

# Multimodal Discourse Analysis on A Cartoon Film Trailer *Up*

Qidan Xing<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University

Correspondence: Qidan Xing, Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University.

doi:10.56397/JLCS.2022.11.04

## Abstract

This article aims to investigate a cartoon film trailer *Up* by the multimodal discourse analysis. The highlight of this study is that different elements (e.g., semiotic information) involved in selected film trailer will be analyzed in a detailed way, including sounds, music, images and lines. With this regard, it will provide a general picture about how the film trailer in the context of multimodal discourse performs and conveys the meaningful information to viewers. In addition, there will be further discussions on other dimensions in the film trailer and relevant limitations.

**Keywords:** multimodal discourse analysis, film trailer, semiotic information

---

## 1. Introduction

Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), as a part of discourse studies, combines the language study with other semiotic resources. In real-life context, communication is not only from verbal expressions but also it could be achieved by non-verbal resources, for instance, the body languages (Cameron & Panović, 2014). However, in terms of genres and multimodality, they are correlated with each other because genres are able to promote the understanding of multimodal texts, which also enable us to interact with each other (Bateman, 2008). Due to the focus of this article, film trailers, as one of multimodal texts (genre), may be a suitable example to adopt an analytical perspective on its multimodal discourse.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

The concept of multimodal discourse analysis comes from Halliday's (1989a) social semiotic method to language, which regards language as a series of semiotic information, such as image, music and body language, and people use these resources to communicate and express themselves. A similar assumption is from Paltridge (2012), he also suggests that multimodal discourse analysis examines how texts work on ways of communication, including pictures, film, and sound combined with words to create meaning, moreover, it looks at how texts are organized and how these semiotic resources contribute to meaning.

Even if people engage in spoken interaction nowadays, however, language itself is seen as basic form of communication and it is one of sources of meaning (Cameron & Panović, 2014). In this sense, there are three kinds of social meanings work on the language use, namely ideational (the content of text), interpersonal (relations among people) and textual meanings (structure of text) (Halliday, 2009a). To further explore, in multimodal texts, meaning can be generated with visual tools as given images can presents actual world (the ideational meaning), to make connections with viewers (interpersonal meaning), and to organize its intention (textual meaning) (de Silva Joyce & Gaudin, 2007). Four assumptions underlying multimodal discourse analysis are proposed by Jewitt (2009a). First is that language and other semiotic information share equal status to contribute to meaning. Second, each component of communication produces different meanings, and language, as sole medium of communication, demonstrates a part of communication. Third, people's choices on modes of interaction are aimed at producing meaning. Fourth, meanings are realized through use of multimodal resources.

Concerning approaches to multimodal discourse analysis, Halliday (2004) puts forward social semiotic approach to language, which has been mentioned before. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) introduce a (top-down) contextual approach with a specific orientation to ideology, gaining criteria of visual design by text analysis. By contrast, O'Toole (2010) creates a (bottom-up) grammatical method by analyzing texts, such as, painting and architecture design to get a structure which can be used in other texts. However, some scholars still have doubts about multimodal discourse analysis. Iedema (2001) indicates that it is time-consuming to analyze the details in each stage, and such analysis tend to be mechanical. Paltridge (2012) also mentions that multimodal analysis pays much attention on features of communication but neglects other approaches.

### 2.2 Multimodality and Movie Trailer

Film trailers are multimodal texts as they cover semiotic codes, and parts of texts are transferred,

reorganized and complemented for purpose of the promotion, however, film trailer mainly aims to inspire audience's curiosity and expectations (Maier, 2009). Film trailers contain well-selected and well-structured shots, which inform and entertain the potential audiences, as a result, the information conveyed in film trailer has two contexts (Maier, 2009). Specifically, the first context is implicit promotional (diegetic context), which means that information provided is relevant to characters and events; the second context is explicit promotional (non-diegetic context), which covers information related to names of file, director, actors and so on. Nevertheless, not all film trailers have these features, and modes of sound, music, and images all benefit the goal and function of each stage of trailer (Maier, 2011).

