

## Multimodal Discourse Analysis of English Portals of Chinese and American Universities: A Case Study of Introductory Web Pages

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**Keywords:** Multimodal discourse analysis, Introductory web pages, Textual analysis, Image analysis, Intersemiotic analysis.

**Abstract:** This article makes a multimodal discourse analysis case study of the forty introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities in the aspects of genre theory, visual grammar and system of image-text relations. Through the analysis, some problems existed in the introductory web pages of Chinese universities are found out and some proposals to address the problems are also provided. The article aims at helping readers understand the social meanings and functions of language and image on the introductory web pages of English portals of universities.

### Introduction

Now with the rapid development of science and Internet technology, the means of human communication have changed tremendously.

In our daily lives, we may make use of colors, gestures, motions, images and other non-verbal semiotic resources to make us well-understood. The use of so many semiotic devices in human communication has indicated that the meaning humans anticipate to express is realized not only through language alone, but also through the combination of other semiotic resources, including static and dynamic ones.

But more often than not, people take such rich and colorful resources for granted or are apt to consider the aesthetic effects instead of interpreting them. Now "We live in a multimodal society, which makes meaning through the co-employment of semiotic resources" (Lim, 2004). Therefore, the study of multimodality becomes the focus of recent researches. Over the past years, however, due to the limitation of science and technology and theoretical development with regard to the discourse analysis, the research orientation in the linguistic field has always concentrated on language alone, which has dominated the linguistic field for many decades. Therefore, if we want to understand how the different semiotic resources intertwine to make meaning, we need to do multimodal discourse analysis.

With the ever-growing popularity of the Internet, more and more universities utilize the portals to present their unique image world-wide. Internet, as an ideal medium to transmit the information, is frequently used by many universities to attract not only domestic students but also overseas students.

On the university portals, introductory web pages have been utilized as an effective advertising method and strategies to attract potential readers. Introductory web pages, as a multimodal discourse, play a prominent role in the process of choosing a college. The information on introductory web pages is often disseminated by the integrated use of linguistic texts and visual images. These visual images are not just ornaments to the linguistic texts; they are also of ideological prominence in meaning representation. Both the linguistic texts and visual images intertwine to make a complete meaning in interpreting the web pages of introductions to the universities. So it is necessary to interpret the meaning of introductory web pages from both the textual and visual perspective.

## **Literature Review**

Many researchers utilize multimodal discourse analysis to analyze various discourse types, such as ads, news and films. However, few scholars have ever tried multimodal discourse analysis to investigate the web page. Luckily, three articles which apply multimodal discourse analysis and also take the web page as a genre are surveyed.

Amy Suen (2009) examines the generic characteristics and visual images of five star hotel homepages in Hong Kong. Chang Yiyuan (2011) tries to explore the similarities and differences between Chinese and American museum web pages. The study by Kem Saichaie (2011) utilizes multimodal discourse analysis to examine the language (text and image) on the institutional websites of 12 colleges and universities across a number of characteristics (e.g. control, type, geographic region, admissions selectivity) in the United States.

The existing literature suggests that various research perspectives and methodologies have been taken by previous researchers. However, the limitations of their studies are apparent. Few scholars have ever tried multimodal discourse analysis to investigate the web pages. However, if universities feel like winning a place in the world, they should make the best use of propaganda and their English portals of the universities which play a major role in international exchanges. Therefore, it is significant to do multimodal discourse analysis of the university web pages. As a result, in this article, the genre of university web pages will be chosen and then a multimodal discourse analysis will be adopted to interpret the whole meaning of university web pages from both the textual and visual perspective.

## **Research Questions**

1. How is interpersonal meaning realized through verbal and visual resources respectively in the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities?
2. How do verbal and visual resources cooperate to construct meaning in the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities?

## **Data Collection**

In terms of selecting Chinese university, Wu Shulian's ranking was employed while US News & World Report's American university ranking was utilized in the selection of the American universities.

20 English introductory web pages of Chinese universities and 20 English introductory web pages of American universities were selected for analysis. A corpus is built with texts and images in the "About the University" columns from the portals of these 40 universities. The data collection period was in January and February, 2016. All the pages and images of the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities accessible during that period were saved for analysis.

