

Representing the Past through Narratives: A Systemic Functional Multimodal Analysis of D-Day Commemoration in Military Times

Feiyu Jiang

College of International Studies, National University of Defense Technology, Nan Jing, Jiang Su, 210039, China

Abstract: This study applies Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) to explore how Military Times, a U.S. military-affiliated publication, constructs historical memory through its reporting on D-Day commemorations. Through the examination of 15 news reports (2019-2024) that incorporate both textual and visual elements, this research interrogates the interplay of linguistic and visual semiotics in reinterpreting collective memory. The analysis reveals how multimodal synergy elevates wartime sacrifice to a moral duty, embeds Cold War paradigms into modern geopolitical contexts, and strengthens military identity via ritualized remembrance^[1]. This ideological framing not only legitimizes U.S. defense policies but also fosters transgenerational ethical empathy and sustains alliance solidarity. The study highlights the pivotal role of military media as institutional agents in leveraging historical narratives to consolidate ideological positions.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA), D-Day commemoration, collective memory construction, military media narratives

1. Introduction

The commemoration of D-Day occupies a sacrosanct position within U.S.^[2] military culture, serving as both an institutionalized crystallization of historical memory and an living tradition for forging armed forces identity. As the largest amphibious operation in history, D-Day not only signified a strategic turning point in World War II but also cast the myth of American exceptionalism into enduring military dogma through narratives of Allied unity, technological ingenuity, and sacrificial heroism^[3-5].

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG)

Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG) establishes language as a social semiotic system and summarizes three codified and abstract three metafunctions of language, i.e., ideational, interpersonal and textual functions.

The ideational metafunction encodes human experience through the transitivity system. By analyzing how clauses construe human cognition of both external physical phenomena and internal subjective experiences, the transitivity system reveals the capacity of language to both construct and reflect socio-semiotic reality, material, mental, relational, verbal, and behavioral processes. Three components are supposed to be involved in each process: the process itself, participants in the process and circumstances associated with the process (Halliday, 2000: 107). The process and its participants are necessary in a clause, while circumstances are droppable^[6-9].

2.2 Visual Grammar

Kress and van Leeuwen extend Halliday's ideas of three metafunctions of language to visual semiotic resources, and rename these metafunctions as meanings embedded in images, i.e., representational, interactive, and compositional

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Region - Educational Research and Reviews.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<https://www.front-sci.com/journal/rerr>

meanings, thus formulating a descriptive framework of visual grammar. They consider that "in order to function as a full system of communication, the visual, like all semiotic modes, has to serve several communicational and representational requirements." (2006: 41)

Representational meaning of imagery corresponds to the ideational meaning of language. It refers to what the image represents to the viewer. It is about people, place and objects within an image, and what it is saying to the viewer (Harrison, 2003). In the analysis of representational meaning, images are examined through the design of presented participants, encompassing two primary semiotic processes: narrative processes characterized by dynamic actions conveyed through vectors and transactional interactions, and conceptual processes that articulate symbolic or classificatory representations of abstract ideas.

3. Analysis of D-Day Commemoration in Military Times

3.1 Context of Culture

3.1.1 Heroic myth construction

The reports bind individual heroism with collective sacrifice, framing D-Day as the cornerstone of collective memory. By spotlighting veterans' personal stories, individual experiences are elevated into the myth of "ordinary people forging extraordinary history". The pervasive visual symbols, flags, military medals, gravestones, and parachutes, etc., materialize abstract historical events into a symbolic lexicon of liberty and sacrifice^[10-12]. Through annual ritualized coverage, personal memories are transfigured into spatiotemporal anchors of national narratives. This reconstructive strategy not only reinforces the historical legitimacy of heroism but also constructs a fixed framework for public emotional engagement.

3.1.2 Cold war paradigm transplantation

The reports consistently anchor D-Day as a historical prototype of Cold War-style confrontation under the framework of "a battle for the survival of the free world," offering discursive support for the sustained military hegemony and alliance expansion^[13-15]. High-frequency lexicons like "courage," "unity," and "freedom" function as evaluative resources, constructing U.S. military actions as ethical imperatives through moral overlexicalization. This lexical strategy naturalizes the nation's identity as a "global order guardian" by conflating military intervention with universal virtues. Driven by the cultural context's ideological dichotomy of "free world versus adversaries," the coverage selectively excludes Russia in commemorations, a situational choice that recontextualizes Cold War paradigms into contemporary geopolitics.

