

China's Eco-friendly Image in the Context of New Media: A Study on Multimodal Metaphor Based on the Environment-themed Posters

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Abstract: With the rapid dissemination of “China Environmental Threat”, it is necessary to show China’s real eco-friendly image to the world. However, few studies have focused on it. This article explores eco-friendly image from the perspective of multimodal metaphors based on conceptual blending theory, taking posters as research materials collected from official *People’s Daily* on the new media Microblog. The results reveal that eco-friendly image is mainly constructed by five representative ways of multimodal metaphors and the most frequent representative way is cross-modal mappings of the type verbal and pictorial source-verbal and pictorial target. The results demonstrate that China’s real eco-friendly image constructed by multimodal metaphors is rendered through the promotion of protecting animals, saving energy and taking care of the earth. It provides examples for the discourse analysis of new media based on multimodal metaphors research and suggestions for the strategy of spreading the eco-friendly image.

1. Introduction

National image is the recognition and evaluation of a country’s politics, economy, society, culture, geography and other aspects by the public at home and abroad ^[1]. It is an important embodiment of comprehensive national power and international influence. In the context of new media, national image competition is more flexible, more distinctive. With the rapid dissemination of “China Environmental Threat”, it is necessary and urgent to show China’s real and true eco-friendly image to the world.

Recent research on China’s national image has mainly focused on themes such as discourse power, cultural strategies, and international competitiveness ^{[2][3]}. Few research focused on national eco-friendly image.

In recent years, scholars in the field of linguistics have begun to pay attention to current politics communication, and the study of China’s national image has become a hot spot. They mainly combined multimodal metaphors with different genres, like cartoons and promotional videos ^[4]. However, there is few research using multimodal metaphors to analyse national eco-friendly image based on posters.

Based on those pieces mentioned above, this article attempts to show China’s real eco-friendly image to the world from the perspective of multimodal metaphors based on conceptual blending

theory, taking environment-themed posters collected from official *People's Daily* on Microblog as research data, which could make contributions to the application of multimodal metaphors in the context of China's new media, and give suggestions for status responsible for presentation of eco-friendly image.

Specifically, this article seeks answers to the following research questions: (1) how is China's eco-friendly image constructed through multimodal metaphors in the posters collected from *People's Daily* on Microblog? (2) which representative ways are used frequently in the metaphors employed to depict national eco-friendly image? (3) what kind of national eco-friendly image is constructed practically through the metaphors?

2. Theoretical Framework

Fauconnier and Turner proposed conceptual blending theory based on cognitive linguistics and mental space theory^[5]. The mental space theory was first proposed by Fauconnier, which means that people constructed conceptual packets to achieve the purpose of local understanding and action when talking and thinking^[6]. A complete conceptual blending theory includes four mental spaces: two input spaces, a generic space and a blended space. Input space 1 and input space 2 are mapped to each other, one being source domain and the other target domain. And the two input spaces selectively enter blended space 4 through the shared framework of generic space 3. Then, through composition, completion, and elaboration, they form an emergent structure. The formation of a layered structure is a highly abstract process. On the basis of fully absorbing and inheriting the core of conceptual metaphor theory, this theory creatively observes and deduces metaphor types from multiple forms and sources in real time and online, especially for novel, dynamic, and three-dimensional metaphorical products that have undergone transformation in multi-dimensional space, setting a satisfactory interpretation scheme^[7]. Therefore, this article adopts conceptual blending theory to analyse China's national eco-friendly image.

3. Analysis of National Eco-friendly Image Based on Multimodal Metaphors

3.1. Data collection

For the purpose of this study, 147 posters were collected from *People's Daily's* official account on Microblog. *People's Daily* is one of the top ten most influential newspapers in the world, and gives play to a significant role in information communication, public opinion guidance, as well as shaping the national image. The posters were selected relying on its elegant design, relatively large quantity and considerable attention, and collected by retrieving the five topics "shengtai (ecology)", "huanjing (environment)", "ditan (low-carbon)", "lvse (green)" and "huanbao (environmental protection)" on Microblog. And the selected time was from January 2020 to December 2022 because China's environmental policy "30 Goals +60 Vision" was proposed during the years. Note that this study focuses on the poster itself, and the posters' title only serves to provide context and is not used as research content. After all the posters depicting national eco-friendly image were collected, multimodal metaphors used within were identified by following metaphor identification procedure.