## **Research Design**

In this article, both textual and image analyses are made to investigate the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities. Firstly, Bhatia's (2004) critical genre analysis model is applied to the textual analysis of the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities. Secondly, this article also adopts Kress & van Leeuwen's (1996) multimodal analysis framework for analyzing images on the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities. Thirdly, the image-text relations on the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities are explored adopting Martinec, R. and Salway, A.'s (2005) system of image-text relations. Lastly, some strategies for the design of the introductory web pages of Chinese universities are proposed.

## Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Introductory Web Pages of Chinese and American Universities

### Textual Analysis

Move Structure of the Introductory Web Pages of Chinese and American Universities.

Table 1. Move structure of the introductory web pages of Chinese universities.

Move Structure	Obligatory/Optional	Token	Frequency(%)
1. Establishing background	Obligatory	20	100
2. Academic capability illustration	Obligatory	19	95
Step 1: Ability Description	Obligatory	19	95
Step 2: Showing Honors	Obligatory	18	90
3. University and Chinese top leaders	Optional	4	20
4. Cooperation & exchange demonstration	Optional	12	60
5. Mission statement	Optional	14	70
6. Contact information	Optional	15	75

Table 2. Move structure of the introductory web pages of American universities.

Move Structure	Obligatory/Optional	Token	Frequency (%)
1. Establishing background	Optional	12	60
2. Academic capability illustration	Obligatory	16	80
Step 1: Ability Description	Obligatory	16	80
Step 2: Showing Honors	Optional	10	50
3. University diversity	Optional	4	20
4. Volunteering in community service	Optional	1	5
5. Giving	Optional	2	10
6. Cooperation & exchange demonstration	Optional	1	5
7. Mission statement	Optional	8	40
8. Contact information	Optional	14	70

### Similarities in Move Structure of the Introductory Web Pages of Chinese and American Universities.

Table 3. Similar Move structure of the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities.

Move structure	Token	
	Chinese	American
1. Background	20/20	12/20
2. Academic capability illustration	19/20	16/20
Step 1: ability description	19/20	16/20
Step 2: showing honors	18/20	10/20
3. Cooperation & exchange demonstration	12/20	1/20
4. Mission statement	14/20	8/20
5. Contact information	15/20	14/20

Differences in Move Structure of the Introductory Web Pages of Chinese and American Universities.

There are three moves which can be regarded as unique characteristics of the introductory web

pages of American universities, namely, volunteering in community service, diversity and giving. However, there is only one move which can be regarded as unique characteristics of the introductory web pages of Chinese universities. This move is called university and Chinese top leaders.

**Analysis of Linguistic Features.** The tool AntConc will enable us to analyze the data and find out the difference between the two corpora.

Table 4. The holistic comparison of the two corpora.

Corpus	Total Volume (Words)	Mean Sent. Length (Words)	Type/Token Ratio (%)
Chinese corpus	18386	23.65	16.09
American corpus	5695	19.43	29.11

**Analysis of Total Volume.** Based on the data in the above table that the total Volume in Chinese corpus are more than in American corpus (18386 vs. 5695), we can conclude that Chinese university introductions are much longer than that of the American ones.

**Analysis of Mean Sentence Length.** As can be seen from the above table, longer sentences (23.65) are largely found in the English introduction to Chinese universities.

**Analysis of Type/Token Ratio.** The type/token ratio in American corpus is higher than in Chinese corpus, which implies the language use in American corpus is more diverse than in Chinese corpus.

### Image Analysis

**Visual Contact.** There are two forms of visual contact: demand and offer. When images demand, the represented participants make an eye contact with the viewers as if the represented participants are inviting the viewers into their world and demanding some information and service from the viewers.

Table 5. Distribution of contact in the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities.

	Chinese		American	
	Token	Frequency	Token	Frequency
Demand	2	3%	6	12%
Offer	58	97%	43	88%

From the above table, we can see that “offers” (97%, 88%) are more widely distributed than “demands” (3%, 12%).

**Social Distance.** According to visual grammar, social distance relates to ‘the size of frame’, the choice between close-up, medium shot, and long shot.

Table 6. Distribution of social distance in the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities.

