

The Interpretation of Sign Meaning from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis—A Case Study of Inside No.9

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Abstract: In the development of multimodal discourse analysis theory, three typical paradigms emerged: social semiotics, cognition and social interaction. In the paradigm of social semiotics, the Chinese scholar Zhang Delu proposed a multimodal discourse analysis framework. This paper, which focuses on the TV series *Inside No. 9*, aims to elucidate the meanings created by different sign resources under the systemic-functional framework proposed by Zhang in 2018. Peircean semiotics theory is an important branch of semiotics. His theory of abduction is befitting for dynamic construct of meaning. In this paper, the author uses Peircean semiotics theory and abduction mechanism to analyze three main modes. In synthetic approach, the author attempts to construct a multimodal sign-meaning analysis approach and explores its practical significance in appreciating artistic value of television works.

1. Introduction

Multimodal discourse analysis has become a research hotspot in many disciplines. At present, the progress of international multimodal discourse analysis can be reflected in the following: in terms of theory, new social semiotic analysis frameworks are emerging, and theories of various disciplines are deeply integrated; in terms of research methods, qualitative analysis is becoming more scientific, and quantitative analysis is showing the trend of big data; in terms of research topics, multimodal discourse analysis pays more attention to important sociocultural phenomena^[1]. These three trends can be embodied in: the combination of semiotic theory and film theory, the use of data annotation statistical software in qualitative analysis and analysis attention to special social groups.

Inside No. 9 is a British black comedy and suspense series co-created and starred by Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith. Since its premiere in 2014, produced by BBC Two, each episode presents an independent story with a diverse style, offering both profound social insights and absurd humor. This paper selects Season 1, Episode 3 as the subject of analysis.

Once the barriers of any two paradigms are broken down, the complementary integration of them can bring innovation and development to multimodal discourse analysis^[2]. Therefore, the author attempts to combine Zhang's multimodal framework and Peircean semiotics theory to promote the analysis of sign meaning in dynamic multimodal discourse.

2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Peircean Semiotics Theory

In the study of the combination of Peircean semiotics theory and multimodal analysis, the researches carried out by foreign scholars are in-depth and comprehensive. Leo Murray^[3] applies Peircean theory to the analysis of sound design, exploring how sound can be used as an indexical or symbolic signs in conjunction with visual elements to construct cinematic meaning. Bateman^[4] uses Peircean triadic relationship in cross-media narrative and multimodal analysis to reveal that visual, auditory, linguistic and other modalities collaboratively construct complex meanings through sign. In addition, Tuomo Hiippala^[5] applies Peircean semiotic model to guide the design and analysis of multimodal corpora to help capture the complex sign interactions in films. However, in domestic circles, the author only obtained a relevant literature cowritten by a foreign researcher and a domestic translator, which integrated discourse semantics with Peircean sign categories and extended view of abduction mechanism, making it possible to conduct multimodal comprehensive analysis of films^[6].

3. The Multimodal Sign-meaning Analysis Approach

Zhang Delu^[7] proposed an improved multimodal analysis framework. The framework boasts a few strengths. First, it highlights the systemic nature of the framework. Secondly, it emphasizes the unity of system and function. Thirdly, it highlights the process of choice. Fourthly, it attaches great importance to the study of the relations between modes. Finally, the new framework adds the description of the level of substance.

Peirce proposed three kinds of trichotomies: first, the “quality” of the sign itself; second, the relationship between the sign representamen and its object; third, the interpretant of the sign. Based on that, he divided signs into nine types^[8]. Peirce combined these nine signs and further divided them into ten categories, and the sign types can be depicted as a pyramid as shown in Figure 1. In this study, the author uses the following ten signs for specific analysis. Abduction is a reasoning process that researcher proposes hypothetical explanations based on observed phenomena. It is inventive and uncertain because there may be multiple plausible hypothetical explanations for the same phenomenon^[9].

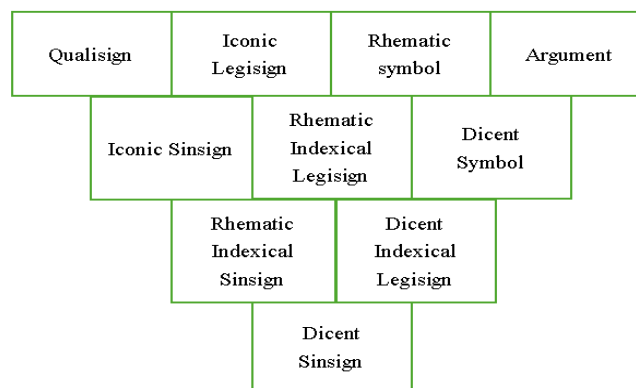


Figure 1: Peircean Ten Types of Signs.

Consequently, this approach will combine Peircean ten categories of signs with Zhang’s multimodal framework to better interpret the meanings of signs from origin to dissemination. Meanwhile, the author preliminarily annotates corpus by ELAN 6.8. Considering that this selected episode is of the suspense genre, the author also uses abduction as a tool for dynamically reconstructing reasoning in analysis. The procedures of multimodal sign-meaning analysis approach can follow five parts: socio-cultural context; meaning system; sign system; medium system; physical system.

