



A Multimodal Analysis of the Interplay Between Visual and Verbal Semiotics in Creating Messages in Chinese Picture Books

QIU Qing^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Intercultural Studies, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Children’s picture books play a fundamental part in the lives, entertainment, as well as education of children in some distinctive ways. Informed by Halliday’s (e.g. Halliday 1978/2001; Halliday 1994/2000) Systemic Functional Linguistics and Painter et al.’s visual narrative framework (Painter et al. 2013), this research is devoted to the analysis of textual choices available to the writer/illustrator to create coherent and meaningful messages in Chinese children’s picture books from a multimodal analysis perspective. The textual features of visual components are identified throughout the database, and the analysis of compositional interplay between verbal and visual semiotic systems is also conducted. It aims to elucidate how visual and verbal semiotic resources are co-deployed to create coherent and meaningful stories in Chinese children’s picture books.

Key words: Systemic Functional Linguistics; Textual Meanings; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Chinese Picture Books

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INTRODUCTION

Children’s picture books play a fundamental part in children’s lives, entertainments, and their education in

some distinctive ways (e.g. Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). For instance, picture books, especially in the forms of a narrative, are generally perceived as a foundational vehicle for passing on social and cultural values from one generation to another, providing the child reader the entry into the “highly valued realm” of literature (Meek, 1998). In recent years, children’s picture books have gradually become a popular subject of academic study in various researches. This paper adopts Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth SFL) as them theoretical underpinnings to probe into the collaboration of visual and verbal texts in Chinese Children’s picture books from the compositional perspective, aiming to investigate the interplay between the two social semiotic systems in creating meaningful and coherent stories.

1. THE CONSTRUCT OF TEXTUAL MEANING IN VISUAL NARRATIVES

In SFL framework, the textual meaning is concerned with text-forming function of language (Halliday, 1994/2000; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). And there are a wide range of ways in which such function may be accomplished in verbal text, such as the choices of “Theme” in a certain clause, and the patterns of unfolding word order, and etc. Similar to the textual meaning of language, compositional meaning is concerned with “the way in which the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.176). Kress and van Leeuwen distinguish three different systems in relation to the compositional meaning, namely, information value, framing and salience. The placement of elements within a visual composition evidently represents some kinds of specific information value. In this sense, different zones within a visual composition are endowed with various information values. The variables such as top/down, centre/margin and left/right placements may reflect some differences in meaning potential.

Developing Halliday's (1997) idea of "information focus" in verbal text, Painter et al. (2013) propose the concept of "focus group" to refer to the unit of information within a visual image. As a basic unit of visual narratives, the double-page spread is regarded as a kind of macro frame in their framework. In the analysis of visual narratives, they set forth three fundamental dimensions relevant to the textual meanings in visuals, namely, INTERMODAL INTEGRATION, FRAMING and FOCUS (Painter et al. 2013, pp.92-120).

As for the first dimension of textual meanings in visual images, INTERMODAL INTEGRATION deals with the arrangement of a single page (or a double-page) in which the verbal and visual elements are emplaced, which can be further categorised into integrated layout and complementary layout. The INTERMODAL INTEGRATION options for the two types of layout are shown in Figure 1.

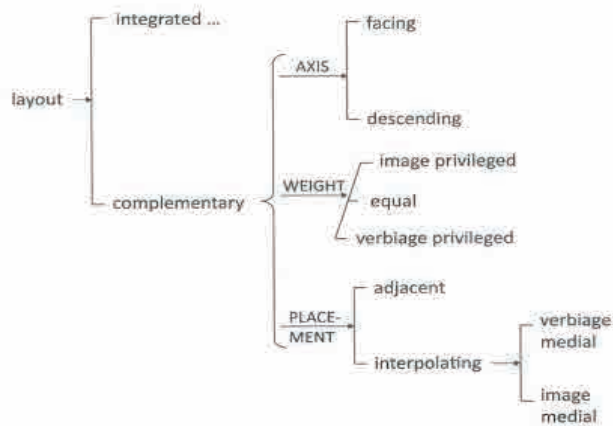


Figure 1
Options for INTERMODAL INTEGRATION (Painter et al., 2013, p.94)

The integrated layout refers to the visual composition where the verbal text is incorporated as part of visual image, serving as a visual unit. On the contrary, the complementary layout is concerned with the visual composition in which both the verbal semiotic and visual semiotic occupy its own space, each of which plays a distinct role in the synergistic meaning-making of the multisemiotic text. According to the different "weight" of each semiotic, the types of complementary layout might be sub-categorised as [equal] layout, [image privileged] layout, and [verbiage privileged] layout. The first option refers to the layout in which each semiotic takes up equal space. The latter two layouts are situated in a contrastive semantic relation. While the option of [verbiage privileged] is concerned with visual composition where the image takes up most of the space; the choice of [verbiage privileged] deals with the visual frame in which the verbiage occupies most of the space.

