

Multimodal Discourse Analysis: English Translation and International Communication of Yunnan Frontier Cultural Symbols

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Abstract

Taking visual grammar of multimodal discourse analysis as the core theory, this paper chooses three cross-era Yunnan border cultural symbols: anti-colonial archives, stone monuments and native folk songs. It combines field investigation, annotated thick translation and cross-media effect evaluation as mixed research methods. Analysis proves text-only English translations without audio-visual aids fail to build complete three-layer multimodal meanings, causing severe cultural bias among overseas audiences. Combining translated texts with on-site footage and ethnic audio can fully interpret the history of border ethnic solidarity against foreign invasion. This paper establishes a four-dimensional closed research path of cultural excavation, annotated translation, multimodal creation and effect assessment, and forms a replicable paradigm applicable to southwest frontier texts, facilitating global understanding of China's pluralistic national development and international dissemination of ethnic unity stories.

Keywords

multimodal discourse analysis, frontier cultural symbols, thick translation, sense of community for the Chinese nation, cross-cultural translation communication

1. Introduction

Against the grand strategic background of China's global cultural exchange and external communication construction, border historical archives, stone stele relics and native folk art creations have become irreplaceable core cultural carriers to interpret the pluralistic integrated development pattern of the Chinese nation. Yunnan Province possesses thousands of kilometers of land borderline adjacent to Vietnam and Myanmar, where cross-border ethnic groups have lived and multiplied for hundreds of years, leaving a large number of precious tangible cultural heritage such as the *1936 Banhong anti-British file* and the *1951 Pu'er Ethnic Unity Oath Monument*. These cultural relics record the shared historical memory of all border ethnic groups jointly safeguarding national territorial integrity and maintaining long-term ethnic harmony, and bear unique regional cultural values that cannot be replaced by general inland literary works. However, the external publicity of these valuable cultural resources has long been restricted by outdated single-text translation modes. Most overseas promotion materials only provide plain English text without matched explanatory notes and

auxiliary audio-visual resources, which leads to serious incomplete transmission of cultural information and distorts overseas audiences' cognition of Yunnan border ethnic groups [1].

Overseas cross-cultural communication research mostly relies on Western post-colonial critical theoretical systems rooted in cultural relativism. Such research logic cannot be well adapted to China's ethnic governance and border development practice, and is easy to produce biased one-sided external narratives targeting Yunnan border communities [2]. From the perspective of domestic academic research, most studies focusing on ethnic literary translation take Han nationality epics as primary research objects, while systematic annotated English translation targeting border stone inscriptions and anti-colonial historical archives with distinctive regional characteristics is extremely scarce. In the field of multimodal communication research, existing papers mostly take commercial feature films and official documentary subtitle texts as research samples, and there is a lack of empirical translation research based on field-collected native folk music and physical cultural relics [3]. By systematically sorting domestic and foreign related research documents, three prominent research gaps can be clearly summarized. First, existing academic achievements lack a targeted complete multimodal analysis framework specially designed for border cultural symbols. Second, most translation-related researches only rely on secondary literature materials without supporting authentic first-hand field interview records and on-site cultural collection data. Third, few academic works combine translated texts with multi-channel online operation data to carry out quantitative testing of actual dissemination effects. On the basis of the above three core research deficiencies, this paper takes three representative cross-era cultural symbols in Yunnan border areas as core research carriers, completes standardized annotated English translation and matched multi-modal audio-visual material development, and summarizes a set of operable targeted translation optimization rules. This research fills the blank of localized translation research on Yunnan frontier cultural symbols, and also provides detailed operable text compiling references for local cultural bureaus and foreign exchange institutions to produce standardized overseas publicity materials for border cultural heritage.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Researches on Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Its Translation Application

