

Multimodal Analysis of Image-text Relations in the Translation of News Cartoons in China Daily

Ruiqi Wang

Lanzhou University, China

Abstract

Based on the image-text relations theory of Martinec and Salway, the present paper analyzes the shifts of image-text relations in translating news cartoons in China Daily and summarizes the multimodal translation strategies. The results find that the discourse meaning differences between image and text in the Chinese version are larger than that in the English version, considering the needs for publicity and target audience. In multimodal translations, translators would supplement the information in images with words, which changes the image-text relation, to realize the exchange of political information and raise political consciousness.

Keywords

Multimodal Analysis; Image-text Relation; News Cartoon; Translation.

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of mass media and the advent of the media era has led to increasingly diverse ways of presenting information texts. In this context, political communication needs to adapt to meet the information needs and reading habits of audiences in the new era (Chen & Liu, 2017). News comics combine visual and semantic components to convey meaning in a visual form (Li & Lin, 2022), aiding cross-cultural understanding by illustrating the creator's perspective and facilitating international communication. However, this multimodal form of communication poses challenges for traditional translation approaches that focus solely on language and text. Given the evolving media forms getting more complicated, it is essential for translation research to take a multi-disciplinary approach beyond a linguistic-centred one. Therefore, introducing a multimodal perspective into translation research has become an important direction aligned with societal changes (Wu, 2021). News cartoons, as a prime example, integrate text and image to generate discourse meaning effectively while simplifying expression. Consequently, they have gained widespread usage in communication and are ideal subjects for translation research. The present paper aims to explore the interplay between text and image in news cartoons from a multimodal perspective along with examining how these dynamics impact the translation process. Additionally, it will delve into the decision-making process considering other contributing factors.

2. Connotation and Development of Multimodal Translation Research

As media activities continue advancing, traditional practices centred around language-based meanings are gradually being replaced by composite discourses incorporating multiple media elements-multimediality-which now represents the new normal (Li & Lu, 2012). Multimodality refers to using more than one semiotic mode within a product or event (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Multimodal discourse involves utilizing various senses such as hearing, sight, and touch alongside language itself through images, sound, movement as well as other symbolic resources (Zhang, 2009). Multimodal translation shifts the focus from traditional language-centered

views to considering the multimodality of texts during their creation and dissemination. This paradigm shift represents a breakthrough in translation studies (Wu & Mou, 2022).

Under the multimodal perspective, language and text no longer serve as exclusive carriers of meaning but rather exist within a network of modes. Non-textual elements like images and sounds also play significant roles in communication—especially in the digital era where multimodality has become fundamental to conveying, interpreting, and accepting meanings (Wu, 2021). However, for quite some time, multimodal translation has not received adequate attention in translation studies.

Since Jacobson (1995:223) categorized translation into intra-linguistic, inter-linguistic, and inter-symbolic translations, scholars have primarily focused on inter-linguistic translation due to objective limitations. This form is commonly referred to as “translation proper.” Though some researchers such as Toury (1994) and Mayoral (1988) recognized non-verbal symbols, they often viewed them as obstacles rather than appreciating their ideographic role (Wu, 2021). Meanwhile, pioneers of multimodal studies like O’Toole Kress and Van Leeuwen predominantly emphasized images over words for an extended period leaving textual components relatively untouched (Martinec & Salway, 2005).

As media forms advance, the image-text relation is no longer binary (Liu, 2017). Different media forms encourage interactive participation among various modalities throughout the process of translating making it imperative to include multimodal during these activities, which contributes to the construction of meaning in translation. Meanwhile, the translation studies also realized that translation is a multimodal activity (Yang, 2022) since “there is no unimodal discourse” (Sindoni, 2011). Over the past two decades, scholars have examined intramodal transformations within multimodal translation. For instance, Borodo (2015) analyzed strategies of addition, change and compression in manga translations. Kaindl (2004) conducted research on image modifications during translation. Domestically, Huang and Zhu (2018) viewed inter-symbolic translations from a communication perspective. Whilst Li and Bo (2005) focused on factors influencing changes, arguing that excellent subtitle translations are governed by linguistic textual norms alongside formal norms. Additionally, some scholars explored translation through the lens of intermodal relations such as Pettit’s (2007) study on graphic-textual interactions about translation strategies. However, the number of studies focusing on news comics—an essential form of multimodal communication—remains relatively limited.