There are three dimensions to analyze their promotional information (Maier, 2009). The first is verbal factor, oral information in diegetic and non-diegetic context is relevant to advertised movie, meanwhile, spoken information, including words, sentences and conversation, also needs decontextualization. The second is visual factor, it relates to framework, shots and scenes appeared in film, the subtitles and transition effect as well. The third is the auditory factor, it refers to speech, music and sounds and their effect in film trailer.

### 3. Method

This study will adopt a case study from a cartoon film trailer *Up* to analyze its texts and semiotic information from two aspects, namely implicit promotional and explicit promotional based on Maier's (2011) framework on multimodality and film trailer.

#### 3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Data is collected from a cartoon movie trailer called *Up*, which was released in 2009. The length of this movie trailer is 2 minutes 25 seconds. Based on its characters and events, the topic is about adventure story. Data collected in this movie trailer will be analyzed by the framework from different stages in implicit promotional and explicit promotion, and three dimensions (verbal, visual and aural) (Maier, 2009 & 2011).

**Table 1.** Implicit promotional (diegetic information)

Stages	Time	Functions	Verbal/Visual/Aural
--------	------	-----------	---------------------

<p>Prologue</p>	<p>0:00-0:27</p>	<p>appetizer</p>	  <p>Sound: doorbell rings</p> <p>A short conversation occurred between two main characters (Cark and Russel)</p>
<p>Orientation</p>	<p>0:28-0:59</p>	<p>contextualization</p>	  <p>Voiceover: "All his life, Cark Fredricksen, dreamed of adventure, today his adventure is finally taking off"</p> <p>Sound: light music and birds flying</p>
<p>Complication</p>	<p>1:00-2:10</p>	<p>Disruptive action</p>	 <p>"Please let me in" said the boy.</p>

			 <p>Sound: thundering and lightening</p>  <p>“Can we keep them on, please!” said the boy</p>  <p>Sound: dogs’ barking and running</p>  <p>Sounds are mixed with some special effect.</p>
<p>Evaluation</p>	<p>2:11-2:25</p>	<p>Interpretation of events or outcomes</p>	 <p>“With my wilderness explorer GPS, we will never be lost!” said the boy</p> <p>Sound: something is falling from the sky</p>

In implicit promotional, it is evident that film trailer starts with prologue, which aims to attract

viewers' appetizer. At 00:00 to 0:27, with doorbell ringing, two major characters (an old man and a child) show up by a short conversation. Through this scene, viewers are likely to guess there will be a story happening on these two people. This prologue is organized in a simple way in which the conversation between two characters can provide audience with a general impression on their personalities. The old man shows his indifferent look and answers with a word, like "no", which implies that he does not want to be bothered, while the boy is warm-hearted and outgoing when he asks the man if he needs help. Clearly, there is a strong contrast between their personalities in this conversation. At the same time, it may arouse audiences' curiosity to know what happens on these two characters at next plots.

Second stage is orientation, it contextualizes the story to viewers and helps them to know what the background information is in this film trailer. At 0:28 to 0:59, the voice over introduces the old man's dream "all his life, Cark Fredricksen, dreamed of adventure, today his adventure is finally taking off", then the camera turns to the old man, who is implementing his plan by using thousands of air balloons to take his house from the ground and fly in the sky. During the process, the sound at the beginning is mixed with movement of objects and birds singing. After that, it appears the soft and light music when the house is flying in the sky, which means that the old man's plan has come true. In this stage, the verbal, visual and aural effect are in a good combination with the change of plots. Therefore, audiences can easily get the reason why the film is called *Up* due to the image of flying house. More importantly, this stage introduces the background information of story, which also paves the way for the rest

stages.