The classical visual grammar theoretical system proposed by Kress divides the internal construction logic of multimodal meaning into three relatively independent semiotic layers: representational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning [1]. Written texts, static scanned images and original audio recordings all belong to independent sign carriers with unique semantic functions; the coordinated matching of multiple modes can effectively make up for the cultural default defects brought by unannotated pure literal translation. Domestic scholars represented by Zhang Delu further improved the localized application system of multimodal analysis on the basis of foreign classical theories, and formally put forward two core matching principles of mode complementation and mode reinforcement, which provides clear quantifiable operation standards for the design of illustrated pamphlets and short audio-visual publicity products with translated texts as the core carrier. A large number of domestic empirical papers have applied multimodal analysis theories to general regional tourism cultural communication research, and verified through platform data that the organic integration of images and audio can significantly lower the cross-cultural comprehension threshold of overseas readers. Nevertheless, most existing relevant research objects are lightweight tourism promotional articles with simple connotations, without involving border historical archives and stone steles carrying heavy ethnic political and historical information. Some scholars have carried out multimodal comparative analysis on the subtitle texts of external publicity documentaries, but their research discussion scope has not been extended to the annotated translation strategies of exclusive culture-laden vocabularies unique to border ethnic groups.

2.2 English Translation Researches on Frontier Ethnic Cultural Texts

Domestic scholars engaged in ethnic translation research have formed unified academic consensus after long-term discussion: the translation of ethnic cultural texts must take the shaping of the sense of community for the Chinese nation as the core value orientation, rather than merely completing simple lexical and syntactic conversion between two different languages. The *thick translation* strategy equipped with layered historical and ritual supplementary annotations has been widely recognized by domestic translation circles as the most effective technical means to eliminate semantic ambiguity of ethnic exclusive culture words [3]. Comparative analysis of multiple translated versions of different ethnic epics further verifies that mechanical literal

translation without contextual supplementary interpretation will completely erase unique regional historical context information, so detailed explanatory notes become an indispensable core component of qualified cross-cultural translated texts [4]. A large number of previous academic papers have affirmed the core strategic position of border stone inscriptions and local folk ballads in shaping the international image of the Chinese nation community, but most of the existing theoretical discussions only stay at conceptual analysis level, without matching specific translation practice and complete multi-modal supporting resource development work [5].

2.3 Overseas Researches On cross-border Ethnic Cross-cultural Communication

Western anthropological researchers have compiled systematic comprehensive reference books covering folk customs, tribal sacrifice rituals and ancient frontier historical records of Southeast Asian highland ethnic groups. These documents fully sort out abundant local cultural phenomena, but all their interpretation logic is built on the perspective of Western regional anthropology, failing to interpret these cultural relics under the unified multi-ethnic historical background of China [6]. Targeted researches on ethnic music translation summarize a widespread depoliticization rewriting tendency among Western translators, who will actively erase the connotations of national territorial sovereignty and ethnic unity in translation texts, which seriously distorts the real governance situation of China's border multi-ethnic regions [7]. Relevant researches focusing on subtitles of border-themed feature films also fully prove that simple text subtitles cannot completely convey the implicit visual information contained in traditional tribal oath rituals and frontier architectural relics, which further demonstrates the necessity of combining images and audio with translated texts in cross-cultural communication activities [8].

2.4 Comprehensive Research Commentary

Current domestic and foreign academic research presents obvious disciplinary segmentation characteristics: multimodal theory research, ethnic translation practice and international communication exploration are mostly discussed in separate academic papers, and few research works integrate Yunnan border historical documents, stone cultural relics and contemporary folk songs into a unified complete research corpus. At the same time, existing literatures rarely combine long-term field investigation, standardized annotated translation and multi-channel online communication data to carry out integrated holistic analysis. This paper realizes innovative integrated research on this research blank, and forms a complete closed research chain covering theoretical deduction, text translation practice, multi-modal material production and real-time dissemination effect feedback. In addition, the whole research framework constructed in this paper can be fully referenced and borrowed by follow-up translation researches targeting Guangxi, Guizhou and other border provinces with similar multi-ethnic cultural resource endowments.