In considering the alternative aspect of intermodal integration, Painter et al. (2013) further distinguish the integrated layout into two major types: [projected]

layout and [expanded] layout. The choice of [integrated: projected] refers to the visual frame where the verbal text is enclosed in a bubble of speech (thus in terms of [locution]), or thought (in terms of [idea]), both comprising a represented projector and a verbal projection. With regard to the second type of integrated frame, the [expand] choice consist of two subtypes, which are in terms of [instated] option and [reinstated] layout. The instating of two different types of semiotic is most common in visual narratives. On the one hand, it may occur when the verbal modality is completely overlaid onto the visual one so that the verbiage is viewed as part of the visual image. On the other hand, the instating often occurs when the represented participants (or actions) are decontextualised (entirely or partly) so that the verbiage and image are framed on the common background (usually white page). Different from the instating layout where the verbiage is subsumed into the image, the [reinstated] option as another subtype of expanded layout accounts for the visual layout where the verbiage appears on a distinct background strip or panel.

Unlike the layout of visual compositions (either page or double page), the options for the system of FRAMING are primarily concerned with whether/how the image is framed, shifting the focus onto the image itself. According to Painter et al. (2013), the FRAMING options in visual narratives are categorised into [bound] image and [unbound] image, depending on whether there is a margin of visual space enclosing (partly or entirely) the image. The sub-options of FRAMING are presented in the Figure 2.

As a basic type of FRAMING, the kind of unbound option has to do with the images not enclosed by a margin of space¹. Bound images, on the contrary, refers to those visuals within a margin of space or border, which separate the depicted world from the reader's world more distinctly than the unbound images. In examining the bound images in visual narratives, there are five simultaneous subsystems meriting great attention. The first aspect relevant to bound images is the colour of the depicted margin. Though the default use of colour for depicting margin is white, a good number of picture books would employ different colours to create a background ambience. This visual feature of margin in a bound image is thus related to the making of interpersonal meanings. Another potential of margin for affording interpersonal meaning is the use of [bound: refocalised] feature. This kind of bound image contains a depiction of a particular character outside the margin of the main image. As the third important feature of the bound image, the extent of margin concerns either the image entirely enclosed by the margin on all sides – [surrounded] option; or the image that is less bound with partial margin – [litimited]

¹ According to Painter et al. (2013), while all the instances of complementary layouts are assigned to bound images, the instances of integrated layouts involve unbound images.

option. Regardless whether the margin surrounds or limits the extent, a [breaching] option occurs in a bound image when a depicted character or visual element breaks the margin of the main image, signifying an emergence of

confinement. The last dimension of the bound image is the frames of image within the margin or edge, which can be further demarcated by the use of colours or by the experiential content within the image.

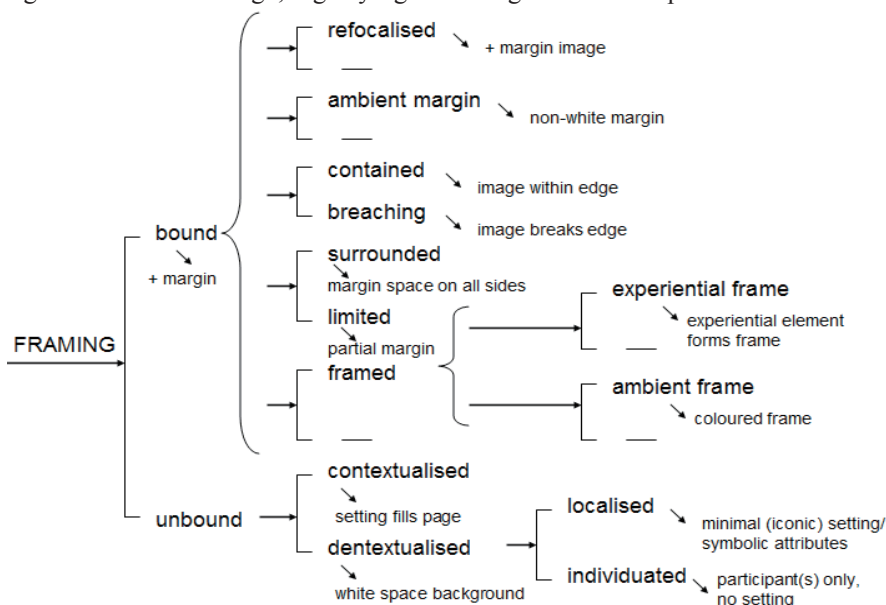


Figure 2
The realisations of FRAMING (Painter et al., 2013, p.103)