4. An MDA of Inside No. 9

4.1 Socio-cultural Context and Its Instantiation

Tom & Gerri reveals the cultural context unique to British society, reflecting issues such as class consciousness, moral dilemmas and urban alienation. In British culture, the middle class faces a sense of fragility, anxiety about social decline, and an underlying fear of the lower class. Furthermore, the alienation and coldness of modern urban life intensify individual loneliness, making mental health an important societal issue.

During the contextualized process, the episode's story revolves around Tom's "well-intentioned assistance" to Migg, which gradually evolves into a battle of class, identity and morality. Migg is not merely a homeless man but also an externalization of Tom's inner anxiety and fear. In the situational context, the tone of the episode transitions from light-hearted to oppressive and despairing, infused with British black humor's satire and absurdity. The mundane dialogue conveys deep social critique and psychological tension, addressing class anxiety, moral struggles, and psychological crises. Overall, *Tom & Gerri* uses an individual's moral choices as an entry point to reflect broader structural problems in British society, presenting a metaphorical social parable.

4.2 Meaning System and Its Instantiation

The meaning potential of semiotic systems refers to the latent meanings and expressive capacity of sign within specific cultural and situational contexts, including language, visual, sound, and other modalities^[10]. In *Tom & Gerri*, modalities selected respectively contribute to the construction and transmission of meaning.

In this episode, language serves to drive the plot and present character relationships. For example, the dialogues between Tom and Migg reveal Tom's moral superiority and inner fears, while Migg's words carry probing and provocative undertones. Visual signs are responsible for creating emotional ambiance and psychological states. From the neatness to the disorder of the apartment, visual signs reflect Tom's inner turbulence and disintegration. Auditory signs play a crucial role in creating atmosphere. As the plot progresses, background music shifts from calm and serene to oppressive and sharp, enhancing the psychological pressure and deterioration of Tom's mental state.

4.3 Sign System and Its Instantiation

4.3.1 Verbal Mode

Tom & Gerri is a story filled with satire and psychological manipulation. By analyzing its dialogue, audience can uncover the characters' power dynamics, strategies of discursive control, and more significantly the multiple storyline hints of verbal mode. This study annotates the lines with sign categories in terms of sense group as the basic unit.

To maintain consistency with the suspenseful style, many dialogues present sort of possibilities, guiding the audience to speculate about the causal connections the signs index. Therefore, rhematic indexical sinsigns appear most frequently. For instance, four lines from Tom's friend Stevie are marked as rhematic indexical sinsigns, conveying the concern of him and his colleagues toward Tom:

- a) "Everyone sends their love."
- b) "Promise me you'll phone if you want to chat and that."
- c) "A few of us at the school have had a whip around."
- d) "I'll get your tablet."

On the surface level of the narrative, Tom is merely refusing to go to work, staying decadent at

home until he quits to pursue his so-called dream of becoming a writer. However, these four rhematic indexical sinsigns suggest another possibility—that Tom has suffered a weighty life setback. The audience are indexde to engage in abduction to uncover the underlying cause: Tom’s girlfriend, Gerri, has died, and as a result, Tom has developed a mental illness.

Next in frequency are qualisigns, which refer to any quality or pure sensation evoked. As for Migg, his “intrusion” into Tom’s home is facilitated by two lines marked as qualisigns “*It’s just nice to talk to a fellow man.*” and “*Makes me feel like I exist.*” These lines convey Migg’s loneliness and sense of unreality. Meanwhile, Tom is in a state of disillusionment—disenchanted with his teaching career and struggling to fulfill his writer-dream. Thus, Tom actively invites Migg to “enter” his world.

Peirce argued that sign types are not fixed, “Every sign is in itself a medium in which other signs can be embodied.”^[9] For example, a sinsign (a singular event) can, through iterations, evolve into a legisign (a sign governed by a law). In the show, multiple instances of the same dicent indexical sinsign—“*You have no messages.*”—eventually form a dicent indexical legisign. The first occurrence is due to Migg deliberately deleting messages, but its repeated appearances later indexes that Migg isolates Tom from the outside world, asserting dominance.

4.3.2 Visual Mode

Inside No. 9 is also characterized by the use of props and images that are not easily noticeable in order to make sense of the development of the plot. In this mode, the creators will express ideas through the reproduction of similar things with implicit meanings. In statistics, iconic sinsign and rhematic symbol appear more often. Therefore, the author will firstly analyze from these two types of signs.

Right at the beginning of the episode, the analyzer can notice a wall separating the left and right sides of the frame (Figure 2). On the right is Tom, and occupying a large area on the left is a painting. This portrait serves as the iconic sinsign, telling the audience that he is in fact the American poet Allen Ginsberg. In the field of Western literature, he represents the “Beatniks”, whose works depict the decadent life of American youth. It can be said that from the very beginning, the play implies the direction of Tom’s life.



Figure 2: Iconic Sinsign.