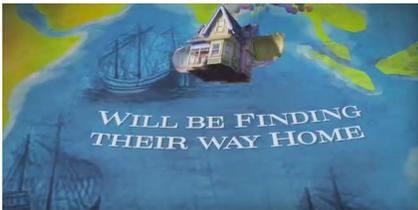
Third stage is complication, it gives the detailed and further information about story. At 1:00 to 2:10, the old man experiences a series of unexpected events. At first the old man encounters the boy, who has a short conversation with him before. The boy is hiding at the corridor of house when the house is flying in the sky. Due to the fear, he knocks the door again, the old man opens the door, which naturally constructs the relation of these two characters. After that, the flying house experiences the lightning and storm, which takes the two characters to south America. In this land, they meet new friends, a peacock and a dog. When they continue the adventure, they are faced with attack from a group of fierce dogs and helicopters chasing. In this stage, the sound effects are various and authentic according to the plots. It can present the natural sounds, like knocking the door, lightning strike, dog barking and helicopters flying. The subtle detail is that the sound of air flow occurs when the house is quickly flying in the sky. By viewing this stage, audiences have a clear picture about the main events in film trailer.

Fourth stage is evaluation, it interprets the events or the outcomes. Experiencing a series of events at previous stage, the camera turns to the old man and the child again. At 2:11 to 2:25, everything looks quiet and peaceful with clear blue sky. The boy shows a GPS machine and tells the old man that they will not be lost. After saying that, the GPS machine is falling out of window. In terms of the sound effect, this action presents a real-life sound that something is falling from the sky. At this stage, even if it does not give the complete interpretation of outcomes, however, the quick shift of plot leaves viewers a mystery for the ending.

**Table 2.** Explicit promotional (non-diegetic and diegetic information)

Stages	Time	Functions	Verbal/Visual/Aural
Promotional identification	0:26-0:28	Film company	

			 <p>Sound: relaxing and light music</p>
Promotional recapitulation	1:16 1:28 2:07	Introduce new orientative information evaluatively	   <p>Different sounds (e.g. wind blowing and dog's barking)</p>
Promotional interpretation	0:15 2:00	Possible impacts	 <p>"I could help you cross the street."</p>

			 <p style="text-align: center;">"Russel, give me your hand!"</p>
Promotional recommendation	1:48 1:54	Advise viewers	  <p style="text-align: center;">Music with some curiosity and nervousness</p>
Promotional information	2:23-2:25	Release dates	

In explicit promotional, the first stage comes from promotional identification, which introduces foregrounds meaning, such as film company, directors and actors (Maier, 2011). At 0:26 to 0:28, images of two companies show up with short theme music, "Disney" and "PIXAR", which gives a clue that this film is produced from the collaboration of these two companies. In this case, some potential fans of these companies may have huge interest to watch this film trailer.

Second stage is promotional recapitulation, it presents characteristics of characters involved in film trailer and comments on stories. On the way of taking adventure, the old man and the child meet their new friends. There are quite different

reactions between these two characters. The child is curious about new things, and he likes his new friends. By shaking with the dog, it can be seen that he is kind and friendly. By contrast, the old man is not interested in making new friends, so he is not willing to let new friends join in his adventure plan. Despite this fact, he is still full of adventurous spirits when he is faced with various difficulties. Moreover, there is a hidden kindness inside of his heart. Otherwise, he will not let the child and new friends join in his plan and experience a series of adventure events together. In this movie trailer, there is a villain, who is also a scientist. He tries to destroy the old man's plan by making dogs attack and helicopter attack. The strong comparison of features among these

characters impress audiences and allow them to make clear about the relationships construction in this film trailer.

Third stage is promotional interpretation, it explores the possible influences of film upon viewers (Maier, 2011). Although this film trailer is filled with adventurous spirits, it also demonstrates the multiple dimensions. Firstly, from the content of short conversation between the old man and the child at the very beginning, we can see that the child is warm-hearted and well-behaved because he wants to help the old man, for example, "I could help you cross the street". This action inspires audiences that people should be kind and be willing to help others. Secondly, in the process of taking adventure, the old man helps the child when he crashes into the cliff, "Russel, give me your hand!" Through this action, we can see that there is a real friendship between these two characters. It may tell audiences that a friend in need is a friend indeed. At the same time, true friendship is to offer help when friends involve in hardships.