Having examined the boundaries represented in the visual images such as pages, margins and frames, Painter et al. (2013) come to the analysis of the FOCUS system that accounts for what is contained within those visual boundaries. There are a range of principal choices of the FOCUS system. In the framework of visual narrative, the system of FOCUS is composed of two considerable and contrasting options: the [iterating] option and the [centrifocal] choice. In the former case, a series of same or similar elements are iterated in relatively regular lines (whether vertical, horizontal or diagonal). A choice of [centrifocal], on the contrary, refers to the visual compositions in which different constituent elements are balanced on or around a visual centre. The realisations of centrifocal focus group may take a variety of forms which can be subdivided into the features of [centred] and [polarised]. The most common form that a centred image may take is the choice of [centred: simple], with the centre of the space filled with a focalising character. The alternative option of centred image is the option of [extended] which deals with the visual composition where the visual element taking up the centre of space is ranged around several additional elements in a circular form. An extended centred image corresponds to the “centre-margin” composition in Kress and van Leeuwen’s framework (1996, 2006). Another possibility of extended centred image accounts for the visual composition in which the visual element on centre is accompanied by two additional elements on each side, so as to create a “trptych” composition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.197).

With regard to the second type of [centrifocal] compositions, the [polarised] option has to do with the visual layout where various represented elements are opposed or balanced alongside a vertical, horizontal, or diagonal axis. If both the two poles of a balanced composition are filled with visual elements, an option of [balanced] is realised in this visual image. A further option related to the polarised focus group is termed as [mirror], referring to the visual composition where one of the represented elements in polarity mirrors another. The mirror image is widely used when a depicted character looks at his/her reflection.

2. COMPOSING VISUAL SPACE IN BIMODAL TEXTS

This paper chooses a range of Chinese picture books as the data. The choices are primarily based on a common theme which is closely related to Chinese custom and traditional culture. Those picture books are written by well-known authors and artists within the field of Chinese picture book writing. The focus of this section is turned to the integration of ideational meanings and interpersonal meanings as a meaningful and coherent whole. Extrapolating from the textual meaning of language, Painter et al. (2013) propose the concept of “focus group” to refer to a unit of information, which means the visual elements grouped together as some kind of “eyeful” to which the reader is attending. Based on the basic unit of compositional information, they further elaborate on three

fundamental dimensions of construing textual meanings in visual narratives: INTERMODAL INTEGRATION, FRAMING, and FOCUS. Drawing on Painter et al.'s (2013) analytical framework, this section conducts an analysis of textual meanings encoded in the visual images and verbal texts of Chinese picture books, exploring how visual and verbal elements in compositional space are framed.

2.1 Investigating the Layout

As a significant dimension in considering the textual function in Chinese picture books, the integration of visual and verbal composition accounts for the arrangements of page or double page spread in which both verbal and visual semiotics are framed. The first type of intermodal integrated layout is termed as “complementary” layout where each visual and verbal semiotic resides in its own space. It means that both visual and verbal modes in a visual composition may play a distinct role in meaning-

making, depending on the varying semantic weight of each semiotic. When an image occupies most of the visual space within a single page (or spreads across the gutter of a double page frame), it is viewed as being privileged when compared to the verbiage; while when an image takes up equal visual space with the verbal text in the visual frame, they are regarded as being carrying the same semantic weight (see Illustration 2-1). In this case, the double page spread is conceived of as a “macro” frame (Painter et al., 2013) where each modality facing each other carries equal semantic weight by apportioning image and text the same visual space. The verbiage on the left side of the spread describes an important plot of the story through the talk between three main protagonists. And the visual image on the recto depicts three characters eating and talking, giving a support to the verbiage on the verso. Thus the visual composition is a complementary layout with verbal text and visual image adjoined horizontally.

