

# The Multimodal Discourse Perspective: Blue and White Porcelain Element in Package Design

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**Abstract:** Multimodal discourse analysis emphasizes the various semiotic resources of discourse. The purpose of this study is to make a multimodal discourse analysis of blue and white porcelain element in package design. Multimodal discourse analysis has been widely applied in the discourse of advertisements and pictures, but the multimodal discourse analysis of blue and white porcelain element in package design still needs to be further explored.

**Keywords:** Blue and white porcelain element; Multimodal discourse analysis; Package design

## 1. Introduction

Multimodal discourse analysis has drawn much attention from linguists since the 1990s. Linguists began to realize that discourse contains not only language, but also non-language such as image, sound and actions, etc. Package design conveys discourse by language and non-language. Jingdezhen is a city famous for its porcelain, especially blue and white porcelain. As one representative element of Chinese traditional culture, blue and white porcelain element has been widely applied in package design. Optimizing the discourse of blue and white porcelain element in package design is helpful to spreading blue and white porcelain culture and Chinese traditional culture, increasing the city charm of Jingdezhen, and developing ceramic culture.

However, the multimodal discourse analysis of blue and white porcelain element in package design is scarce. Multimodal discourse analysis has been widely applied in advertisements and pictures, and it has achieved some profitable results which are applied in practices. The study briefly introduces multimodal discourse analysis theories, describes the application of blue and white porcelain element in package design, and makes a multimodal discourse analysis of blue and white porcelain element in package design to conclude the characteristics and advertising effect of the multimodal discourse of blue and white porcelain element in package design.

## 2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal discourse analysis makes full use of the various semiotic resources (text, visual image, space and other design) to analyze the discourse. The dimension of new semiotic resources is quite wide, including printed media, dynamic and static digital media, spatial 3-D de-

sign and other image elements in package design (Kay, 2004).

### 2.1. Literature review

The theoretical basis of multimodal discourse analysis is Halliday (1978)'s social semiotic language theory. Halliday believes that text is one of various semiotic resources (gestures, images, videos and music, etc.) and people use all kinds of semiotic resources to communicate or create meanings. The emphasis of multimodal discourse analysis is on the various semiotic resources in social situations. Halliday divides language function into three categories: ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. The ideational function is to convey information, communicate meanings and build experience; the interpersonal function is to build and maintain the interpersonal relationship between two speakers or communicators; the textual function is to describe the process of organizing information. In the multimodal discourse, these meanings or functions can be realized through visual, audio and other semiotic resources. It conveys the real world by its ideational function, builds and maintains the interpersonal relationship by its interpersonal function, and organizes the internal elements by its textual function.

Multimodal discourse analysis has drawn the increasing attention from linguists since 1990s. People obtain their perceptions and communicate their meanings through visual modality, audio modality, tactile modality, olfactory modality and gustatory modality. The representative researches on multimodal discourse analysis include *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006) and *Multimodal Discourse Analysis: Systemic Functional Perspectives* (O'Halloran, 2004). Jewitt (2009) describes four theoretical assump-

tions of multimodal discourse analysis. Bednarek and Martin (2010) discuss the systemic functional perspectives of multimodality. Multimodal discourse analysis has been widely applied in advertisements and pictures, and it has achieved some profitable results which are applied in practices. However, the multimodal discourse analysis of blue and white porcelain element in package design is scarce.

## 2.2. Limitations

Firstly, multimodal discourse analysis is quite subjective. Different discourse analysts may have different understandings or analyses on the same multimodal discourse. The quantitative analysis of multimodal discourse is helpful to decrease its subjectivity.

Secondly, there are many potential mistakes in the multimodal discourse analysis. For example, the analyzed semiotic resources or discourse may not be really needed to be analyzed. Or, it pays more attention to the ultimate result of multimodal discourse and pays little attention to the people who create the multimodal discourse.

Thirdly, the purpose and range of multimodal discourse analysis are limited. Multimodal discourse analysts pay more attention to the features of communication and neglect other methods of discourse analysis, therefore the discourse is not adequately analyzed.

## 3. The Application of Blue and White Porcelain Element in Package Design

The three major essential components of package design include package material, craft skills, and decorative design. The study mainly focuses on the third essential components, namely, decorative design. The main purpose of package design is to promote products, attract target customers, and reach the expected sale amount. Blue and white porcelain element has often been applied in the package design of Chinese liquor, tea, mooncake, rice and porcelain, and most of them make use of its representative Chinese traditional culture to promote and market their products.

### 3.1. The application in package design of Chinese liquor

Many companies of Chinese liquor (Fenjiu Liquor Company, Hongxing Liquor Company and Jingdezhen Liquor Company) utilize blue and white porcelain element in their package design. They not only use blue and white porcelain pattern in their package, but also use blue and white porcelain as their liquor containers. The shapes of blue and white liquor container are different and the patterns of blue and white porcelain element are various. Representing Chinese traditional culture and natural scenery, dragons, landscape, calligraphy, ancient towns, flowers and plants, and other patterns have been widely applied in blue and white porcelain element.

### 3.2. The application in package design of tea

Different from Chinese liquor containers using blue and white porcelain, tea containers using blue and white porcelain are known as blue and white porcelain jars. Generally speaking, bottles have bottleneck, and jars have no neck. China is the first country which discovered and used tea plants, therefore it is regarded as the hometown of tea. Nowadays, the habit of drinking tea in many countries comes from China. As a symbol of Chinese traditional culture, tea needs blue and white porcelain, another symbol of Chinese traditional culture, to be combined in package design.