Yang (2022) suggests that the paradigm for multimodal translation research primarily involves five factors: influencing factors, multimodal original discourse, translator role, multimodal target discourse, and target audience. The present paper will concentrate specifically on analyzing both multimodal original discourses and target discourses while integrating key issues proposed by Wu (2021). To accomplish this goal convincingly, this study employs a case study of news cartoons published in Chinese and English versions of China Daily, seeking answers to three crucial questions: How do different modalities interact to create meaning within news cartoons? Does the relationship between various modalities change throughout the process of translation? What factors influence decision-making when it comes to translating within a multimodal context?

3. Analysis of News Cartoon Translation from a Multimodal Perspective from a Multimodal Perspective

News cartoons encompass a range of ideographic symbols, with textual and pictorial symbol systems being the most prominent. The meaning conveyed by news cartoons not only arises from these respective symbol systems but also relies heavily on the interaction between different symbols (Hou, 2019). Consequently, when translating news cartoons, it is crucial to

consider not only language and text translation but also changes in the relationship between pictures and text.

China Daily serves as an essential platform for China since it is the sole national newspaper that has an English version. All news cartoons are initially published in English before selected ones are compiled and published in Chinese. In this study, we will focus on researching news cartoons published between November-December 2022. The study will classify and analyze the graphic relationships present in both Chinese and English versions of these cartoons. Moreover, it aims to compare whether there are any adjustments made to these graphic relationships in the compiled version while examining their underlying causes.

3.1. Image-text Relation in News Cartoon

Martinec and Salway (2005: 352-353) employed functional grammar theory based on Kress and Van Leeuwen’s work to investigate image modality within multimodal discourse. Specifically, they drew upon small-sentence relation theory within functional grammar to expound upon graphic relationships prevalent in multimodal discourse (Zeng, 2010). Due to space constraints, the present paper focuses solely on exploring expansion relations between pictures and texts categorized into four types illustrated in Figure 1: exposition, exemplification, extension and enhancement.