3.2. Metaphor identification procedure

For the identification of multimodal metaphors, this study adopts the three criteria proposed by Bounegru and Forceville: (1) two signifiers in a specific context should be seen as different categories and have similar relationships in certain aspects; (2) the two referents can be identified as

the source domain and the target domain respectively, and the two are not interchangeable; (3) one or more features related to the source domain can be mapped to the target domain^[8].

After the process of identification, 20 posters with multimodal metaphors are selected from the total 147 posters collected from *People's Daily's* official Microblog. The dramatic reduction of target posters in numbers is because most posters are about propaganda slogans and policy interpretation without metaphors. Thus, they are not contained in the research scope. Note that different metaphors on a same poster are identified as different posters.

Then, based on the classification of multimodal metaphorical representation ways in poster discourse, this study statistically identifies the number and proportion of representation ways. Next, this study uses text analysis method to analyse each representation way, striving to reproduce the metaphorical mapping process under the joint action of multiple modalities (text, image, text image, implicit). Finally, based on the composition characteristics of poster images, this study analyses the overall meaning of these multimodal metaphor types and the constructed national image through conceptual blending theory.

3.3. Data analysis

This section provides a qualitative analysis of the metaphors identified in a corpus of 20 posters. The posters are discussed under five groups divided according to representative ways: verbal and pictorial source-verbal and pictorial target; pictorial source-verbal and pictorial target; pictorial source-pictorial target; verbal source-verbal and pictorial target; verbal and pictorial source-implicit target, which can better analyse the construction of eco-friendly image.

3.3.1. Verbal and pictorial source-verbal and pictorial target

This representative way is showed by using one poster as an example. In figure 1, the multimodal metaphor can be expressed by words as “performance is prison”. The target domain is cued verbally and pictorially “biaoyan (performance)”. The source domain is cued pictorially and verbally “laolong (prison)” and a monkey’s head being fettered by the barbed wire. The composition of this poster involves two parts, the right being a monkey in nature with freedom and the left being a monkey fettered by the barbed wire with melancholic eyes, which shapes a sharp contrast to express serious harm that wild animal has suffered. And its bottom is presenting words “woxiangwangzirandewutai, bushibiaoyandelaolong (I yearn for a natural stage, not a prison for performance)” and “baohuyeshengdongwu (protecting wild animals)” to express the core meaning of this poster.

This metaphor can be represented using conceptual blending theory as follows. In this poster, green leaves are metonymic of nature, the barbed wire metonymic of prison, an unhealed wound metonymic of cruelty from breeder. They are composed as Input 1, and their mapping elements, nature, prison and cruelty are composed as Input 2. The elements in two Input spaces mapping mutually in the generic space “wild animal is being harmed” are projected into a new construct referred to as the blend in which there is a new configuration of concepts that wild animal is friends of humanity and we should protect them rather than hurting them. This conceptual structure is referred to as the emergent structure. In summary, the poster utilizes the synergistic effect of images and text both in source domain and target domain to vividly construct a multimodal metaphor of “protecting wild animals”. That also means people should protect animals’ living environment.



Figure 1: The Metaphor (performance is a prison).

3.3.2. Pictorial source-verbal and pictorial target

This representative way is analysed by taking figure 2 as an example. In this figure, the multimodal metaphor can be expressed as “water is bubbles” in words. In this category, the source domain “bubbles” is cued pictorially, whereas the target domain “water” is cued verbally and pictorially. The background of the poster is baby blue, representing the color of water. The composition of the poster is divided into upper and lower structures, with large and small bubbles on the top and text below, indicating the current situation of water conservation and water shortage.

