

Multimodal Discourse Analysis on Chinese-English Subtitle Translation

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Abstract:

The development of modern multimedia technology has facilitated the widespread dissemination of fine traditional Chinese culture in the world. The traditional Chinese medical culture is becoming more and more well-known as a gem of Chinese civilization. One of the common multimodal text kinds is the documentary, which uses text, audio, and images among other symbols to convey meaning. It possesses authenticity and artistic qualities, acting as a key conduit for the spread of culture. This study uses the documentary *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2* as the object of analysis and a multimodal discourse analysis framework as its theoretical foundation. This translation technique examines the relationship between subtitles as a textual modality and other modalities, as well as the results attained, by studying the subtitle translation strategies via three levels: culture, context, and content. Ultimately, this study aims to provide insights for subtitle translation practices in traditional Chinese medicine documentaries and thus contribute to enhancing the international influence of Chinese traditional culture.

Keywords: *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2*; Multimodal discourse analysis; Traditional Chinese medicine.

1. Introduction

China is becoming more and more influential in the global arena these days. Based on this, more people are learning about and appreciating the accomplishments of its superb traditional culture thanks to scientific and technological advancements. However, because of its rich and complicated content, the spread of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) culture has long been hindered by linguistic, cognitive, and cultural barriers. Advances in multimedia technology have facilitated the emergence and international dis-

tribution of numerous TV programs, variety shows, and documentaries centered around TCM culture in recent years. Unlike traditional books, these new cultural carriers stimulate audiences' senses through the complementary use of images, language, and text, thereby promoting their comprehension and impression. *The Tale of Chinese Medicine* is the first large-scale documentary series on TCM in China, consisting of two seasons that explore the functions and applications of Chinese medicinal herbs while narrating the stories of cultural inheritors. This research takes *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2* as a case

study, analyzing selected texts from cultural, contextual, and content perspectives. By examining the coordination and integration of various modalities including visuals, sound, and cultural symbols, and applying the theory of multimodal discourse analysis, this study aims to explore subtitle translation strategies in *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2*. In the end, it aims to ascertain how this documentary complies with common guidelines for subtitle translation while assisting viewers in perceiving the provenance, effectiveness, and modes of absorption of medicinal herbs intuitively. This will yield important insights for advancing TCM culture and enhancing the standards of subtitle translation in documentaries.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Documentary subtitle translation

Subtitles can be classified as either intralingual or interlingual from a linguistic standpoint. Interlingual subtitle translation, also referred to as subtitle translation, is the process of translating text from the source language into the target language and superimposing it at the bottom of the screen while keeping the original audio of the work [1]. Subtitle translation goes beyond this one-to-one relationship, in contrast to the “source text-target text” strategy used in traditional print media. Scholars have identified five general characteristics of subtitle translation: auditory, integrative, instantaneous, popular, and non-annotative [2]. Furthermore, subtitle translation varies in style and characteristics depending on factors such as era, form, content, and audience of the work. Since this study takes documentary as the research object, the review part will be organized only for the characteristics of subtitle translation of documentaries.

Documentaries are a type of film that mainly uses subtitles, hence they have a lot of specialist vocabulary. Translators face a significant challenge in accurately conveying the narrator’s intent while coordinating with the documentary’s pictures and audio, and allowing the audience to quickly form cognitive frameworks because viewers must continuously focus on the subtitles while watching the pictures in order to understand. Early scholars approached this from the audience’s perspective, suggesting that subtitle translation should be audience-centered and proposing principles such as ‘reasonable economy’ and ‘colloquialism’ and ‘comprehensibility’ [3]. Other researchers examined films from the translator’s point of view and found that “non-verbal signs becoming significant texts for meaning construction” is a commonality among them. Additionally, they pointed out that, in comparison to other forms of subtitles, the “temporal and spatial limitations

of subtitles” and the “frequent changes in register” cause more noticeable losses in language conversion [4]. As a result, even though earlier research has identified several basic ideas and traits of documentary subtitles, multimodal components have not received enough consideration.