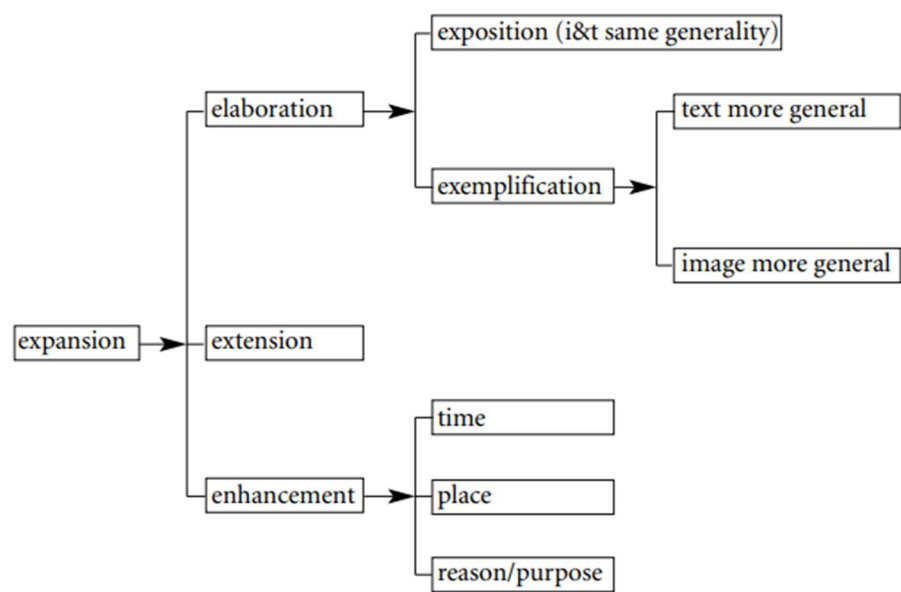


Figure 1. System of image–text relations, Martinec & Salway, 2005:352

Exposition and exemplification are two distinct classifications falling under the broader category of elaboration. These classifications differentiate based on the level of discourse meaning conveyed through both pictures and words (Borodo, 2015). In instances where pictures and words convey identical meanings, an exposition relationship is established. On the other hand, exemplification refers to the existence of a superordinate-hyponym relationship between the content expressed by these two modalities.

For instance, the cartoon titled “Battle for the ballot box” in Figure 2 portrays a donkey symbolizing the Republicans and an elephant symbolizing the Democrats engaged in a conflict over a ballot box situated in water. Notably, the caption aligns closely with the elements presented within the picture itself. Consequently, the image-text relation in this particular example is an exemplification.



Figure 2. “Battle for the ballot box”, China Daily on November 10, 2022

The scenario portrayed in Figure 3 exemplifies a reduction in biological space. The visual representation shows a forest scene with only a hippopotamus and an elephant, which are specific representatives of the superordinate term in the cation “biodiversity”. Therefore, it abstracts the specific situation and primarily uses the image as an illustrative tool to support the textual content.



Figure 3. “SOS from biodiversity”, China Daily on December 12, 2022

Extension refers to the provision of supplementary information beyond what is explicitly conveyed in either modality (Martinec & Salway, 2005: 350). For instance, Figure 4 suggests that protectionism has become a burden on the global stage. However, the representation of the “Earth” element within the picture does not convey this central message. Consequently, the translator’s inclusion of “World Economy” as an element in the caption serves as a means of augmenting information based on the visual content. In doing so, it clarifies ambiguous details and establishes an extended relationship between the picture and text.

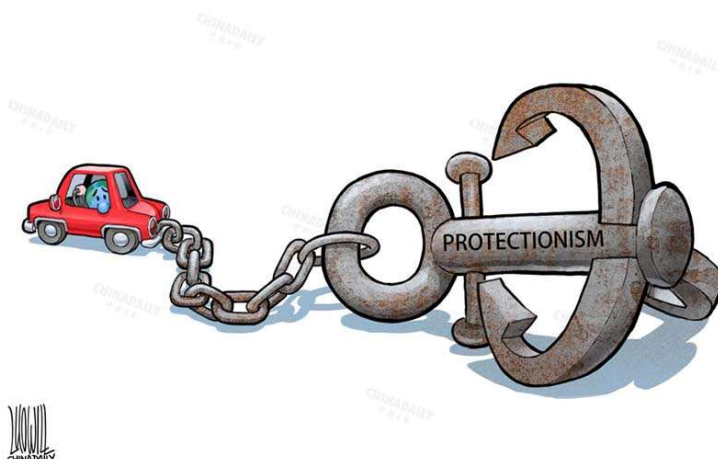


Figure 4. “Protectionism Hinders the Recovery of World Economy”, China Daily (Chinese version) on December 2, 2022

Enhancement involves one modality providing background information linked to another modality, for example, when textual explanations clarify temporal and spatial aspects related to depicted individuals and events. Such instances align closely with enhancement relationships found within clauses (Zeng, 2010), while causality also falls under reinforcing graphic relationships (Martinec & Salway, 2005: 350). Figure 5 features an anthropomorphic figure of America labelled as ‘unilateralism’ extracting juice from a box symbolizing the EU. The accompanying caption reveals its consequences—specifically highlighting the potential ‘danger’ posed to the EU’s survival. Herein lies a causal enhancement text-image relation.



