

Analysis on the Interpersonal Meaning of Western Political Cartoons in the Perspective of New Visual Grammar

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes 16 cartoons from the website of American Political Cartoons in the perspective of new visual grammar. It discusses the Sino-US relations reflected by political cartoons. The construction of the interpersonal meaning of those cartoons is demonstrated from three aspects: the focalization system, the pathos system and the ambience system. The results show that Western political cartoons interact with readers from more than two visual angles. In the past, most scholars use traditional visual grammar to analyze pictures. This analysis, however, explores the new theoretical framework for picture analysis under the guide of the new visual grammar.

Keywords: *new visual grammar, interpersonal meaning, political cartoons, picture analysis*

I. INTRODUCTION

The American boycott on Huawei has attracted extensive attention of political news media in China and the West. In relevant news reports, political cartoons, as a popular and powerful way of expression, can interact with readers as effectively as words. Here come questions worth studying: what do Western political cartoonists think of Sino-US relations in this boycott? How do the cartoonists present such relations to readers? In other words, what kind of interpersonal meaning is constructed and how is it constructed?

The political cartoon has always been an important research object in the study of multimodal semiotics. CNKI has published 62 articles concerned with "multimodal political cartoons" (up to February 17, 2020). However, discussions on political cartoons in China still rely on Halliday's theory of meta-functions or traditional visual grammar created by Kress & van Leeuwen. The new visual grammar, the latest visual image analysis tool, isn't applied in those articles.

In view of this, this study adopts the theoretical framework of the new visual grammar to find out Sino-US relations in their views through deconstructing the

interpersonal meaning of the 16 "Huawei-related" cartoons retrieved from the website of American political cartoons. This can help readers get the ideas conveyed by Western political cartoonists under the background of American boycott on Huawei, which will make some small contributions to cross-cultural exchanges in civil life.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Introduction to theory

The new visual grammar originates from functional linguistics and inherits and develops the traditional visual grammar. In 1978, Halliday proposed three meta-functions of language, namely, conceptual function, interpersonal function and textual function.[1] Regarding interpersonal meta-function, Halliday claims that language is a meaningful activity and a means of communication between people in society, which is destined to reflect the relations between communicative roles. It is embodied by mood, modality, key and other categories in language. [2] Thus "communication" in this study includes not only the interaction between the characters in the images, but also the interaction between the image role and the reader. The interpersonal meaning of political cartoons lies in the realization of those relations. In 1996, Kress & van Leeuwen explored visual grammar [3] based on meta-function theory in order to conduct visual image analysis, focusing on the social functions of images, that is, the effect produced by the selection of media, text, color, frame, size and shape of an image in a specific context. It is claimed that the meaning system

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of an image covers representational meaning, interactional meaning and compositional meaning. [4] In 2013, Painter *et al.* published *Reading Visual Narratives: Image Analysis of Children's Picture Books*. They inherited and developed Kress & van Leeuwen's theory on the analysis of individual images and made it applicable to the analysis of serial images [5], which is called "new visual grammar" by scholars.

The proposed framework of new visual grammar consists of three parts, namely interpersonal meaning system, ideational meaning system and textual meaning system^[5]. According to the purpose of this research, the interpersonal meaning system is applied to analyze the language materials selected. It contains three subsystems: focalization system, pathos system, and ambience system. [6] The author will introduce the interpersonal meaning system in detail along with the analysis of language materials in the following text.

B. Research questions

For the interpersonal relationship between image roles: what kind of relations between the roles is reflected by the Western political cartoons?

For the Interpersonal relationship between the image role and the reader: how does the character interact with the reader so as to influence his view or judgment on the character?

C. Research methods

1) *Selection of research materials:* On August 13, 2018, Trump signed Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, in which section 889 requires that all of the agencies in the US government be prohibited from purchasing equipment and services from Huawei. Thus the boycott on Huawei is escalated into a full-scale war. Since then, Huawei has often come up to the headlines of media around the world. More and more political cartoons in the media focused on this topic.

Based on it, Western political cartoons published from August 13, 2018 to February 17, 2020 are selected as research materials.

When the word "Huawei" is put into the search box on the website of American Political Cartoons, 26 cartoons are retrieved. After taking out the repetitive and irrelevant pictures, there were 16 left. [7] Therefore, the research materials of this study are the 16 Western political cartoons.

2) *Methods of analysis:* The interpersonal meaning of political cartoons covers the relationship between characters in the image and that between the role and the reader. Therefore, this study takes the perspective of the interpersonal meaning system of new visual grammar to analyze the Sino-US relations presented by materials and find out how the role interact with the reader.

III. RESULTS

The analysis is conducted from three subsystems: focalization system, pathos system, and ambience system.