Distribution Social distance	Chinese		American	
	Token	frequency	Token	frequency
Close shot	12	20%	21	44%
medium shot	10	17%	7	14%
Long shot	38	63%	21	42%

From this table we know that in introductory web pages of Chinese universities, long shot is most widely used to establish an impersonal relation between the represented figure and the viewer. However, close shot is most widely used to establish an intimate relationship between the represented participants and the viewer in American university web pages.

**Attitude.** Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) suppose two dimensions to consider images: the horizontal dimension, through which participants are presented frontally or obliquely; and the

vertical dimension, through which participants are presented in a high-angle, at eye level or in a low-angle.

As to horizontal angle, there are 65% images on the introductory web pages of Chinese universities and 57% images on the introductory web pages of American universities take a frontal angle. As for vertical angle, eye-level angle which takes 48% is most widely used on the introductory web pages of Chinese universities and 67% images of American take an eye-level angle. It indicates an equal relation between the represented objects and viewers.

Table 7. The distribution of perspectives in the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities.

Distribution		Chinese		American	
		token	frequency	token	frequency
Horizontal angle	Frontal	39	65%	28	57%
	Oblique	21	35%	21	43%
Vertical angle	High	24	40%	8	16%
	Eye level	29	48%	32	65%
	Low	7	12%	9	24%

### Intersemiotic Analysis

Based on the theory framework provided by Martinec & Salway (2005), there are all two main relation between text and image-equal relation and unequal relation.

Table 8. Intersemiotic relationship between image and text.

Status		Chinese samples		American samples	
		token	Frequency	token	Frequency
Equal	Independent	1	2%	1	2%
	Complimentary	24	40%	40	82%
Unequal	Image Subordinate to text	33	55%	7	14%
	Text Subordinate to image	2	3%	1	2%

As can be seen unequal relationship between image and text in the introductory web pages of Chinese universities is more often applied whereas equal relationship between image and text in American universities' web pages is frequently displayed.

### Summary

Based on the analysis of the generic pattern and linguistic features of the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities, we reach the conclusion that there are both similarities and differences between them. Although the difference does not indicate the gap between introductions of Chinese university and that of American university, some problems do exist in the introductory web pages of Chinese universities. The following three categories are classified and some suggestions are also provided.

Firstly, the introductions to Chinese university are so long that it is difficult for readers to quickly obtain the information they need. As a special discourse, an introduction, which presents the readers with a general information, should be concise and precise. It should provide the important and representative information to the readers who will not spend much time in weighing words one by one or scanning all the content on the web page. It's not necessary to put all the detailed information on the web page. American users seem to have less patience than Chinese users. Therefore, more American web pages have headlines or basic statistics only so that American people can find the entry to the information they desire as soon as possible. Despite the fact that we

can understand what the writer wants to emphasize, it sets up some barriers for the reader who is anxious to find out the relevant information. Thus, an English introduction should seize the key points and reflect its main characteristics of the universities.

Secondly, on the introductory web pages of Chinese universities, images of long shot is most widely used to establish an impersonal relation between the represented figure and the viewer. However, close shot is most widely used to establish an intimate relationship between the represented participants and the viewer in American university web pages. So web designers of Chinese university are supposed to put more images which indicate intimate distance on the web page because this will shorten the distance between the persons/objects in the picture and the web users.

Finally, unequal relationship between image and text in the introductory web pages of Chinese universities is more often applied whereas equal relationship between image and text in the introductory web pages of American universities is frequently displayed. So web designers of Chinese university should put more images indicating equal relationship between image and text to make a close relationship with readers at home and abroad.

The analysis conducted in this article shows that there are some differences between the introductory web pages of Chinese and American universities. Besides the reason that native writers are more proficient and competent in English than Chinese, we could account for the difference on the basis of three factors: different cultural patterns, different educational philosophy and different economic situation. Although the introductory web pages of Chinese universities own certain unique features which reflect Chinese culture, it is worthy of learning from the writing and design on the web pages of American universities for further improvement.

### **Acknowledgement**

This article could not have been in today's shape without the generous help and support of many people. I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to each of them. First, I wish to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Professor Xu Xiaoyu, who constantly offers me insightful ideas and encouragement with patience. Second, I wish to thank my families for their tender love and warm support in the past years.

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