3. Theoretical Basis and Research Design

3.1 Core Theoretical Framework: Visual Grammar of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

The whole research takes Kress's visual grammar as the exclusive unified analytical framework running through all chapters, and divides the whole construction logic of multimodal meaning into three progressive systematic layers with internal logical connection [1]. Representational meaning mainly relies on high-definition scanning photos of cultural relics and on-site shooting footage of ethnic group collective activities to restore complex historical scenes that cannot be fully described by single English vocabulary, including Wa tribal alliance ceremonies and traditional ox-slaughter oath rituals. Interpersonal meaning is realized through collected original ethnic folk music and edited oral interview recordings of cultural inheritors, which can effectively weaken the rigid, stiff and solemn stylistic sense of formal historical written texts and greatly shorten the psychological distance between international audiences and China's border development history. Textual meaning depends on matched annotated translated texts, chronological picture sequences and specially edited supporting soundtracks to form a unified complete narrative clue centered on ethnic solidarity and long-term border protection. Combined with Appiah's classical *thick translation* theory, this paper adds multi-layer in-text and postscript explanatory notes for special ethnic titles, crucial frontier historical events and exclusive tribal rituals, so as to systematically supplement the cultural information gaps that cannot be fully covered by single images or single audio materials. All standardized annotation sorting rules summarized in this paper can

be directly generalized and applied to the translation work of other similar border historical cultural relics in Yunnan and surrounding border provinces.

3.2 Research Corpus

Through four rounds of on-site field visits in Pu'er, Mangshi, Dali and Lincang four border cities, three cross-era representative frontier cultural symbols with progressive historical logic are selected as core research materials:

- 1) Historical archive: *A Letter to Compatriots from the Seventeen Kings of Kawa*, finished in 1936, recording the complete historical process of local Banhong anti-colonial movement;
- 2) Physical cultural heritage: *Pu'er Ethnic Unity Oath Monument*, completed in 1951, carved with joint handwritten signatures of representatives from 26 different ethnic groups in Yunnan Province;
- 3) Contemporary folk creation: *United-heartfelt Harmony*, original folk song produced in Dehong Prefecture in 2022, describing the scene of long-term multi-ethnic co-prosperity along China-Vietnam border.

3.3 Research Methodology

Four mutually complementary mixed research methods are adopted throughout the whole research cycle to ensure data authenticity and research integrity. First, field investigation: conduct on-site visits to local municipal archives, cultural exhibition halls and professional folk music creators, collect original scanned archive documents, high-definition on-site photographs and native folk audio recording resources. Second, standardized thick translation: complete three rounds of rigorous revision including preliminary student translation, group cross-proofreading and supervisor academic polishing, and attach targeted hierarchical cultural explanatory notes to all core ethnic and historical professional terms [3]. Third, multi-modal text construction: integrate annotated English translated texts, field shooting photographs and original folk audio into two types of formal overseas publicity products: printed illustrated pamphlets and short cross-media promotional videos. Fourth, communication effect quantitative analysis: systematically sort out total browsing volume, likes and comment interaction data of released multi-modal works, so as to carry out horizontal comparative analysis of audience acceptance difference between monomodal pure text materials and integrated multi-modal translated products.

3.4 Core Research Questions

- 1) From the complete perspective of multimodal discourse analysis, what systematic representational, interpersonal and textual meaning defects will be caused by unannotated plain English translation of Yunnan frontier ethnic cultural symbols?
- 2) How can visual image modes and folk audio modes cooperate organically with annotated English translated texts to fully transmit the profound historical connotation of the community for the Chinese nation contained in border cultural relics?
- 3) What universal standardized annotation rules and opening layout optimization schemes can be summarized for multi-modal translation of various types of southwest frontier ethnic cultural resources?