A. Focalization system

In the focalization system, images can be divided into "contact" images and "observe" images according to whether a depicted person gazes out at the viewer. Moreover, images can be divided into "objective" images and "subjective" images according to the reader's reading perspective. The "subjective perspective" includes "inscribed subjective perspective" and "inferred subjective perspective". The "subjective" perspective is more likely to strike an emotional responsive chord in the hearts of readers. [6] Next, a quantitative analysis of the research materials is conducted in the perspective of focalization system, as shown in "Table I".

TABLE I. FOCALIZATION SYSTEM

Focalization system	Interaction (whether the depicted person gazes out at the viewer image)		Perspective (whether the reader is positioned to see through the character's eyes)			
	Contact (+gaze)		Observe (-gaze)	Subjective (the reader views the story through the eyes of a character)		Objective (the reader observes without being positioned as a reader)
	Direct contact (the character has direct eye contact with the reader)	Indirect contact (the character interact with the reader through the orientation of its head or eyes)		Inscribed subjective perspective	Inferred subjective perspective	
Quantity	3	9	10	9	0	13

It can be seen from "Table I" that the character has direct eye contact with readers in only 3 of these 16 cartoons, while the character in the rest cartoons

interact with the reader through the orientation of its head or eyes. The indirect eye contact helps the characters to complement each other through the eye

directions, and also highlights the interpersonal relationship between the characters. "Fig. 1" depicts the Chinese and American leaders who look each other in the eye, presenting the tense Sino-US relations. The reason why there are more "observe" images is that some images abstract the characters into icons, such as replacing Huawei with its trademark of "lotus" and replacing China with a dragon without depicting the dragon's eyes. Such icons are clear at a glance, which is helpful to speed up the reader's reading speed.



Fig. 1. Game of phones.

The implication of "perspective" is in line with "interaction". Since there are more indirect eye contacts in "interaction", there are more "inscribed subjective perspectives" which lead readers to view the reaction of one character from the perspective of another character. Because these cartoons are not serial pictures, there is no need for the reader to infer the character of another picture. Consequently, there is no picture which implicates "inferred subjective perspectives". The "objective perspective" can also be called "God-like perspective". Although it is not as easy to integrate the reader into the story as the subjective perspective to arouse the reader's emotional resonance, the "objective perspective" has another advantage. In other words, it makes readers feel like "god" when they view the confrontation of political roles in the picture. They will have the illusion of objectivity and fairness like "god", which is still influenced by the thought of cartoonists. Although it is called "objective perspective", what it

actually expresses is still the "subjectivity" of cartoonists, and what it produces is the "subjectivity" of readers. For example, "Fig. 2" presents an objective perspective. Instead of viewing through the angle of the white sheep or the black sheep, the reader looks at the confrontation between the two kinds of sheep out of the frame. It is obvious that all the white sheep are surrounding one black sheep. It actually expresses the "subjective" thought of the cartoonist who considers Huawei as the weak one. Readers are likely to get involved in such "subjective" thought of the cartoonist.

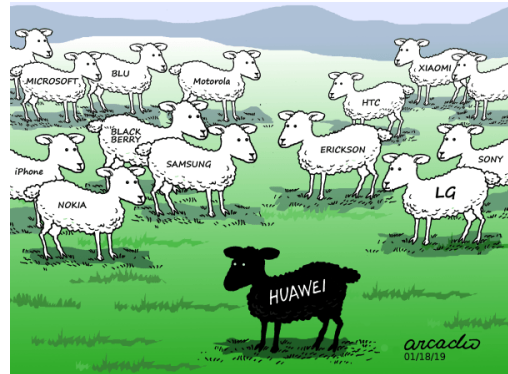


Fig. 2. La oveja negra de celulares.

To sum up, based on American boycott on Huawei, the depicted character in some Western political cartoons often makes indirect eye contact with the reader, resulting in the emphasis of the tense relationship between China and the United States. However, like "Fig. 2", some cartoons present the unfair practices of the United States in an objective perspective.

B. Pathos system

Images can be divided into "engaging" images and "alienating" images according to whether they attract the reader to integrate his emotional feeling into the picture. "Engaging" images can be further divided into three subcategories: "appreciative", "empathic" and "personalising" images. Painter et al. claims that the reader's emotional involvement in the "appreciative" image is the least, while in the "personalising" image the most.[6]

The quantitative analysis of the 16 cartoons in the pathos system is as follows:

TABLE II. PATHOS SYSTEM

Pathos System	Engaging			Alienating
	Appreciative	Empathic	Personalising	
Quantity	4	8	0	6

It can be seen from "Table II" that the volume of empathic images is the largest, which indicates that the

purpose of political cartoons is to enable readers to quickly identify the emotions of political characters.

The reason why there is no personalising image is that cartoons must be abstract rather than natural. If the characters are presented in the form of photos, the most personalising images, they can't be called cartoons but photos.

The alienating images are mostly related to the icons of China and Huawei. They are in line with the belief of objective criticism in news media. However, readers are inevitably influenced by the subjective thoughts of cartoonists.

