

# Multimodal Discourse Analysis of MOOC Videos



Dandan Wang\*,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Fuzhou Institute of Technology, China

**Abstract:** Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), as a newly developed teaching mode, is just stepping into the classes of universities and the view of researchers. There are more and more professors and famous teachers in the universities beginning to make their own MOOC, which includes recording videos, designing questions and arranging discussions through MOOC platform, so as to develop rich teaching contents and vivid teaching mode, which contributes to attracting the learning interests of many learners. Especially during the outbreak of the new crown virus, online teaching has become an essential means of teaching in contemporary colleges and universities. In this thesis, the characteristics of MOOC videos and MDA method are combined, that is to say, it chooses one MOOC-related to English teaching as the research object and used MDA to study the videos in it, so as to present the distinguished characteristics of MOOC.

**Keywords:** MOOC videos; MDA; visual grammar

## Introduction

Due to the development of computer and multimedia technology, people's communication changes from writing on the paper to mobile phone calls and video chatting through the electronic equipment. In the new information era, the multimodal communication is increasingly applied in both daily life and all kinds of working fields, such as school education, global conference, business negotiation and the like (Zhang, 2009). A survey reported that students' satisfaction with online learning is at least comparable to their satisfaction with traditional classes (Allen et al, 2022). In this way, the traditional single discourse analysis is transformed in to Multimodal Discourse Analysis(henceforth MDA), which is derived from Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistics. Therefore, the trend to use many different semiotic systems to analyze the meanings of almost everything in the world is inevitable. The thesis combines MDA with Massive Open Online Courses

(henceforth MOOC). And the videos in an MOOC, which is called *Understanding IELTS: Techniques for English Language Test*, are chosen and used to be mainly analyzed through the method of MDA, so as to see how the meanings are presented through MDA. The thesis also concludes the characteristics of MOOC from MDA perspective, which aims to promote the development of MOOC in the field of English as Second Language in the long run. MDA is a branch of discourse studies, which is derived from Halliday's systemic-functional theory of language (Halliday, 1994), and then extended by Kress and Van Leeuwen (Kress et al, 2001) into the language as well as other semiotic resources, which are adopted for meaning construction.

According to O'Halloran (O' Halloran et al, 2011), MDA is an emerging paradigm in discourse studies which extends the study of language per se to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, scientific symbolism, gesture, action, music, and sound. Actually, with the development of technology, more and more people use and focus on the semiotic systems. Thus, there is

**Corresponding Author:** Dandan Wang  
Fuzhou Institute of Technology, China  
Email: [18359165917@163.com](mailto:18359165917@163.com)

©The Author(s) 2023. Published by BONI FUTURE DIGITAL PUBLISHING CO.,LIMITED. This is an open access article under the CC BY License(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

quite a large number of SFL scholars working on the study of multimodal discourse, including language. According to Len(Len, 2008), the forms of all semiotic systems are related to the meaning-making functions they serve within social contexts, which indicates the strength of SFL in contributing to frameworks for the development of multimodal and inter-semiotic theory. Through this method, many scholars begin to use it to analyze the things that they are interested in. For example, O'Toole(O' Toole, 1995)uses the modality constructing method to analyze the Sydney Opera House at work and play; Alfred (Alfred, 2004)completes a multimodal analysis of a museum exhibition in Singapore; multi-semiotic mediation in hypertext by Arthur. As the further research of Halliday's SFL, he guides the direction into education. Kress and Van Leeuwen(Kress et al, 2006a)find that educational contexts remain key sites for the expansion of SFL-based social-semiotic theories into other modalities, such as images. In this way, the pedagogy analysis is further developed into the adoption of MDA, which can systematically and completely analyze the foreign language teaching methodology and effects.

