university's official WeChat account, analyzing how students construct meaning in digital narrative discourse across cultural, contextual, and content dimensions. Results indicate that learners can clearly express cultural connotations; the videos employ abundant culture-related symbols to visualize Chinese customs; and students can effectively coordinate multiple modalities in creation. Through narrative practice, learners deepen their cultural understanding, enhance cultural awareness, and provide positive implications for the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

Keywords: digital narrative; multimodal discourse analysis; university learners

1 Introduction

Digital storytelling is the practice of sharing personal narratives via digital media [1]. Combining storytelling with interactive media, it has drawn wide attention for its positive effects on language learning [2]. Recent research on digital narrative mainly covers three areas: teaching frameworks and strategies [3], practical teaching applications [4], and learners' digital narrative abilities [5].

Although existing studies have laid a foundation, most studies focus primarily on textual analysis. This study therefore adopts Zhang Delu's multimodal discourse analysis framework to explore the meaning construction of English learners' narrative discourse [6].

2 Theoretical framework

Zhang Delu's framework (Figure 1) consists of three levels: cultural, contextual, and content. The cultural level, as the highest tier, encompasses ideology and genre. The contextual level covers tenor, field, and mode, referring to discourse participants, content, and the role of language in different contexts. The content level can be analyzed via verbal and non-verbal dimensions, drawing on Halliday's three metafunctions and Kress & Van Leeuwen's visual grammar to explore representational, interactive, and compositional meanings [7][8].

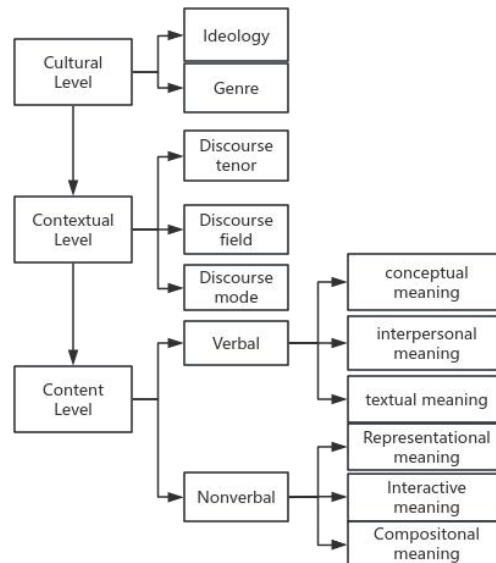


Figure 1. Theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis (Zhang Delu, 2009)

3 Research design

This section will sequentially introduce the research questions, corpus selection, and research methods of this study.

3.1 Research questions

- (1) What discourse meanings do learners construct culturally?
- (2) What discourse meanings do learners construct contextually?
- (3) What discourse meanings do learners construct in content?

3.2 Research methodology

This study analyzes high-engagement cultural videos (Dragon Boat Festival, Qixi Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival) from a university's English-language channel, with each video approximately five minutes in length. These videos serve as ideal samples for examining students' multi-level discourse meaning construction. Adopting qualitative methods, this study employs ELAN 6.8 for multimodal annotation and provides an interpretative analysis of the coded data.

4 Research findings

This section will sequentially present learners' construction of narrative discourse meaning at the cultural, contextual, and content levels.

4.1 Cultural level

In these three videos, learners consistently begin their narratives with festival origins for two primary reasons: they reflect ancient modes of production, daily life and culture, laying a foundation for understanding related customs and traditions, while also offering a key entry point into history and traditional culture. For example, the story of Qu Yuan's patriotic sacrifice helps learners recognize that Chinese festivals embody the spiritual essence of loyalty and patriotism in Chinese civilization.

Learners progress from the origins of festivals to related folk customs. Videos that vividly showcase these traditions serve as a tangible approach to preserving cultural heritage. For instance, in the Mid-Autumn Festival, learners explore traditional customs like mooncake-eating, revealing the cultural significance of this major Chinese festival. Through the video's visual presentation, audiences gain deeper insight into the cultural meanings embedded in these traditions.