4. Empirical Multimodal Analysis of Translated Texts

4.1 Inherent Deficiencies of Monomodal Pure Written Translation

If only English written texts are independently adopted as cross-cultural communication carriers without any matched images and audio resources, all three layers of multimodal meaning will face obvious incomplete loss with structural defects. In terms of representational meaning, without supporting cultural relic and ritual pictures, overseas readers cannot intuitively perceive the sacred historical connotation of Wa tribal ox-slaughter alliance oath, and simple literal translation can only retain superficial lexical meanings while completely hiding the profound historical background of all ethnic groups jointly resisting foreign colonial aggression. In terms of interpersonal meaning, formal and rigid historical English texts lack soft emotional

resonance brought by native folk music and oral inheritance recordings, which will make overseas audiences generate obvious sense of alienation and indifference towards Yunnan border ethnic historical stories. In terms of textual meaning, scattered segmented translated paragraphs cannot effectively connect three complete progressive historical phases: modern border anti-colonial struggle, early new China multi-ethnic unity construction and new-era cross-border ethnic coordinated development, resulting in fragmented and one-sided cognition of cultural symbols among foreign audiences. Real-time communication statistical data also objectively verify that pure text promotional materials have extremely low total browsing volume and low full reading completion rate [2].

4.2 Complete Meaning Construction Realized by Multi-modal Synergy

4.2.1 Visual Modes Make Up for Missing Representational Meaning

For the multi-modal promotional short video adapted from *A Letter to Compatriots from the Seventeen Kings of Kawa*, high-definition scanned original archive photos and documentary shooting pictures of anti-colonial memorial sculptures are matched as core visual materials. The publicity content supporting *Pu'er Oath Monument* integrates full-view panoramic shots and close-up detail shots of multi-ethnic hand-carved signatures on stone surface. The music video of *United-heartfelt Harmony* inserts a large amount of real daily life shooting footage of local Jingpo and Dai ethnic residents. All visual auxiliary materials can visualize abstract tribal conceptual nouns and obscure complex historical incidents, realizing intuitive historical restoration effect that cannot be achieved only by plain English text.

4.2.2 Audio Modes Build Stable Interpersonal Emotional Connection

The multi-modal adapted version of *United-heartfelt Harmony* completely retains the original ethnic instrumental music tunes, and rewrites matched English lyrics fully fitting the original melody rhythm. All historical document short videos are embedded edited clip recordings of local cultural inheritors' oral historical interviews. Soft and unique native ethnic folk music can effectively relieve the solemn and heavy narrative tone of historical written records, and build stable long-term emotional connection channels with international audiences through exclusive auditory cultural symbols.

4.2.3 Integrated Multi-modal Resources Form Unified Complete Textual Meaning

All self-produced multi-modal translated works follow a consistent progressive historical narrative logic: modern frontier anti-colonial resistance movement → multi-ethnic unity construction after the founding of new China → cross-border ethnic shared development in the new era. Annotated English translated texts serve as the core verbal framework of the whole discourse, while chronological arranged pictures and matched folk soundtracks act as auxiliary semantic supplementary resources, jointly forming coherent complete cross-cultural discourse system, helping overseas audiences sort out the full historical development context of China's integrated multi-ethnic community.

4.3 Summarized Universal Translation and Dissemination Optimization Rules

Four operable standardized optimization paths are concluded after sorting and analyzing all empirical data of this research. First, reasonably adjust the opening layout design of multi-modal products, prioritize the display of cultural relic close-up and ritual real shot pictures at the beginning, and compress redundant long textual explanation paragraphs within the first five seconds of content. Second, reasonably balance the matching proportion of different semiotic modes, insert short folk music clips and oral commentary recordings at fixed time intervals to continuously maintain audiences' sustained participation and reading attention. Third, design differentiated annotation systems for translated texts targeting different overseas audience groups: add brief comparative explanatory notes of Western ancient alliance covenants for European and American readers, and highlight shared border cultural origin interpretation content for Southeast Asian recipients. Fourth, appropriately adjust translated text length and multi-modal material forms to fit the content release norms of various international social media platforms, so as to expand the overall overseas audience coverage range of cultural publicity works.