Figure 5. “US unilateralism dangers EU”, China Daily on November 29, 2022

It is worth noting that news cartoons published in China Daily serve as rapid reportage through media channels; hence they may occasionally require concise textual descriptions or captions due to space limitations within pictures (Sun, 2014). Therefore, it becomes essential to consider both elements holistically as a complete entity. Nevertheless, since all cartoons published in the Chinese version include textual descriptions serving extension functions by default, it becomes challenging to differentiate them if considered collectively. Thus, herein the ‘text’ in ‘image-text relation’ only refers to the caption.

In November-December 2022, a total of 38 cartoons were published in both the Chinese and English versions of China Daily. Out of these, 36 cartoons exhibited an extended image-text relationship. The specific breakdown is as in Table 1 shows.

Table 1. Image-text Relation in News Cartoons in English and Chinese China Daily

	Elaboration	Exemplification	Extension	Enhancement	Coherent image-text relation	Incoherent image-text relation
English version	16	6	10	4	10	16
Chinese version	13	2	12	9		

As can be seen from Table 1, the images and texts in the English version of China Daily mostly convey the same content, followed by extension; while the news headlines and cartoon themes in the Chinese version of China Daily are mostly elaboration and extension, with few exemplifications. In the next section, the present paper will focus on analyzing the cases in which the graphic relationship changes in the translation process.

3.2. Case Study of Multimodal Translation of News Cartoons

In the process of translating news cartoons, the diverse trends in image-textual relations present several features: (1) The gap in the discourse meaning carried by the Chinese version of the cartoon’s graphic is greater than that of the English version. Among the four pairs of graphic relations, elaboration is the category with the highest overlap in the content conveyed by the graphic (ibid.: 366). 7 of the 16 pairs of elaboration in the English version do not have change relations, while the other 9 groups all alter into the type with a large gap in discourse meaning, so compared to the Chinese version of the news cartoon, the text provides more information beyond the picture, which is mainly caused by the difference in the cultural background of different groups of readers.

For example, although the title of Figure 6, “Gun Violence”, is taken from the text in the picture, the text on the picture is regarded as a part of the picture because it is a meta-symbol that carries the ideational content (ibid.: 353), and therefore it still constitutes an elaborating relationship. Foreign readers, especially in the United States, are well aware of the dangers of gun violence and are able to learn about the number of children killed by gun violence from local news, so they do not need more information from the text in order to understand the meaning.

However, in domestic publicity, if the expository relationship is retained, the caption is only a simple illustration of the news cartoon, and it is more difficult for the audience to know the details of the news event directly from it (Xu, 2013), so the translator translates the caption of the Chinese version as “The number of U.S. children killed due to gun violence has reached a record high” which adds the consequences caused by U.S. gun violence to the Chinese version. So Chinese readers can intuitively understand the prevalence of gun violence in the U.S. based on the information in the pictures which enhances the function of the news cartoon.