Dietary customs are deeply rooted in daily life and reflect people's attitudes toward life. For example, round

mooncakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival symbolize family reunion, longing for hometown, and wishes for harvest and happiness. However, dietary customs differ regionally. Zongzi during the Dragon Boat Festival is shared nationwide but shows distinct preferences between northern and southern China. These regional differences reflect China's geographical diversity.

4.2 Contextual level

The discourse focuses on festival-related information, with learners choosing familiar daily topics to avoid macro-narrative detachment from reality. Its field encompasses video participants in festivals, showing diverse interpersonal relationships; the mode mainly uses verbal modalities to delve into ordinary people's daily lives, enhancing audience participation. The video incorporates festival cultural symbols like "Zongzi" and "Mugwort", vividly presenting Chinese traditional customs and cuisine to promote deeper exploration of Chinese culture.

4.3 Content level

This study will analyze how image modality and text modality construct discourse meaning, using three representative video screenshots as examples.

4.3.1 Meaning construction in verbal modality

Subtitles constitute the main verbal-textual modality across the three videos. This study analyzes the narrative discourse from three dimensions: conceptual, interpersonal, and textual, as elaborated below:

(1) Conceptual: The selected videos primarily foreground material processes, relational processes, and mental processes at the level of conceptual meaning. The following sections will conduct an in-depth analysis using specific case studies.

- ① Children wear fragrance sachets during the Dragon Boat Festival.
- ② Another traditional custom during the Dragon Boat Festival *is* the hanging of Mugwort leaves.
- ③ Folk women would thread needles *wishing* to be as clever and skillful as the Zhinv.
- ④ In 278 BC, after the Qin army captured the capital city of Chu, Qu Yuan threw himself into the Miluo River on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, sacrificing his life for his country.

Of these four clauses, some represent material processes whose agents are children and people, employing the verb "wear" with "fragrance sachets" as the object. This reflects people's wish to ward off misfortune and pray for blessings during the Dragon Boat Festival, embodying care for life and pursuit of health. The clause "hanging Mugwort leaves" expresses a relational process marked the verb "is". As a ritual, it strengthens the festive atmosphere and ceremonial significance of the Dragon Boat Festival. Another clause represents a psychological process. Through needle-threading activities, women traditionally sought to acquire the dexterity of the Weaver Girl, reflecting a common wish of ancient women.

(2) Interpersonal: These three videos focus on conveying information about traditional culture in an objective manner. Consequently, they employ declarative sentences to present the origins, customs, and cultural significance of traditional festivals to the audience. For instance, the sentence ④ introducing the Dragon Boat Festival's origins reflects the profound affection and loyalty people hold for their nation and ethnicity. As a patriotic poet, Qu Yuan's spirit of patriotism and deep devotion to his country have been revered and commemorated by later generations.

Table 1. Results of descriptive statistics

| Theme | Rheme |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Qixi Festival | was associated with the touching love legend of Niulang and Zhinü |
| In 278 BC | the Qin army captured the capital city of Chu. |
| Qiaoguo | is the festival food for the Qixi Festival |
| Mooncake | was an ancient tribute to the God of the Moon on the Mid-Autumn Festival. |

(3) Textual: Among the four clauses in Table 1, only the second clause—"In 278 BC"—serves as a marked theme clause, while "The Qixi Festival," "Qiaoguo", and "Mooncake" function as unmarked theme clauses. Each theme clause represents a distinct facet of Chinese culture.

However, learners' overall cross-cultural awareness remains limited. Some content uses expressions unfamiliar to foreign audiences and lacks explanations of Chinese dynasties, place names, and regional cuisines, which may cause comprehension barriers. For example, the brief statement "In 278 BC, Qin forces captured the capital of Chu" needs additional context. Without clarification, audiences unfamiliar with Chinese history may struggle to understand and resonate with the content.