Fourth stage is promotional recommendation, it provides some information to advise viewers. At 1:48 and 1:54 in film trailer, there are two maps with written sentences "The adventure of a lifetime" and "Will be finding their way home". Meanwhile, two maps show up with the curious and nervous music, which further guides viewers to expect and guess result of the adventure. More importantly, it may give them a kind of feeling of guessing and tension about this adventure story.

The last stage is promotional information, it explains extra non-diegetic information, such as address, release dates, and so forth. At the end of film trailer, the image come out with the release date and the type of film, "3D" and "MAY 29th", the size of these two key words is larger than other words, which highlights the information that director wants to convey.

Based on the analysis of implicit and explicit promotional, the overall evaluation will focus on three elements (verbal/visual/aural). The verbal aspect includes the voiceover and conversations, they directly introduce the spoken information. The visual aspect, it mainly presents images with characters and events, which is vivid and clear to present the content of story. The aural aspect,

there are various sound effects in chosen film trailer. The sound effects vary in terms of variation of slots. At the same time, they present the natural and authentic situation for audiences, such as lightning strike and door-bell ringing. The well-combination of three elements not only gives a clear picture about story, but also allows viewers to experience different feelings, such as guessing the end and feeling tension. Apart from these, it is worth mentioning some written information in this film trailer. Such as, the written logo of film company, the maps with sentences and the image with the release date and the type of film, all of them give extra important information to viewers. On the whole, these elements work together to function well of each stage in implicit and explicit promotional.

#### 4. Further Discussions

Film trailers, which generally last 2 to 3 minutes, are good examples of multimodal texts as numerous semiotic resources, such as sound, images and music, contribute to the process of meaning-making (Kuara, 2014). Other elements (e.g., order of shots, camera movement, sound impact and emotional tone) in film trailer need to be further discussed in this section.

The ordering of shots in movie trailer has impact on evaluation and comments on characters (Maier, 2009). Back in movie *Up* again, the sequence of shots influences the presentation of character's personalities on screen. At the very beginning, the old man seems to be indifferent and stubborn as he refuses to receive any help from the child. At the middle stage, he accepts the child's request and let him join in his plan. However, he is still not willing to get to meet new friends. At the climax stage, he shows his hidden kindness and lend a hand to the child who gets struck in trouble. Obviously, with the presentation of slots from the beginning to the end, we can see that there is a variation of the old man's characters. Therefore, viewers may have a comparatively accurate evaluation on this character.

Camera movement is one of factors which has impact on evaluation of verbal and visual information in movie trailer (Maier, 2009). In the movie *Up*, there are some evidences of camera movements. At orientation stage, the old man is sitting on an automatic wheelchair in his house,

moving from up-stair to the middle, then pressing the button on the wheelchair. With this action, there is a voice over telling the viewers that the old man is implementing his plan. Then the camera turns to the outside of the house in which thousands of air balloons come out from the roof. Followed by the house is ready to fly away. In this clip, the camera movements links with the images and voice over (visual and verbal tools) to convey information that the old man is in the charged of making his house fly away by using balloons. Therefore, camera movement is related to presentation of verbal and visual information, and it helps to process information from images and spoken language. Similar research on camera movement in film comes from *Freaky Friday*, two characters switch bodies with each other because of cookies, by camera movements, one of characters face her new body and present words and gestures (Maier, 2009).

Sounds, like other semiotic resources, are likely to make connection with listeners, to further explain, sounds can present people's actions and interactions, for instance, sound of door slamming, meanwhile, some types of sounds (e.g., melody) can affect listeners' emotions and feelings (van Leeuwen, 1999). In the movie *Up*, there are a variety of sounds appearing, and all of them are natural and authentic. What is more, they can be generally divided into two types. One is for presenting characters' action and interactions, for example, knocking the door and door-bell ringing. Another one is for impacting audiences' emotions and feelings, for instance, at the climax stage of film trailer, two characters and their friends suffer from the attack of dogs and helicopters, the music is full of nervousness and excitement, which may make audiences feel worried and anxious as well. The further research on sounds in film trailer comes from Noad & Unsworth (2007), they analyze the relation between sounds and social distance through the film *The Queen*, finally they conclude that the aural perspective can construct the relation social distance between listener and sound itself.