In recent years, documentary translation has increasingly emphasized the integrated use of multimodal elements. Due to the typical display time of subtitles being between 2 to 7 seconds on screen [3], some scholars have observed that the ‘dilution’ phenomenon of Chinese culture is inevitably present in translation. They advocate for the flexible reorganization of different signs, such as text, images, and visual elements, in terms of meaning and structure, which can partially compensate for the referential loss in language conversion and provide a rich contextual space for disseminating excellent traditional Chinese culture and concepts [5]. The translation of the documentary *Xi Jinping’s Governance Philosophy* exemplifies this approach, as the translator effectively conveyed China’s governance principles and achievements to an international audience through carefully designed subtitles and narration [6]. Although complete information transfer cannot be achieved within 2 to 7 seconds due to information volume constraints, cultural barriers, and temporal-spatial limitations of subtitles, some scholars have used multimodal discourse to convey certain information through non-verbal signs, thereby improving the audience’s sensory experience and avoiding tedious subtitles that could interfere with the presentation of other elements.

2.2 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

In the early stages, Zhang Delu proposed a framework for multimodal discourse analysis based on systemic functional linguistics, comprising four levels: cultural, contextual, content, and expression. The text’s cultural context, which includes elements of ideology and genre, is the primary focus of the cultural level; the scope, tone, and modality of discourse are addressed by the contextual level; and the complementary relationships between language, images, sound, and other modalities within the text are examined by the content level [7]. Multimodal discourse analysis has since been extensively used in the translation of numerous works.

Taking traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) as an example, the names and functions of Chinese herbal medicines present significant challenges in translation, as there are rarely exact equivalents in English. These names are highly condensed in meaning and often expressed in classical Chinese, generalizing the essence of Chinese culture. Therefore, deviations in meaning can occur during the translation process. Historically, the dissemination of

TCM culture has been limited to learning and referencing among professionals, resulting in a narrow audience with the general public largely unfamiliar with TCM. But because to developments in media technology, documentaries are now presenting TCM culture in a more thorough and authentic manner. Through the use of multimodal collaboration, viewers are able to experience and comprehend the richness and diversity of TCM by using numerous senses. Auditory modalities can elicit emotional responses, which fosters a stronger sense of identity and resonance with TCM, while visual modalities enable audiences to observe the actual procedures of TCM, improving the veracity of the content.

In summary, this study will employ the multimodal analytical framework to explore the cultural, contextual, and content dimensions of subtitle translations regarding the names and functions of traditional Chinese medicine in *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2*. Eventually, it will figure out the relationship between subtitles as a textual modality and other modalities. Then building on this relationship, this study will examine the translation strategies and methods used for the original subtitles, and ultimately address why these translation methods were chosen and the effects achieved.

3. Research Method

This study adopts a descriptive-explanatory method together with a case study of the subtitle translation of *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2*. In this study, the subtitles of the whole ten episodes of *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2* are collected as data. Based on the theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis proposed by Zhang Delu, the subtitle translation is analyzed from cultural, contextual, and content levels. Because many modalities collaborate to create the meaning of a multimodal discourse [8], the relationships between modalities must be considered while translating subtitles. This study examines the subtitle translation of this documentary with an

emphasis on visual, aural, linguistic, and other modalities. As part of the analytical process, this study also covers how different modalities affect the translation of subtitles; as a result, a summary of subtitle translation techniques is provided.

4. Subtitle Translation of Documentary *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2* From the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

4.1 On the Cultural Level

Since there are great differences in the history and traditions between China and the other countries, different characteristics are presented when translating Chinese cultural elements, which led to a vital role of cultural level in intercultural communication [7,9]. There are a lot of cultural elements, especially about TCM culture, in *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2*. This study mainly focuses on the translation of the names of Chinese herbal medicine and TCM Prescriptions, and some historical records in ancient classics.

4.1.1 Translation of Chinese Herbal Medicine Names

Given the variety of naming practices for Chinese herbal medications, it is imperative to use distinct translation strategies depending on the context [10]. Translators typically use transliteration, free translation, foreignizing translation, and literal translation techniques. Moreover, in view of the complementary relationship, many clips in *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2* involving herbal medicines reflect the highlighting relationship between images and subtitles. Subtitles are foregrounded as the primary way of conveying information, while images provide background information and enhance the subtitles. Some examples are shown in the Table 1 as follows.