4.3.2 Meaning construction in nonverbal modalities

This study will analyze the meaning construction of learners' digital image narratives from three perspectives: representation, interaction, and composition, as detailed below:

(1) Representation: The conceptual representation in the selected video mainly relies on symbolic processes (Figure 2). Set against the backdrop of the Qixi Festival, bright lights, a unified color scheme and soft details create a strong traditional cultural atmosphere. This visual strategy links abstract prosperity to concrete festival imagery, arousing viewers' cultural consensus on national prosperity and people's well-being without text. Implicit classification is also shown: Qiaoguo pastries are evenly spaced, identical in size and neatly aligned, reflecting an equal relationship. Figure 3 illustrates its associative structure, where diverse forms are juxtaposed or associated to highlight key production stages and form a unified visual whole. Such combination of classification and analysis reveals the universal, stable and timeless essence of the concept.

Narrative representation mainly involves action and reaction processes. In the action process, an oblique vector is formed by the actor's body or limbs. Figure 4 illustrates both processes: a boy reaches toward a lotus lantern, forming a visual vector that transforms custom from an abstract concept into a tangible form. The boy also acts as a reactor: his gaze and facial expression create a response vector, adding emotional depth, affinity, and cultural resonance to the image.



Figure 2. Qixi Festival



Figure 3 Qixi Festival



Figure 4. Mid-Autumn Festival



Figure 5. Mid-Autumn Festival

(2) Interaction: These three videos frequently use close-ups focusing on the upper body and hands, clearly showing facial expressions and physical interactions. This proximity helps viewers intuitively perceive emotions, conveying how Mid-Autumn Festival customs build empathy and strengthen interpersonal bonds. In contrast, Figure 2 uses a long shot to present a broader scene integrating people and architecture, highlighting the festival's social and communal nature in cultural inheritance.

Figure 2 adopts a horizontal and oblique perspective, suggesting the viewer is outside the scene. Paired with long shots, it increases psychological distance and strengthens the objectified effect. Figure 6 combines a horizontal front-on perspective with close-ups, letting the figures face the viewer directly to establish contact, drawing the audience into the festive atmosphere, enhances emotional engagement and creates a strong sense of participation.



Figure 6. Qixi Festival



Figure 7. Dragon Boat Festival

The high-angle viewpoint places the audience in a symbolic position of authority. While under a low-angle perspective, participants appear elevated and unique. As shown in Figure 7, the shot posits the audience below. From the viewer's visual experience, this angle induces a certain psychological pressure.

Composition: The informational value is reflected in Figure 5. According to visual grammar, learners place key information at the top of the image to represent ideals, with the bottom standing for reality. The sky lantern symbolizes ideals and wishes, while the people at the bottom represent real life. Vectors in the narrative connect ideals and reality, forming the compositional meaning. It also achieves prominence through several visual techniques. The two central figures are placed in the foreground and enlarged to attract attention, while the background is blurred to reduce interference and highlight the foreground subjects via contrast. It relies on a vector formed by upward-reaching arms that connect the figures to the sky lantern. This structure unifies the image, guides the viewer's gaze, and reinforces its meaning.

5 Conclusion

This study analyzed a university-produced video from cultural, contextual, and content dimensions, exploring the cultural connotations of traditional festivals. Results show that the video uses abundant cultural symbols to visualize Chinese customs at the contextual level, and learners achieved modal coordination at the content level. However, their cross-cultural awareness was insufficient: terms like personal names, places, and festivals that may be unfamiliar to international audiences lacked sufficient explanation, repetition, or emphasis. This study offers preliminary insights into multimodal discourse in university videos. As the limitation, the findings may lack universality. Future research should expand the corpus and adopt statistical analysis to enhance rigor.

Acknowledgments

This paper was supported by Department of Education of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Higher Education Scientific Research Project (NYG-2024-052).

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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