5. Research Conclusions and Implications

5.1 Core Conclusions

First, monomodal unannotated English texts cannot realize high-efficiency international communication of Yunnan frontier cultural symbols. The missing state of three layers of multimodal meaning will trigger serious cross-cultural communication cultural discount, and plain text translation cannot fully carry complete detailed historical and ethnic information. Second, the coordinated organic use of written, visual and audio semiotic resources can systematically display the shared weal and woe long-term development history of all border ethnic groups; *thick translation* equipped with layered explanatory annotations can effectively fill the cultural information vacancies caused by simple mechanical literal translation and significantly improve the readability of translated works for overseas audiences [1][3]. Third, the closed-loop working framework of cultural connotation sorting, annotated thick translation, multi-modal resource development and communication effect quantitative evaluation has strong replicability and popularization value for all southwest border provinces' ethnic translation and overseas publicity work. Fourth, cultural materials with heavy historical themes generally face the problem of low audience retention rate in cross-media release; reasonably embedding daily ethnic life warm narratives into translation annotation and multi-modal layout design can effectively lift overseas audiences' overall acceptance degree and prolong average viewing time.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This study expands the application boundary of Kress's multimodal visual grammar to the professional research field of Chinese border historical document English translation, breaking the long-term isolated separation trend between translation research and media communication research [1][2]. The localized empirical case data supplemented by this paper remedy the inherent inadaptability of Western post-colonial communication theories when applied to China's multi-ethnic governance and border development national conditions. This research forms a complete mixed qualitative and quantitative research paradigm, which can provide repeatable standardized research reference for follow-up researches focusing on frontier cultural translation and cross-cultural exchange.

5.3 Practical Implications

The standardized annotated English translations and serialized matched multi-modal audio-visual resources can be directly adopted as official overseas publicity materials by cultural bureaus and foreign exchange departments of Yunnan Province. The whole set of complete translation and multi-modal design operation model can be popularized to Guangxi, Guizhou only after slight replacement of local characteristic cultural materials. Field research interview records and cultural symbol interpretation documents collected in the research process can serve as auxiliary teaching materials for college foreign language and ethnic major courses. The summarized universal multi-modal translation logic provides general reference schemes for localized ethnic foreign language resource development in all types of frontier schools, without binding any specific regional educational institutions.

6. Conclusion

Guided by the classical visual grammar of multimodal discourse analysis, this paper takes three typical cross-era cultural symbols in Yunnan border areas as core research objects, and comprehensively adopts four research methods including field on-site investigation, layered annotated thick translation and multi-modal audio-visual integrated production to build a full-chain international communication system for frontier ethnic cultural resources. Field in-depth surveys fully excavate the patriotic unity and joint border defense connotations embedded in historical documents and stone relics; layered annotated translation eliminates various cross-cultural comprehension obstacles brought by culture-loaded vocabulary; integrated text-image-audio multi-modal materials fully adapt to the browsing and viewing habits of global online audiences. Cross-media platform feedback data objectively verify the prominent communication advantages of integrated multi-modal translated works compared with single plain text materials, while unreasonable opening narrative structure and insufficient overseas platform adaptation become two major core restrictive factors affecting overall external communication effect. This research fills the research blank of integrated multi-modal translation and international dissemination of southwest frontier historical cultural symbols, providing operable replicable paths for telling authentic China border ethnic unity stories globally. Follow-up related

researches can further expand the coverage range of frontier cultural text corpus, adjust targeted translation annotation strategies according to diversified overseas media, and combine long-cycle multi-year platform feedback tracking data to continuously optimize the whole multi-modal translation system of border cultural symbols.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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