## 1.Introduction of IELTS Videos

Like many other online phenomena, MOOCs grow in popularity at a rapid rate. Wu Jie(Wu, 2014)mentions that the development of MOOC leads to about three major reforms in English Teaching, which causes challenges and opportunities to reform the method of English education. As Zhu Yongsheng(Zhu, 2007) predicts, MDA will show two obvious trends. One is to concentrate on the complimentary effect and the other one is the increase of complexity degree, such as developing from static research to dynamic research. The data collected in this thesis is from the website called *futurelearn.com*(British, 2020), which is an authoritative website for MOOC resources. The selected MOOC calls *Understanding IELTS: Techniques for English Language Tests*, which has six lessons totally. It lasts for six weeks, and there is

one lesson for each week. The main purpose of the course is to explain all aspects of IELTS test for the students. In all of the videos, the tutor is Rob, who introduces each topic and offers some tips of learning for the whole week. Besides, some other scholars or interviewees from all over the world also appear in the videos to provide the viewers with more advice and learning experience.

## 2.Analysis of IELTS Videos

### 2.1 Representational Meaning Analysis

The representational meaning refers to our ideas about the world, which includes experiential meaning and logical meaning. They respectively indicate the representation and portrayal of experience in the world and the construction of logical relations in that world. In accordance with this function, we can research the relationships among the elements in one or several images. Different from the previous semiotic research, based on Martin and Rose(Martin et al, 2003), it changes their subjects for a single sign and its simple, direct meaning to the many different signs and the way they are used in combination.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen(Kress et al, 2006b), there are two aspects in representational meaning, that is, narrative process and conceptual process. And vector is the most important factor to distinguish them, which means that the former possesses it while the later does not. For most of the videos, the tutor speaks in the middle and occupies about 1/3 area of the video images. According to Jesu and Mari(Jesu ' s et al, 2008), the layout of the participants in the image is proportional to their importance. Therefore, as shown in **Figure 1**, we can clearly judge that the tutor is the most important element to express the meaning in this video. The background images are blackboard, wall, chair or something like that. As we can see, the background images are vague, so that they make the important figure more distinct and reduce those unnecessary distractions. In addition, at the bottom of the video image, we can see the subtitles obviously. They are printed in white with the black background, which is really obvious and striking. With the purpose of

highlighting the characters, the viewers whose English levels are not so high are able to understand the discourse and seize the information effectively. And it is also convenient for the viewers to take notes. In the bottom right corner, it is the logo of British Council. The logo is not very bright and marked for the light blue color. And it is in capital letters, which aims to emphasize that the course is supported by British Council. As for the author, he wears a black suit and violet shirt inside, which illustrates a type of formal and decent sense. All the elements in the video images are very harmonious and comfortable, so as to make the viewers calm down and listen to the tutor's teaching carefully and peacefully.



Fig.1 Week1.3--2:17

## 2.2 Interpersonal Meaning Analysis

The interpersonal meaning means the enactment of social relations. It is encouraged to discuss the social relationship among people in the images or videos, the communicative purpose of the designers as well as the involvement of the readers on the contents. The images appearing in the video can establish a type of relationship between the meaning of the elements and the viewers. That is to say, the interpersonal meaning is formed by the elements, such as perspective, contact, the size of the frame and social distance, soundtrack, and modality, which are based on Visual Grammar and the framework proposed by O'Halloran (O' Halloran, 2004). There are two main perspectives of images in videos: horizontal perspective and vertical perspective. Firstly, the horizontal perspective focuses on the relationship between the represented participants and the viewers. Secondly, it is the vertical perspective, which is another important means to achieve perspective. High angle and low angle are two essential elements to achieve this

perspective.

As we all can see, the tutor in **Figure 2** sits in front of the viewers and looks directly at the viewers, which means an equal status between the tutor and the viewers. In this way, the viewers will feel that they are involved in the course.