The reason why the total number of cartoons is more than 16 is that some characters in the cartoons are both appreciative and empathic. As shown in "Fig. 3", the image of Trump is empathic, while images of Huawei and Google are appreciative. This is because the icons of Huawei and Google are easier for readers to recognize than their corporate leaders. Since empathic images are more likely to arouse the reader's emotion feeling than appreciative images, the image of "Trump" is more hostile than that of "Huawei", which may indicate the view of this Western political cartoonist.

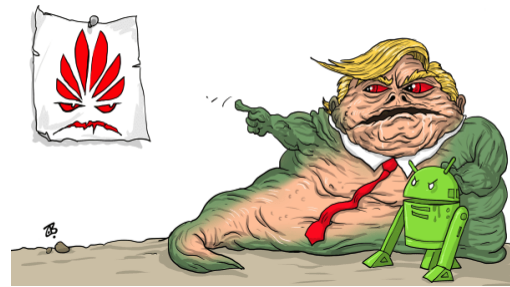


Fig. 3. War on Huawei.

In conclusion, in terms of emotional engaging, some Western political cartoons tend to use appreciative images to enable readers to quickly identify political characters, and empathic images to arouse the reader's emotional resonance, while the personalizing images don't exist because cartoons must be abstract rather than natural. The emotional alienation is in accord with the belief of objectivity in news media. News media claim to encourage readers to view news events from an objective and critical perspective, although it is still inevitably subjective.

C. Ambience system

The image is colored so that its ambience system can be activated. The activated image can be analyzed from three aspects: vibrancy, warmth, familiarity. [6]

The quantitative analysis of the ambience system of these 16 cartoons is as follows:

TABLE III. AMBIENCE SYSTEM

Ambience system	Activated						Inactivated
	Vibrancy		Warmth		Familiarity		
	Vibrant	Muted	Warmth	Cold	Naturalistic	Abstract	
Quantity	8	6	9	9	4	10	2

It can be seen from "Table III" that there are only 2 inactivated images, that is, black and white images, and the rest are all colorful. Therefore, the emotional ambience of the rest 14 images is activated. The existence of black and white images may be related to the fact that some newspapers are not printed in color.

"Warmth" is related to "vibrancy", so the number of "vibrant" image is almost the same as that of the "warm" image. In fact, the "muted" and "cold" images can better illustrate the tension in the confrontation between the United States and China's Huawei. Part of the reason for the existence of "vibrant" and "warm" images is that the icon of Huawei is bright red. Therefore, in some pictures, "vibrant" and "muted" coexist, and so do "warmth" and "cold". Another reason is that the cartoonist attempts to make the tense

atmosphere funny in order to attract the reader's attention.

The reason why the "abstract" images are more than the "naturalistic" images lies in the nature of the cartoons.

According to the above analysis, under the background of American boycott on Huawei, some Western political cartoons adopted muted colors and cold tone to create a tense confrontational ambience, while others make the tense atmosphere funny, which attracts the reader's attention and indicates the funny nature of this boycott and the attitude of seeing of most people in Western countries.

IV. DISCUSSION AND INSPIRATION

Based on the above analysis, the answers to the research questions are as follows:

- Interpersonal meaning within the picture: some Western political cartoons present a tense relationship between China and the United States;
- The interpersonal meaning between characters and readers: Western political cartoonists interact with readers in multiple perspectives. Some of them tend to arouse readers' emotional feelings, while others expect readers to view the news figures in an objective and critical perspective. Some cartoonists use vibrant colors and warm tone to attract readers' attention, while others adopted muted colors and cold tone to make readers feel the tense atmosphere of confrontation.

In summary, the interpersonal meaning system of the new visual grammar that Painter et al. advocates is of great significance to the design and interpretation of the interpersonal relationship between the characters in Western political cartoons and that between the character and the reader. This paper helps readers to scientifically identify the thoughts of Western cartoonists and the means of conveying those ideas in news media. A clear understanding of "means" can help readers to be alert, keep independent thinking, and avoid being brainwashed by the painter.

V. CONCLUSION

Most scholars used to analyze the social function of visual images with the help of traditional visual grammar, but seldom applied the theory of new visual grammar. This paper enriches the research objects of the new visual grammar — Western political cartoons, and explores a new way in theoretical application different from the traditional visual grammar. It also provides a reference for the relevant research of the new visual grammar. It is believed that this theory has plenty of scope for application and improvement. It is urgent to arouse scholars' attention and discussion on this theory.

In terms of social practice, the study is expected to broaden readers' horizons, so that they will not be limited to China's domestic news reports on the American boycott on Huawei, but to understand China's image and Sino-US relations in the eyes of Western media. It may be helpful for the communication between Chinese and Western news readers. In addition, the study helps readers to identify the means adopted by Western cartoonists to convey political ideas. To grasp a clear understanding of the "means"

helps readers to raise their vigilance and keep independent thinking.

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