Table 1. Translation Examples of Chinese Herbal Medicine Names

Naming Methods of Herbs	Methods	Examples
According to botanical name or medicinal part	Literal Translation	菊花 Chrysanthemum 生姜 Ginger 莲子 Lotus Deed 桃仁 Peach Kernel
According to origin place	Literal Translation; Foreignizing Translation	五味子 Chinese Magnoliavine Fruit 川芎 Sichuan Lovage Root 杭麦 Hangzhou Dwarf Lilyturf Root

Using external color	Literal Translation	桑白皮 White Mulberry Root Bark 赤芍 Red Peony Root 白僵蚕 White Stiff Silkworm
Using preparing process	Literal Translation	焦山楂 scorched hawthorn fruit 干姜 Dried Ginger
For materials had no analogues in English	Free Translation or Transliteration	牛黄 Cow-bezoar 附子 Fu Zi

4.1.2 Translation of the Names of TCM Prescriptions

In *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2*, there are two main approaches to translate prescription names: (1) Transliteration plus forms of preparation. Symbolic terms are used in place of explicit names in these prescriptions, which often involve intricate blends of three or more herbs. Certain formulations, like Daqinglong Decoction, even incorporate elements of Chinese culture. Transliteration is used to promote picture fluency and sustained subtitle presence,

which improves reading while simultaneously adhering to the conciseness standards of subtitle translation. (2) Preparation forms with literal translation. Typically, these prescriptions only include four herbs. The audience can gain a comparable or equivalent comprehension of the source language by using the literal translation approach, which preserves all of the information in the original text and format. Some examples are shown in the Table 2 as follows.

Table 2. Translation Examples of the Names of TCM Prescriptions

Methods	Examples
Transliteration	大青龙汤 Daqinglong Decoction 二至丸 Erzhi Pills 交泰丸 Jiaotai Pills
Literal Translation	苓桂术甘汤 Decoction of Poria, Cassia Twig, Rhizome of Largehead Atractylodes and Ural Licorice Root 参苓白术散 Ginseng, Poria and Largehead Atractylodes Rhizome Powder 瓜蒌薤白白酒汤 Liquor soup of Chinese snake gourd and long stamen chives

4.1.3 Translation of Common Sayings, Historical Records

Most common Sayings and historical records are ancient texts with concise language, rich literary elements and profound cultural connotations [11]. In *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2*, when common sayings and historical records appear, the subtitles and the visual image show a

non-complementary relationship mostly, that is the visual image does not contribute significantly to the subtitles in terms of embodiment of meaning. On the other hand, the visual aesthetic—like Chinese ink painting—can somewhat enhance the words. To achieve the change of various texts, translators use methods such as literal translation, annotation, omission, etc. The following is a list of several examples found in Table 3.

Table 3. Translation Examples of the Names of TCM Prescriptions

Methods	Examples
Literal Translation	上应月魄而性灵异，退虚热，行湿气，杀虫，而为疳病痲痘诸疮要药也。 It has amazing properties as it echoes the spirit of the moon; it can bring down deficiency-heat, relieve eczema, and kill insects, thus serving as a cure for infantile malnutrition, ulcers, and sores.
Literal Translation with Annotation	本草纲目记载，此物出巴蜀，而形如菽豆，故以名之。 According to the „Compendium of Materia Medica“, this plant is indigenous to Bashu (Modern-day Sichuan) and is shaped like a bean (dou), hence its name „ba dou“.
Omission	多子多孙，子孙满堂。 Many children, many grandchildren.

4.2 On the Contextual Level

4.2.1 Translation of narration

Narration, as one of the most commonly used documentary languages, is widely used as subtitle language in the documentary *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2*. In the subtitle translation of narration of this documentary, the accuracy and simplicity of term translation and the aesthetics of subtitle translation are well presented.

For example, in the documentary, a doctor uses “sizhen” to refer to “four visits”, but it also contains two additional meanings of “four doses” and “four diagnostic methods” in traditional Chinese medicine. This example highlights a crucial aspect, that the translation of Chinese medicine phrases in subtitles should be matched with the context of documentary language. Furthermore, this documentary’s English subtitles focus on the aesthetic impact of mixing images to strengthen context when it comes to image modes. The context paired with multi-modal elements provides a complete narrative system in the process of documentary subtitle translation.