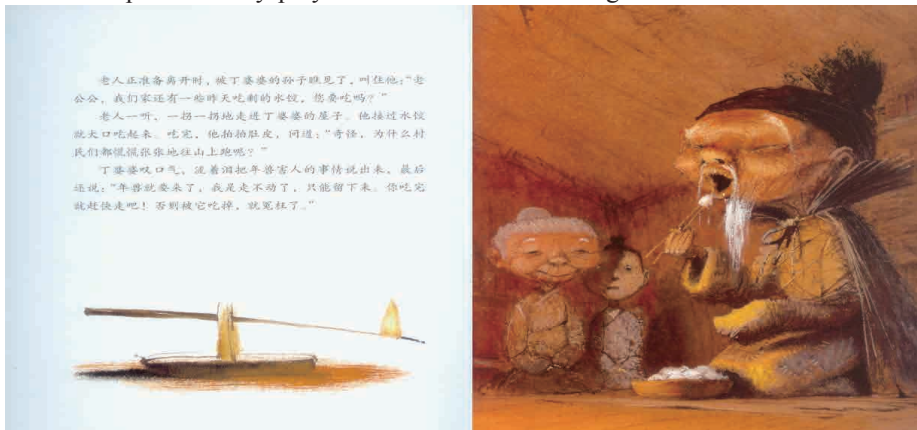


Illustration 2-1 from *A Battle with Nian* (2015)

Despite the facing layout of visual compositions, there are also a number of complementary layouts in Chinese picture books organised alongside the vertical axis with verbiage and image adjoined to each other in descending layers. In the type of descending layouts, the image in the visual composition may be placed above the verbal text, or vice versa. However, the upper part of the visual layout is usually considered to have more semantic weight (e.g. Arnheim, 1982, Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2006) than the lower part, no matter which modality is framed on the upper part. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the visual elements which are placed in the upper part within a vertical layout play an essential role of representing “Ideal” information value.

If, in a visual composition, some of the constituent elements are placed in the upper part, and other different elements in the lower part of the picture space or the page, then what has been placed on the top is presented as the Ideal, and what has been placed at the bottom is put forward as the Real. For something to be ideal means that it is presented as the idealized or generalized essence of the information, hence also as its, ostensibly, most salient part. The Real is then opposed to this in that it presents more specific information (e.g. details), more ‘down-to-earth’ information (e.g. photographs as documentary evidence, or

maps or charts), or more practical information (e.g. practical consequences, directions for action). (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp.186-187)

Obviously, elements in the upper proportion of a visual composition, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), are ostensibly most salient part of the visual layout. And they further extend that if the upper part is taken up by the visual image (one or more) and the lower part by the verbiage, then the visual image plays the role of representing ideologically foregrounded message while the text serves to provide elaboration on it; inversely, if the verbal text occupies the upper part of a visual composition, it then plays a dominating role while the images in a subservient role (Kress & van Leeuwen, p.187). However, Painter et al. (2013) emphasise the amount of visual space taken up by each modality as an indicator of salience in the visual composition, rather than depending on the orientation of axis alongside which the visual layout is organised. The present research follows Painter et al.'s (2013) perspective to the analysis of Chinese picture books, with a particular focus on distinguishing the foregrounded part of a visual

composition via the amount of visual space it occupies.

Apart from the complementary organisation of visual image and verbal text, there is the alternative kind of layout commonly used in picture books where image and verbiage are integrated to form a more unified frame rather than having the two modalities in demarcated parts of the visual compositions. The verbal text and visual image can be organised to form a unified arrangement in two ways. When a visual composition is arranged with the verbiage

represented in a bubble of speech or thought, it presents an option of [integrated: projected] which comprises a represented projector as well as a projection of verbal text. Another differentiated integrated layout in picture books is the choice of [projected: sound] which projects only the non-speech sound such as “Cracking” or “Bang”. Illustration 2-2 provides an example which depicts an image of playing firecrackers, projecting the non-speech sound of “Cracking” in the central of the visual composition.



Illustration 2-2 from *Happy New Year* (2011)

It is noticeable to the reader that the verbiage in projecting relation is integrated to the represented participant so as to offer a full meaning which has to be interpreted as a unity. In this sense, the verbiage of the sound is regarded as a visual unit that is overlaid onto the visual image, serving as a symbolic attribute of the celebration of Spring Festival to highlight the mood of jollification at this important moment of the story. Combined with the interpersonal choice of [WARTH: warm], it provides a positive mood to involve the reader in the significant moment of the story to share with the delightful and light-hearted feeling with the main protagonist.

2.2 Establishing Visual Framing

While INTERMODAL INTEGRATION as a vital parameter considers the layout of visual composition (e.g. single page or double page), the system of FRAMING moves the foci to the image itself, taking into account whether and how the image is framed within the composition. In considering the framing devices applied

in picture books, there are two major choices realising pictorial framing within visual compositions, relying on whether the image extends to the edge of page (as an “unbound” frame) or whether there exists a margin enclosing (partly or fully) the image (as an “bound” image). In an unbound image, there is no boundary between the depicted world and the child reader, which enables the reader to establish a kind of affinity with the represented characters within the image.