Rhematic symbol is an unfinished sign expression with potential meaning based on social conventions and customs, which can guide and suggest possible meanings to the viewer. The play repeatedly focuses on the mirror in the room. Common sense dictates that if a person is real, he or she will be mirrored in the mirror. In Figures 3 audiences fail to see Gerri’s mirror image even though she clearly passes by the mirror, whereas the other three characters in the play all have a clear mirror image when they appear in the mirror. This rhematic symbol raises the possibility that perhaps from the beginning Tom could not accept the death of his girlfriend and activated a psychological defense

mechanism, continuing imagining that she was still with him.



Figure 3: Rhematic Symbol.

As one of the few dicent symbols in the play, Figure 4 shows a dirty kitchen scene, which directly reflects the current state of the kitchen (a complete factual narrative), and conveys the meaning to the audience that this visual sign symbolizes that Tom has been muddling along for many days, becoming more and more lazy and disorganized internally, meaning that there has been a problem with Tom's mental health.



Figure 4: Dicent Symbol.

4.3.3 Auditory Mode

Qualisign exists on the basis of the “quality” or “sensory properties” of signs, and the expressive power of sound to convey basic emotional or atmospheric signals without additional context or interpretation is what makes sound easily regarded as a qualisign. Therefore, in the analysis of auditory mode, the author focuses on the qualisigns.

There are four main types of background sounds as qualisigns when Migg appears. First, the low-frequency vibrato increases the psychological pressure on the audience, making them suspicious of Migg's intentions. The second is a slightly higher pitch when Migg gradually establishes relationship with Tom, accompanied by murmurs and dissonance, further demonstrating Migg's threatening nature. Later on, when Migg is in control of the situation, his aggression is emphasized by the prolongation of dull or shrill tones. And finally, Migg is killed by Tom in the bathtub. This scene occurs twice, once when Tom's best friend first discovers it, at which point the soundtrack simply expresses horror, and the second time at the end of the episode, when Tom argues that his best friend is only seeing a hallucination, and that the Migg he has killed does not really exist. The gradual speeding up and elevation of the strings at a later stage makes this moment full of suspense.

The author found that abduction has a wide range of applications in the analysis of auditory mode. Sound signs often lack clear meaning pointers and require the audience to rely on other modal cues

to reason out the underlying meaning of the sound. For example, in the discussion about who is real in the play, the different viewpoints stem from the different explanatory assumptions that the audience arrives at by applying abduction.

4.4 Medium and Its Instantiation

Kress and van Leeuwen^[11] point out that different modalities work together to convey complex messages and emotions. In *Tom & Gerri*, drawing on Peircean semiotics theory, the media facilitates the operation of his ten types of signs across these modalities.

Visual media provides detailed depictions of signs, audio media builds layered emotional and spatial dimensions, and narrative media orchestrates the temporal and spatial integration of modalities. These auditory signs synchronize with verbal modalities, such as Migg's provocative remarks followed by sharp sound effects, amplified through media techniques like delay effects and pitch adjustments to intensify the emotional impact of the conflict. Narrative incorporates signs through scene layout and recurring motifs, such as repeated close-ups of the apartment door, which mean both boundaries and invasion, functioning as focal points for the convergence of visual and auditory modalities. Media thus plays an indispensable role in the coordination of multimodal signs, rendering the semiotic meanings of the episode more vivid, multi-dimensional, and impactful.

4.5 Physical System and Its Instantiation

In film and TV production, the material realization of media encompasses various technological devices involved from shooting to final distribution. Initially, capturing and recording equipment such as cameras and lenses are responsible for capturing visuals and converting them into image signals. Sound recording equipment such as microphones and audio interfaces capture dialogue and ambient sounds, ensuring clarity in sound quality. During post-production, editing software and audio processing tools (e.g., Pro Tools, Adobe Premiere) are employed to cut, color-grade, and mix both image and sound. In the storage and transmission phases, hard drives and SSDs store recorded data, while transmission devices deliver content to the editing and post-production teams via networks or fiber optics. Finally, projection equipment like Video apps transform the processed visuals and audio into perceptible forms for the audience. High-quality display technologies enable precise transmission of the semiotic system. Throughout this process, these material devices work in unison to ensure that the semiotic system of the TV *Inside No. 9* production is effectively captured, processed and disseminated to the audience.

5. Conclusion

This paper not only focuses on the analysis of the resulted signs, but explores them from sign selection to sign distribution. In addition, the author innovatively analyses the components of linguistic, visual and auditory modalities as each real sign by using Peircean semiotics. Through the combination of functional linguistics and Peircean semiotics, the author conducts a comprehensive investigation of signs, such as cultural context, sign systems and audience cognition, which provides a good experimental precedent for multimodal analysis of television.

One of the obvious flaws of this research is that it fails to explore in depth the influence of individual differences and cultural background knowledge of the audience in interpreting these signs. In addition, the classification about the types of signs in the episode is somewhat subjective. These aspects can be further added in the future.

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Appendix

Screenshots of the episode used in this paper are sourced from the Bilibili platform:
<https://b23.tv/ep198219>.