4.2.2 Translation of dialogue

Dialogue translation strategies from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis pay attention to ensuring the accuracy of information and the adaptability of context while combining multimodal discourse analysis. It preserves the speaker’s original meaning and manner while giving the translated language a more lively and organic quality. The speaker’s cultural background and the professional words used in the discourse are researched and verified prior to translation, and the original culture’s distinctiveness and values are upheld throughout the translation process. For example, in the context of the documentary *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2*, “hanre” refers to the two evils of the body in the conception of TCM, rather than the simple expression of temperature, so that the word “chill” is used instead of “cold” in the subtitle translation. Through precise language translation, non-linguistic modal assistance and flexible processing strategies, the subtitle translation of this documentary successfully conveys the dialogue content to the international audience in the context of TCM.

4.3 On the Content Level

4.3.1 Application of representational meaning

In the documentary *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2*, the filmmakers fully demonstrate the “representational meaning” of multimodal discourse analysis through the presentation of characters, events and their relationships in visual modes such as images and videos. The movie

ties the narrative, concept, and other levels together with its depiction of dynamic scene display and character behavior. With the use of high-definition photography, this documentary vividly depicts the TCM practice process while capturing the dynamic scenes of growing, picking, processing, and matching herbs. This enhances the expression of the documentary subtitles and creates a seamless narrative chain. In this documentary, the essence of TCM is also represented by a few symbolic aspects. The elements such as ancient medicine cabinets, old medical books and traditional processing tools, not only represent the historical inheritance of TCM, but also symbolize the adherence and inheritance of TCM practitioners. Through the use of multiple modal resources and the subtitles, the documentary *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2* represents a comprehensive image of TCM from the content.

4.3.2 Embodiment of interpersonal meaning

The “interpersonal meaning” in multimodal discourse analysis, especially the interactive relationship between images, words and other modes in the transmission of information, successfully helps the documentary *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2* to establish a profound connection between the audience and the documentary content. The documentary helps the viewer feel the significance of Chinese medicine in resolving contemporary medical issues in addition to helping them comprehend the deep meaning and distinct charm of Chinese medicine through the deft use of contact, social distance, and attitude. For instance, the documentary uses close-ups to highlight patients’ joyful reactions to treatment, giving viewers the impression that they are there and experiencing the special allure of TCM and its amazing healing powers. In addition to strengthening the audience’s sense of belonging, this intimate emotion helps them better comprehend and identify with traditional Chinese medical culture. By showing the professional attitude and exquisite skills of TCM experts in the process of diagnosis and treatment, as well as the deep emotion between them and the patients, the documentary narrows the distance between the audience and the TCM, making the audience feel the warmth of Chinese medicine culture. While by showing the natural scenes such as the origin and growing environment of Chinese medicinal materials, the documentary maintains a certain sense of distance, enabling the audience to think about the relationship between people and nature. The patients in the documentary relate their treatment experiences with appreciation, and the doctors’ rigorous efforts to promote TCM information all contribute to the favorable assessment and attitude toward the practice. This multimodal interaction gives new life to TCM’s inheritance and development while also enhancing the expression of doc-

umentary subtitles.

5. Conclusion

Multimodal discourse analysis provides a new perspective for the study of documentary subtitle translation, emphasizing the coordination and mutual promotion of various modalities in the translation process. On the cultural level, translators should give full play to the complementary role of visual images or the other modalities, and adopt translation strategies such as transliteration, omission and literal translation to strengthen the expression effect of the cultural information contained in source language. It should be noted that when the text and other modalities are non-complementary, it is necessary to appropriately adopt strategies such as addition and annotation. At the content level, documentaries incorporate a variety of symbolic resources like contemporary technology, image presentation, background music, and in-depth explanations, which partially offset the semantic loss that subtitle translation neglected and are crucial in creating the connotation of TMC. At the context level, subtitle translation can be as concise as possible based on the support of modal information and the context, accurately conveying the meaning of the original text. It should also fully combine the context as well, selecting the most appropriate translation method according to the plot, background music, speaker's expression, etc.. Based on the theory of multimodal discourse analysis, this paper studies the subtitle translation of a TCM-themed documentary, *The Tale of Chinese Medicine S2*, from the three levels of culture, context, and content, further deepening the understanding of this theory and TCM culture. It is also hoped to get enlightenment for translators to comprehensively consider multimodalities during translation process, and adopt appropriate translation strategies to construct the complete meaning to the greatest extent, thus helping target language audience to deeply and accurately understand the connotation of Chinese traditional culture, so as to improve the international communication power of Chinese documentaries and expand the influence of Chinese traditional culture.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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