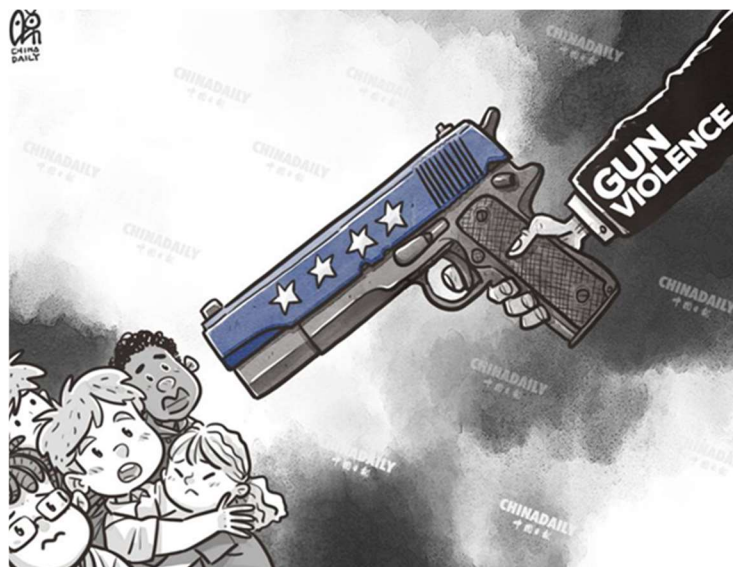


Figure 6. “Gun violence,” China Daily on December 29th, 2022

In addition, the transformation of the image-text relationship in the translation process also helps to guide value judgment and eliminate decoding differences. If only relying on picture communication, the audience’s understanding of the connotation of the image in the decoding process may differ from the author’s ability to refer to the image symbols due to the influence of cultural level and social background (ibid., 2013).

For example, the information in the picture in Figure 7 shows that the U.S. government supports the “Taiwan independence” forces led by Tsai Ing-wen through the so-called National Defense Authorization Act, but in fact, it is just armour made of balloons, which builds an illusion of “being protected” for the “Taiwan independence” forces. “The balloon is used here as a metaphor for the meaning of “illusion,” and it forms an interpretive relationship with the title, indicating to overseas readers China’s views on the National Defense Authorization Act in foreign propaganda. However, domestic publicity should ensure the ideological consistency and standardization of thought (Ten, 2016), to minimize the risk of arbitrary interpretation, so the translator uses the title “The Collusion” to point out to the domestic readers the unethical collusion between Taiwan and the U.S. to strengthen the political stance.



Figure 7. Chinese version(left): “The Collusion”, English version(right): “The Illusion of Protection”)

Nonetheless, due to differences in the target audience and focus, there are sometimes cases where the Chinese version of the cartoon has a smaller gap between the meaning of the cartoon’s graphic and textual discourse than the English version. For example, the message of

the cartoon in Figure 8 only indicates the act of maliciously blaming China, but it does not identify the subject. In external publicity, China Daily, as an important channel to speak, must state China's position, so it points out to readers through the text message "US blame game" that these behaviours are the tricks of Western media led by the United States to discredit China. Meanwhile, the same function is not needed internally since people are already well aware of the long-standing villainous intentions of the United States, so even without emphasizing the main body of the 6 information, the people are also able to make judgments in light of current events. In this context, the relationship between the picture and the text shifts from the extension type to the elaboration type.