This metaphor can be represented using a blend as follows. The metaphor is based on the generic space “saving water”. Input 1 is the domain of large and small bubbles shaped by water drop. Input 2 is the domain of water. Both inputs include a number of elements that agree with the content of the generic space “large and small bubbles is shaped as a big drop of water, and every drop of water is accumulated and turn into plenty of water”. The elements in two input spaces are projected into the blend. That is, any drop of water should not be wasted, and they can be added up as a large amount of available water. People should save water.



Figure 2: The Metaphor (water is bubbles).

3.3.3. Pictorial source-pictorial target

In this section, both the source domain and the target domain are cued pictorially. In figure 3, a multimodal metaphor can be expressed by words as “dolphins are plastic bags”. In this poster, almost two to thirds of the screen is densely packed with plastic bags, floating like dolphin shoal, with only one real dolphin standing alone on the right side of the screen. There are captions at the bottom of this poster that “nidexiguanjuedingtadewanban (your habits determine its playmates)”. The poster contains dark blue and bright blue and forms a strong contrast in quantity and color, giving viewers a sense of suffocation.

This is a case of single-scope blend illustrated in the following. The generic space “severe pollution” underlines this metaphor. Input 1 is the domain of dense plastic bags. Input 2 is the domain of a real dolphin. Both inputs include a number of elements that agree with the content of the generic space. The elements in two input spaces are projected into the blend in which there is an emergent structure. If humanity litter, the number of dolphins will dramatically reduce. Thus, the

little lonely dolphin has no real playmates in his life and is forced to be together with plastic bags. It expresses the severity of marine pollution and the harm to marine animals, and calls on people not to litter and to take care of the marine environment.



Figure 3: The Metaphor (dolphins are plastic bags).

3.3.4. Verbal source-verbal and pictorial target

This representative way is analysed by taking figure 4 as an example. The multimodal metaphor can be explained as “pollution is garbage”, in which “pollution” is cued verbally and pictorially “huangmohua (desertification)” and cracked land, whereas “garbage” is cued verbally by captions “qinxi (invasion)”. Regarding composition of this poster, the top half of the screen is presented with green grass and obvious words “xiangyaoshengjibobodedadi (want a vibrant land)”, whereas the bottom half is presented with a picture of dry and cracked land and captions “buyaohuangmohuadeqinxi (don’t let desert invade)”, which shapes a strong contrast.

This metaphor can be represented using a blend as follows. The metaphor is based on the generic space “water shortage”. Input 1 is the domain of dry and cracked land. Input 2 is the domain of invasion. Both inputs include a number of elements that agree with the content of the generic space “because of the lack of water, the originally vibrant land has turned into dry land, as if attacked by the enemy”. The elements in two input spaces are projected into the blend in which there is a new emergent structure. It expresses that people should cherish water resources and do not let the soil desertification.



Figure 4: The Metaphor (pollution is garbage).

3.3.5. Verbal and pictorial source-implicit target

This representative way is analysed by taking figure 5 as an example. In this figure, the multimodal metaphor can be expressed as “pollution is shadow” in words. In this category, the source domain “shadow” is cued verbally and pictorially “huian (gloomy)”, whereas the target domain “pollution” is cued implicitly by the whole scenario. The background of the poster is black, and its center is an earth. A child is coloring the gray earth blue. The top left corner of the earth says “xiangyaoweilanxingqiu (want a blue planet)”, and the corresponding bottom right corner says “buyaotabiandehuan (don’t let her to become gray)”, representing the child’s expectation.

This metaphor can be represented using a blend as follows. The metaphor is based on the generic

space “protecting the earth”. Input 1 is the domain of gray dark color. Input 2 is the domain of pollution. Both inputs include a number of elements that agree with the content of the generic space “pollution can cause haze, which can make the sky gray”. The elements in two input spaces are projected into the blend in which there is an emergent structure. That is, the following generations of humanity want a clean and beautiful earth, not a place to live in with poor ecological environment. People should protect the environment and take good care of the earth.