3.2 Context of Situation

Context of situation refers to the immediate social and situational environment of language activities, shaping how communication unfolds. Halliday (1985) systematized this concept by proposing three key contextual parameters: field, tenor, and mode^[16-18]. Field refers to the subject matter, social activity, or topic of discourse; tenor concerns the relationships between participants; and mode relates to the channel and medium of communication. These three subsystems collectively determine the register of a text and influence language structure and function^[19].

The field demonstrates a politicized shift from solely historical commemoration to geopolitical cautionary discourse. Reports from 2019-2021 focused on historical details and veteran narratives to construct collective memory. Post-2022, the Russia-Ukraine conflict triggered a thematic shift toward contemporary security issues^[20]. Through strategic juxtaposition of D-Day with the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the media forges a continuity narrative of "countering authoritarian threats." Lexical choices evolved from "sacrifice/victory" to "defense," repurposing commemorative rituals as mobilization tools for defense policies.

4. Conclusion

This study integrates SFG, Visual Grammar theory, and Zhang Delu's comprehensive framework for multimodal discourse analysis to conduct a multimodal discourse analysis of the ideational meaning in *Military Times'* D-Day commemorative reports, examining cultural, contextual, content, and expression levels^[21]. The research reveals that the ideational meaning of language is primarily constructed through material processes in the transitivity system, followed by relational, mental, and verbal processes; and the ideational meaning of images relies mainly on narrative representation, supplemented by conceptual representation. A complementary relationship exists between the two modalities, jointly transforming D-Day commemorative and mourning activities into tools for constructing collective memory, reinforcing national identity, facilitating intergenerational education, and strengthening alliance ties. It should be noted that, due to

limitations in corpus accessibility, this study focuses solely on static news texts and does not incorporate other modalities such as auditory elements. Future research needs to be conducted for deeper exploration.

References

- [1] Fillmore C J. Frame Semantics. In *Linguistics in the Morning Calm*. Seoul: Hanshin, 1982. 111-137
- [2] Smith D. Language and War Memory Semantic Structures in Military Media Narratives. *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 2018, 19(1): 102-121
- [3] Lee H, Zhang Y. Semantic Framing in Chinese Anti-Japanese War Discourse Lexical Patterns and Intertextual Symbolism. *Discourse & Society*, 2020, 31(4): 401-419
- [4] Hall S. *Representation Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage Publications, 1997
- [5] Chen X. War Memory and Ethnicity The Role of Nontraditional Symbols in Southwest China. *Memory Studies*, 2021, 14(3): 567-584
- [6] Assmann A. Transformations between History and Memory. *Poetics Today*, 2008, 29(2): 489-506
- [7] Connerton P. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge University Press, 1989
- [8] Butler J. *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990
- [9] Wertsch J V. *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Cambridge University Press, 2002
- [10] Liu Y. Narrative Structures in Chinese War Commemoration Reports: A CorpusBased Study. *Discourse Context & Media*, 2019, 28: 100267
- [11] Olick J K. Collective Memory The Two Cultures. *Sociological Theory*, 1999, 17(3): 333-348
- [12] Caruth C. *Unclaimed Experience Trauma Narrative and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996
- [13] Halbwachs M. *On Collective Memory*. University of Chicago Press, 1992
- [14] Zhang Y. Media Narratives of War Survivors Trauma Sublimation and National Identity Construction. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 2022, 15(1): 45-61
- [15] Jones R, Smith T. Private Narratives and Public Histories Revisiting the Risks of Memory Reconstruction. *Memory Studies*, 2021, 14(5): 789-805
- [16] Halliday M A K. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* 2nd ed. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching & Research Press, 2000. 107+143 (in Chinese)
- [17] Kress G, Leeuwen T V. *Reading Images The Grammar of Visual Design* 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2006. 41
- [18] Harrison C. Visual social semiotics Understanding how still images make meaning. *Technical Communication*, 2003, 5(1): 46-60
- [19] Zhang D. An exploration of a synthetic theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis. *Foreign Languages in China*, 2009, (6): 24-30 (in Chinese)
- [20] Royce T D. Intermodal Complementarity and Multimodal Meaning Towards a Model of Representational Relationships between Language and Visual Images in Authentic Texts. In Royce T D, Bowcher W L eds. *New Directions in the Analysis of Multimodal Discourse*. London: Routledge, 2007. 63-104
- [21] Nørgaard N. Teaching Multimodal Stylistics. In Jeffries L, McIntyre D eds. *Teaching Stylistics*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 221-238

About the author:

Feiyu Jiang(2002-), female, Han, Shuyang, Jiangsu Province, master's degree, English Language and Literature Major.