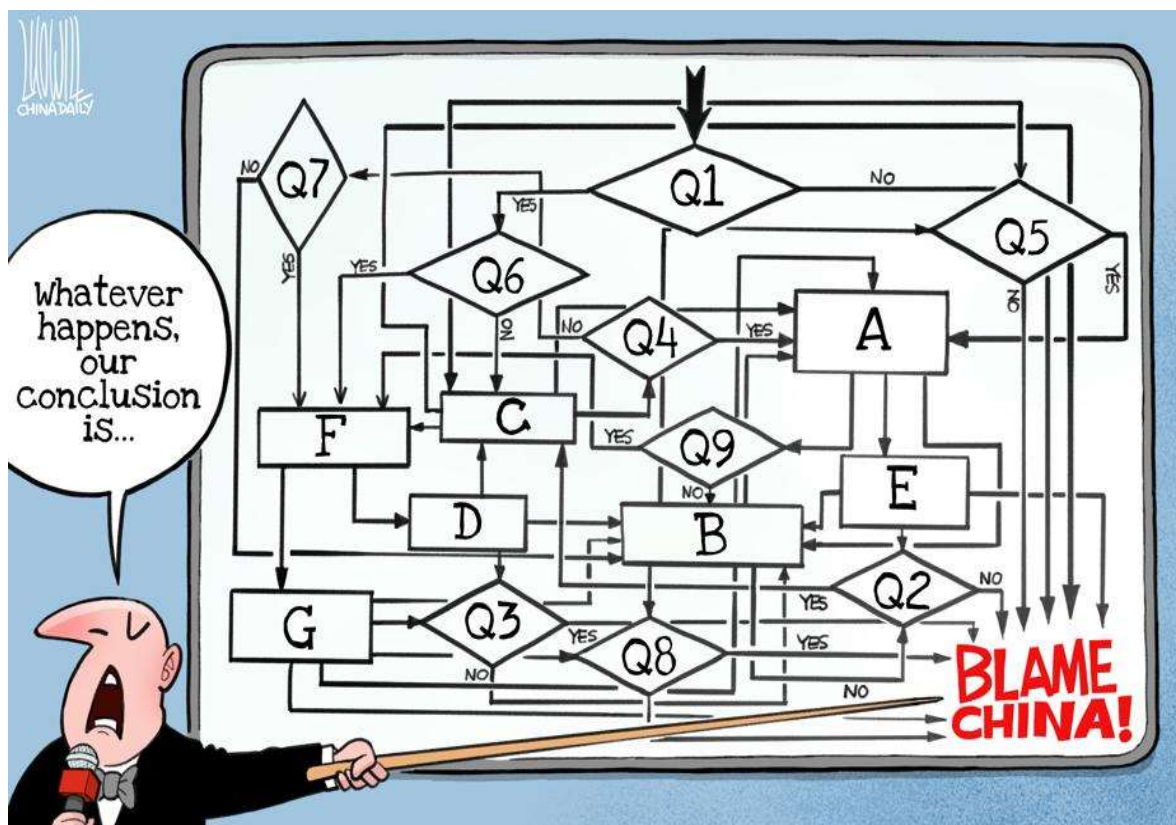


Figure 8. “Pass the buck to China,” China Daily (Chinese version) on November 25, 2022

Another major feature of image-text relationship translation is (2) to play the succession function of language when necessary to supplement the background information for readers. Succession function refers to the formation of a mutually complementary relationship between language and images, to uncover meanings that are difficult to explain in the images themselves (Tan, 2019). For example, the picture in Figure 9 only expresses the meaning of the energy crisis threatening Britain, but because foreign readers, especially British readers, are well aware of the consequences of the energy crisis, there is no need to repeat the dilemma of the energy crisis for Britain.

However, Chinese readers know less about foreign information, so the translator needs to include the information that is not conveyed in the picture but is necessary to be explained in the caption, which is translated as “Energy Crisis Triggers Economic Crisis”, to provide the background knowledge and to help readers decode the meaning of the cartoon in its entirety.



Figure 9. “Exposition”, China Daily on December 30, 2022

When there is too much information to be added in the caption, the translator will realize through translating subtitling without affecting the integrity of the picture, such as in Fig. 7, the National Defense Authorization Act as an important element of background knowledge and picture composition, it is necessary to convey this information to the domestic readers. However, if it is used as a caption, it cannot satisfy the characteristics of news caption ideographs that are distinct, vivid and accurate (Tao, 2020), and it cannot realize the role of news cartoons in conveying the viewpoints quickly. Therefore, the translator places this important background information in the picture.

4. Conclusion

With the arrival of the image era, people’s way of receiving information has gradually transitioned from text-based to simpler and more direct ways of reading pictures (Zhu, 2017). From the international online public opinion involving China in recent years, news cartoons serve as the “light cavalry” in international communication (Li & Lin, 2022), and in this context, news cartoons in mainstream media should give full play to their function of “political public relations” (Ji & Ru, 2022). Under the background of this era, news cartoons in mainstream media should play the function of “political public relations” (Ji & Ru, 2022), and efficiently and rapidly exert its potential of guiding public opinion to convey China’s attitude to readers at home and abroad.

News cartoons involve inter-symbol translation, and in the process of translation, attention should be paid to the relationship between the two modes of pictures and words, and the modes should be utilized to complement each other in the process of translation by appropriately adjusting the translation of one of the two modes to achieve a better communication effect. In addition, the communication intention of the author and the cultural background knowledge of the readers will have an impact on the translation of news cartoons, so these factors should be evaluated comprehensively to better communicate to domestic and foreign audiences to understand and accept the voice of China in a concise, fast and accurate way.

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