### 3.3. The application in package design of mooncake

The package is closely related with its products. The original purpose of package is to protect the products during the transportation and storage. With the development of technology and the change of lifestyle, package has become an integral part of products. The information conveyed by package design includes the cultural connotations of products. Since ancient times, mooncake has been an important part of Mid-Autumn Festival. Mooncake is not a common food and commodity, but a special food and commodity with the meaning of family reunion. Therefore, the package design of mooncake products should show its cultural connotation. Most of mooncake package use the color like red, yellow and orange, yet the application of blue and white color and blue and white pattern in mooncake package makes it novel and traditional.

## 4. Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Blue and White Element in Package Design

Multimodal discourse analysis has been widely applied in advertisements and pictures, such as movie posters, magazine covers, TV commercials, etc. Based on the analysis of their representational meaning, interpersonal meaning and compositional meaning, a deeper understanding of the discourse created by language and non-language to promote and market their products will be obtained, and the research results can be applied in package design practices.

### 4.1. Representational meaning

The color of blue and white in package design represents an outstanding feature of blue and white porcelain element. With the corresponding application of blue and white color, it has become symbols or metaphors of blue and white porcelain. The color of blue and white is the form of blue and white porcelain (meaning), and it has become a part of semiotic system of blue and white porcelain. Their relationship is no longer random, but closely related. The package design containing blue and white porcelain element represent not only blue and white por-

celain, but also its connotative Chinese traditional culture. Many colors have their own representational meanings and have a great influential power upon the expression effect of advertisements. On one hand, colors are directly reflected in the images and have a direct impact on visual perception; on the other hand, colors are the direct representation of commercials. In Chinese culture, the red color represents festive atmosphere, the yellow color represents royal nobility, and the green color represents vitality. Blue and white porcelain provides the color of blue and white with the representational meaning of simplicity and elegance.

#### 4.2. Interpersonal meaning

The multimodal discourse can not only show the relationship among components in the discourse, but also construct the interactive relationship between the participants and the world in the discourse. The three essential parts of interpersonal meaning are contact, distance and perspective. In order to effectively promote and market products, the package designers should maximize the information conveying to target customers. Thus, they prefer to use the expression form which is easily accepted and understood by target customers. There is no direct and face-to-face interaction and communication between package designers and target customers. The target customers do not know the process of package design creation, and the resource from which they can obtain the information about products is their package design. In the package design containing blue and white porcelain element, "The real creators", package designers or product sellers, build the interpersonal relationship with target customers and interact with them through "actor", blue and white porcelain patterns.

#### 4.3. Compositional meaning

The compositional meaning is to combine the representational meaning with the interpersonal meaning and form a meaningful discourse. The organization of right position and left position, the organization of front position and rear position, the organization of framing and other composition methods can have a great impact on the information conveyed by package design or pictures and the expected effect. Different positions and organization have different salience and information value. The left position corresponds with the known information, and the right position relates with the new information. The upper position represents the ideal aspect, and the lower position shows the real aspect. The relationship between the central position and the marginal position conveys the relationship between the important information and the unimportant information. The salience refers to the level of attracting audiences' attention. The background, size, and color contrast, etc. can influence the salience. The framing means the spatial division line in pictures, which

represents the relationship of components. The important decisive part of package design containing blue and white porcelain element is the position of words and pictures. Chinese people prefer symmetrical image. Thus, most of words (brand name) are placed in the central part of the entire package design, or placed in the proper position according to the principle of harmony in package patterns.

### 5. Features and Effects

Based on the multimodal discourse analysis of blue and white porcelain in package design, three features of multimodal discourse analysis of blue and white porcelain in package design are summarized and its effects are discussed.

#### 5.1. Features

Firstly, the package design featuring the color of blue and white or the package design containing blue and white porcelain element represents not only blue and white porcelain, but also its connotative Chinese traditional culture. The color of blue and white remind people of Chinese traditional ink-wash painting and blue and white porcelain, which are symbols of Chinese traditional culture. Secondly, compared with other package design or advertisements, the multimodal discourse of blue and white porcelain element in package design is shortage of dynamic "actor" and audio semiotic resources. Thirdly, the color of blue and white porcelain element in package design is mostly blue and white, and the symmetric patterns of blue and white porcelain element are quite common. The color of blue and white gives people a taste of elegance and freshness, and the essence of traditional beauty will be inherited and developed.

#### 5.2. Effects

In the multimodal discourse, different modalities are mixed and integrated together, and visual modality is employed to convey complex discourses and attitudes. An online questionnaire on the effects of package design containing blue and white porcelain is conducted among 100 people. The ranking of six different package designs containing blue and white porcelain element shows the level of purchasing products. The survey reveals that the package design arousing customers' purchasing desire most combines the marketing products with blue and white porcelain elements in harmony, and its representational meaning, interpersonal meaning and compositional meaning reach its maximum effects. Therefore, in order to optimize the multimodal discourse of blue and white porcelain element in package design, the representational meaning of Chinese traditional culture in blue and white porcelain element and other elements shall be intensified, the interpersonal meaning of blue and white porcelain element in package design should be enhanced, the com-

positional meaning of blue and white porcelain element and other design elements is supposed to be complete and harmonious.

## **6. Conclusion**

With the development of new technology, discourse has developed single modality into various modality and multimodal discourse analysis has prospered. The package design containing blue and white porcelain element mainly employs the visual modality to realize its discourse effect. Compared with other multimodal discourses, the multimodal discourse of blue and white porcelain element in package design has its unique features. The multimodal discourse analysis of blue and white porcelain element in package design can optimize the discourse of blue and white porcelain element in package design and develop the ceramic culture.

## **7. Acknowledgment**

“The Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Blue and White Porcelain Element in Package Design”, 2014 Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute Program

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