Fig.2 Week2.2--1:22

In everyday interaction, social distance refers to the actual distance people keep from one another. However, the social distance here suggests the different relations between the represented participants and the viewers, which concerns about the objects and environments. Besides, it can also be further classed into the following categories. It belongs to intimate distance if we can see the face or head; and we regard the head and shoulders presented as close personal distance; the part up waist presented as far personal distance; the whole figure as close social distance; the whole figure with "space around it" as far social distance; and the torso of at least four or five people as public distance. Actually, all the distance categories mentioned above belong to the social relationships between the represented participants and the viewers, which are realized through the size of the frame, namely, the option among close-up, medium shot and long shot.

## 2.3 Compositional Meaning Analysis

The compositional meaning refers to the organization of the meaning for coherent texts and units. According to this function and the information distribution of MDA, we can analyze different elements, their relative locations and other specific information to identify the point of departure and the focus of the information expression. In fact, the compositional meaning is achieved by different variables in an image or video. As we can see, the compositional meaning consists of three variables,

that is, informative value, salience, and framing.

Firstly, the information value is realized by the placement of specific elements in an image or video. The place of each element can indicate its role and importance. Kress and Van Leeuwen (Kress, 1996) propose that the meaning of given and new ranges from left to right, and the meaning of ideal and real is in the distribution of top to bottom in the image. According to visual grammar, the information that is familiar to the viewers is regarded as given information. In contrast, the new ones refer to the information that is unfamiliar to the viewers. The distribution of these elements aims to greatly attract the viewer's notice. The ideal ones mean the information that is just presented in the form of conception or mental image, while the real ones stand for the things that are proved to be existed.

Secondly, the constitution of an image or video also involves various degrees of salience. It can further explain the arrangement of the related elements, which express the degree of attention of the elements in the image, so as to indicate their importance to the viewers. The salience can be realized by the arrangement in the visual field, the contrasts of the sound value, the difference in sharpness and so forth.

Finally, framing refers to whether there are the features to link the components in an image, demonstrating that whether they are within the range to a certain extent. In the videos, the choice of showing two or more actors together in one shot or editing between individual shots of the actors in which each is isolated from the others by framing lines can create similar effects sometimes.

**Figure 3** is the example for this point of compositional meaning. In this image, the tutor stands in front of the lens, which refers to be presented in the foreground, so as to indicate his importance and attract the viewers' concentration. On the left bottom side of the image, there is the tutor's name, Rob. As we mention above, this is the given and real information. Since it is not the first class of the whole course, we know the tutor's name before, so it just aims to remind you. Next to the name mark,

it is the subtitle of the video. The subtitles are also in the middle and bottom, so we can conclude that the subtitles are important and real. On the right bottom part is the name of IELTS organizer, *British Council*, which is supposed to be the most important information. As we all know, the IELTS is held and recognized by British Council, so the purpose to place the mark here is to tell the viewers that this course is authoritative and reliable. The authority itself is very important, so it is just the right thing to put it in the most significant place. Moreover, the characters are in blue capital letters and the size is kind of bigger than the other words, which aims to emphasize its importance again. There are also four small blue circles next to these two words, with the purpose of attracting the viewers' attention, ensuring to convey the authoritativeness of this course.



**Fig.3 Week3.1--3:54**

Language is the carrier of culture and knowledge, which can convey information and express meaning. Not only the contents of the language can provide information, but the characters' font, size, color, typography and other elements can also add the information to the meaning. Moreover, the tutor's sound is gentle and comfortable, which contributes to making the viewers concentrate on the valuable information discourse. Among all the discourses of the tutor in the video, there is no stuck, reception or uttering like "er" or "ah". Therefore, the whole video is very coherent and refined.

## Conclusion

The thesis adopts the method of MDA to analyze the characteristics of the videos in MOOC, so as to conclude the characteristics of MOOC and find out the way how the meanings are presented through MDA method. In terms of the research, the

MOOC videos use the meaning integration of images, language, subtitle, voiceover, background music and other semiotic resources to show the unique characteristics of MOOC. The analysis structure involves both single modality analysis and the integration of multimodalities, which add the effectiveness of interpreting the MOOC videos. The thesis discusses the roles of visual modality in establishing the discourse meaning and the way how they influence each other to achieve the whole meaning expression of the discourse. In this way, it is found that the videos in MOOC aim to close the distance between the tutor and viewers to make the communication more accessible and to increase the popularity and value of MOOC itself.