The emotional tone in film trailer embedded with narration, which aims to attract the audiences' emotions by contextualizing the register and make it understandable (Jesen & Reitman, 2014). In movie *Up*, the basic emotional tone covers the

adventurous spirits by presenting the old man's dream and a series of his experiences with the child. In this sense, audiences may be inspired and encouraged by the so-called adventurous spirits from two main characters.

Based on the analysis of four dimensions, including the order of shots, camera movement, sound impact and emotional tone, we may have a more comprehensive understanding of the chosen film trailer. Film trailers, as one of multimodal texts, it utilizes the abundant semiotic resources to help viewers to understand the content of it and also make connection with them.

### 5. Conclusions and Limitations

This study examines the multimodal discourse analysis on the film trailer *Up*, which is explored by multifaceted factors, including verbal, visual and aural information, on top of these, order of shots, camera movement, sound impact and emotional tone have been discussed with relevant plots and demonstrations in chosen clip. Overall, the multimodal texts and underlying semiotic information in this film trailer may give a clear picture to the viewers.

Nevertheless, some limitations of this study should be mentioned. On one hand, there are limited researches on multimodality and film trailers, which restricts an in-depth study with comprehensive and supportive literatures. On the other hand, the film trailer *Up* contains the cartoon characters and limited plots, which cannot present a complete story and real-life scenes. Regarding the future research, multimodal texts and activities could be implemented in language classroom, which enables learners to experience the various semiotic resources and to draw attention on meaning (Newfield & et al., 2003).

### References

- Bateman, J. A. (2008), *Genre and Multimodality: A Foundation for the Systematic Analysis of Multimodal Documents*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cameron, D., & Panovic, I. (2014). *Working With Written Discourse*. SAGE Publication.
- de Silva Joyce, H. and Gaudin, J. (2007). *Interpreting the Visual: A Resource Book for Teachers*. Putney, NSW, Australia: Phoenix Books.

- Halliday, M. A. K. (1989a), Context of situation, in M. A. K. Halliday and R. Hasan. *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-semiotic Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 3–14.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (2009b), Text and discourse analysis, in J. J. Webster (ed.), *The Essential Halliday*. London: Continuum, pp. 362–402.
- Iedema, R. (2001), Analysing film and television: A social semiotic account of *Hospital: An Unhealthy Business*, in T. van Leeuwen and C. Jewitt (eds), *The Handbook of Visual Analysis*. Los Angeles: Sage, pp. 181–204.
- Jensen, C., Bier, S., & Reitman, J. (2014). Reduced narration, intensified emotion: the film trailer. *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind*, *viii*(1), 105–125.
- Jewitt, C. (2009a), An introduction to multimodality, in C. Jewitt (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*. London: Routledge, pp. 14–27.
- Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2006), *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2nd edn). London: Routledge.
- Kuara, R. (2014). *Multimodal Resources in Film Trailers* (Doctoral dissertation, UNIMED).
- Maier, C. D. (2009). Visual evaluation in film trailers. *Visual Communication*, *8*(2), 159-180.
- Maier, C. D. (2011), Structure and function in the generic staging of film trailers, in R. Piazza, F. Rossi and M. Bednarek (eds), *Telecinematic Discourse: Approaches to the Language of Films and Television Series*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 141–58.
- Newfield, D., Andrew, D., Stein, P., & Maungedzo, R. (2003). No Number Can Describe How Good It Was: Assessment issues in the multimodal classroom. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, *10*(1), 61–81.
- Noad, B., & Unsworth, L. (2007). Semiosis in the film soundtrack: aural perspective and social distance in *The Queen* film trailer. *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, *15*(3), 8.
- O’Toole, M. (2010), *The Language of Displayed Art* (2nd edn). London and New York: Routledge.
- Paltridge, B. (2012). *Discourse analysis: an introduction* (2nd ed.). London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (1999) *Speech, Music, Sound*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

**Notes**

Website link for film trailer:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORFWdXl\\_zJ4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORFWdXl_zJ4)