Figure 5: The Metaphor (pollution is shadow).

3.4. Discussion

To address the first and second research questions related to how China’s national eco-friendly image is constructed through multimodal metaphors in the posters and the frequency of representative ways, data analysis has showed that it is depicted mainly through five groups as shown in figure 6.

It shows that the type verbal and pictorial source-verbal and pictorial target is the most recurring representative way to depict national eco-friendly image, accounting for 35% of the corpus. The second is the type pictorial source-verbal and pictorial target and pictorial source-pictorial target accounting for 20% of the posters respectively. The least common representative way is the type verbal source-verbal and pictorial target and verbal and pictorial source-implicit target, which appears in 10% of the posters respectively.

The most frequent representative way is verbal and pictorial source-verbal and pictorial target, different from the finding of Yang Youwen that verbal source-pictorial target^[9]. That is because multiple modes of mapping can better facilitate readers gaining the gist of the poster by stimulating their multiple schemas previously existed in their brains. The verbal and pictorial modes simultaneously existed in the source domain and target domain also can give readers more visual impact than single modes of each domain. This kind of expressive way is usually employed in the context of new media.

Regarding the third research question that deals with what kind of China’s national eco-friendly image is constructed in the posters, the analysis has showed the image of protecting animals, saving energy like water and electricity, taking care of the earth, as well as preventing air pollution. The national eco-friendly image is mainly rendered by using multimodal metaphors to vividly present the consequences of environmental damage and by policy interpretation and achievements in environmental governance, in line with Zhao Li’s recommendations of transmission of environmental protection^[10]. The most common expressive way in the posters is to form strong contrasts like in color and quantity, which can make readers have the most intuitive shocking feelings. Thus, the media achieves its purposes.

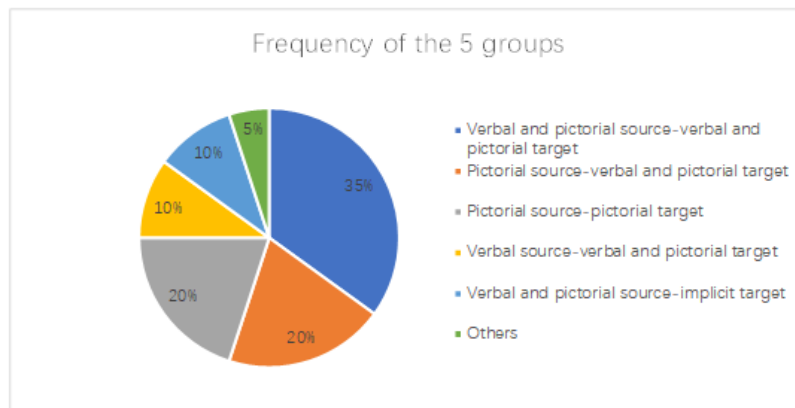


Figure 6: Frequency of representative ways of multimodal metaphors depicting national eco-friendly image.

4. Conclusions

This article explores China's national eco-friendly image from the perspective of multimodal metaphors based on conceptual blending theory, taking posters of the new media Microblog as research materials. It finds that national eco-friendly image is mainly constructed by five representative ways of multimodal metaphors. Among them, the most frequent representative way is cross-modal mappings of the type verbal and pictorial source-verbal and pictorial target. The national eco-friendly image is constructed practically through protecting animals, saving energy, taking care of the earth, as well as preventing air pollution.

Based on the examined posters and multimodal metaphors within, it can be argued that new media facilitates the transmission of national eco-friendly image by using multimodal mappings. Thus, it is a good way of transmitting other aspects of national image. However, the path of transmission still can be more diverse, not only from the perspective of natural ecology and government, but also from public, at home or abroad, as a result that the real China's national environmental image can be rendered to the whole world.

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