MOOC provides an opportunity for the students all over the world, aiming to enjoy the best professors' class in the field and open the door of knowledge to the whole world. It complies with the development of modern education and technology and conforms to the traditional concept of lifelong learning. Different from self-study by reading teaching materials or just watching the videos, it uses the online network technology to imitate the real classroom and brings the viewers the academic atmosphere. Thus, it becomes a trend to record MOOC videos. MOOC is not a type of fashionable trend, so we should not lose our direction or run after the other blindly, which will only lead to the reform process of multi-media network courses. According to this thesis, it is good to use the MDA method to produce MOOC videos, carefully think about the essence of MOOC, foreign language teaching and how to make MOOC be fully suitable for foreign language teaching, so as to improve the quality of courses and bring true benefits to the viewers. This is just the key points for the foreign language teachers and researchers. It is believed that no matter how much attention and popularity that MOOC can obtain, it is still impossible to replace the traditional teaching modes and exist independently. It is eventually a way to assist the classroom foreign language teaching, so the combination of MOOC and classroom teaching will become a new trend in the

future educational field.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

### Acknowledgement

This research was funded by:

Education and Scientific Research Project for Young and Middle-aged Teachers in Fujian Province in 2019 (NO. JAT191011).

### References

- Zhang, D. (2009). On a synthetic theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis. *Foreign Language in China*, 2009.
- Allen, A., & Seaman, J. (2022). Staying the course: Online education in the united states. [http://www\\_sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/staying\\_the\\_course\\_pdf](http://www_sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/staying_the_course_pdf).
- Halliday. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Edward Arnold Press.
- Kress, G., & Van, L. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. London: Arnold Press.
- O'Halloran, L., & Smith, A. (2011). *Multimodal studies: Exploring issues and domains*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Len, U. (2008). *Multimodal semiotics---functional analysis in contexts of education*. Continuum International Publishing Group.
- O'Toole, M. (1995). *A systemic-functional semiotics of art. . Discourse in Society Systemic-Functional Perspectives: Meaning and Choice in Language: Studies for Michael Halliday*. Norwood, 1995(NJ: Ablex).
- Alfred, P. K. M. (2004). *Making history in from colony to nation: a multimodal analysis of a museum exhibition in singapore*. London: Continuum Press.
- Kress, G., & Van, L. (2006a). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. 2nd Edition. London: Routledge Press.



- Wu, J. (2014). A research on the reform of college foreign language teaching based on MOOC. *College English Teaching*.
- Zhu, Y. (2007). Theory and methodology of multimodal discourse analysis. *Foreign Language Research*.
- British, C. (2020). Understanding IELTS: Techniques for English Language Tests .  
<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/understanding-ielts/2/todo/2629>
- Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2003). Working with discourse: Meaning beyond the clause. Continuum, London & New York.
- Kress, G., & Van, L. (2006b). Reading images: The grammar of visual design. 2nd edition. London: Routledge Press.
- Jesu's , M., & Mari'a , S. (2008). Compositional, international and representational meanings in a children's narrative: A multi-modal discourse analysis. *Journal of Pragmatics*.
- O'Halloran , L. (2004). Multimodal discourse analysis: Systemic-Functional perspective. London: Continuum Press.
- Kress, G., & Van, L. (1996). Reading images: the grammar of visual design. London: Routledge Press.

**How to Cite:** Wang, D. (2023). Multimodal Discourse Analysis of MOOC Videos. *Contemporary Education and Teaching Research*, 04(09),483-488.  
<https://doi.org/10.61360/BoniCETR232014930913>.