Illustration 2-3, for instance, adopts the option of [FRAMING: unbound] in the image to construe a close link between the world of the child reader and the represented story world, inviting the reader to engage with the main protagonist at the selected moment of defeating the monster Nian. Coupled with the interpersonal choice of [graduation: quantification: up], the child reader is then invited to the story world to share with the depicted character’s feeling of extraordinary happiness for achieving the success. The unbounded frame encourages the reader to identify with the child protagonist via sharing the positive feeling of happiness and easiness invoked in him.



Illustration 2-3 from *Nian* (2015)

In comparison to the type of unbound images, bound images demarcate the world of child reader from the depicted story world at a relative remote distance, with a margin of space or border confining the represented character. Generally speaking, the margin of a particular bound image would afford some kind of interpersonal meaning through the use of colour. Since the default choice of colour for the depiction of margin is white (and black for border), a variety of bound images in picture books are likely to employ different colours to make a prevailing background ambience within the image. The visual is viewed as a bound image where the child protagonist is enclosed by a rounded border. Instead of the default choice of black colour for the border, the image makes a differentiated choice of red hues to decorate the margin, and therefore, the depicted character is confined by a red margin. The unmarked choice of colour enables a positive background ambience to be foregrounded, encouraging the reader to share the surge of positive attitude invoked by the warm ambience, and also the mood of happiness of the depicted character when he has found ways to defeat the monster Nian. The colours used for the margin or border have played a significant part in contributing to the ambience of the image. Nevertheless, regardless of the functions of colours in construing visual frame, there is another type of frame via utilising a set of simple lines to separate the image from a minor frame built on the experiential content.



Illustration 2-4 from *Nian* (2007)

A central focus group may occur in picture books when its visual elements are placed around a centre of the visual composition. The choice of [centred: simple] is seen as the most straightforward form in picture books where the central space of visual image is filled with one single (or a group of) visual element(s).

An example can be found in the first spread of *The Monster Nian is Coming* (Liu 2013). The image depicts an introduction of the monster Nian which attracts the reader's attention to the represented character in a relatively direct way, creating a static moment of the story narrative. In this sense, it serves as a significant way to introduce the

2.3 Mapping Out Focus Groups

Unlike framing devices applied for delimiting boundaries of an image, the system of Focus is concerned with the visual elements enclosed within the boundaries, or in Painter et al.'s term, "focus groups" that constitute a plus of information and placed within a visual composition as "eyeful" (Painter et al., 2013). The textual meanings in picture books account for the organisation of meaning in a visual composition through placing various visual elements in different visual space to attract and control the reader's attention. To this end, the concept of focus group is essential for the analysis of visual elements in compositional relations. According to the data of picture books, there are two basic types of focus groups. A focus group may be composed of a series of identical or similar ideational visual elements which are repeated in the visual composition; or it may be emplaced around the centre of the image in different ways. The former instance refers to the visual composition where a set of visual elements are repeated along vertical, horizontal or slanted lines.

An instance is presented in Illustration 2-4 where an option of [iterating: aligned] is adopted to present a row of human characters, distracting the reader's attention from any individuated character in the image. Combined with the choice of minimal style of character depiction, the iterating focus groups illustrated in the visual image contribute to the management of the reader's attention, enabling the child reader to identify the depicted characters as collective groups.

depicted character as the main protagonist of the depicted story. Through the choice of a simple centrifocal focus group, the image encourages the reader to attend to the single depicted character (the monster Nian in this case) without potential dispersal of his/her attention. Apart from the most simple and straightforward central focus groups, there are some other complex types displaying extended centred focus groups. Analogous to the "centre-margin" composition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2006), the choice of [extended: circular] describes the image where the central element (or the central space) is ranged around by a set of additional visual elements in a circular pattern.

CONCLUSION

This paper is primarily concerned with the way in which verbal and visual semiotic resources are co-deployed to form coherent messages within Chinese picture books. It adopts SFL (Halliday, 1994) as the analytical tools to investigate the verbal system, and also employs visual narrative framework proposed by Painter et al. (2013) as the methodological way to analyse the visual system in Chinese picture books. In the hope of analysing the collaboration and interplay of the two social semiotics at the compositional level, it examines the ways in which the visuals and verbiages are co-instantiated to effectively create coherent and meaningful stories in Chinese children's picture books.

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