A Multimodal Approach to Translating Chinese Zhuang Folklore

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Abstract

The Zhuang ethnic minority is the largest minority in China. Over its long history, the Zhuang people have developed a rich collection of folklore that is an important component in the preservation of China's diverse ethnic culture. Although some art forms of Zhuang folklore have been recognized as intangible cultural heritage, their accessibility and appreciation by majority cultures are largely undeveloped due to limited translations of these works. In this paper, we propose a multimodal approach to translating Chinese Zhuang folklore. The article first reviews studies on Zhuang folklore and investigates works of translation. It then proposes a theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis as the basis for constructing meanings in the translation of Zhuang folklore. Finally, it examines how translators can mobilize the discourse domains of culture, context, content, and expression in order to produce multimodal translations. The proposal of a multimodal approach to translating Zhuang folklore involves the utilization of different communicative modes, such as verbal, visual, and tactile modes. The goal is to develop an efficient mechanism for translating Zhuang folklore in order to achieve wider transmission and appreciation of Zhuang culture.

Keywords: Multimodal discourse analysis, multimodal translation, Chinese Zhuang folklore

1. Introduction

As a multi-ethnic country, China is home to 56 ethnic groups. The Zhuang nationality, with a population exceeding 19 million, is the most populous ethnic minority group in China (Office of the Leading Group of the State Council for the Seventh National Population Census, 2022). Among numerous Zhuang cultures, Zhuang folklore provides a distinctive lens through which to understand the Zhuang people. Examples of Zhuang folklore include the epic of Baeuqloxgdoh, Zhuang folk songs, Zhuang opera, Zhuang clothing, and Sanyuesan Festival. Various forms of Zhuang folklore serve as important components in preserving and promoting the diverse ethnic culture of the Zhuang people.

A number of studies have been conducted on Zhuang folklore over the years. However, many of these studies focus on the folkloric aspects of Zhuang folklore (Obuchová, 1999; Lin & Liu, 2021; Li & Mahamed, 2022). In contrast, research on the translation of Zhuang folklore remains largely unexplored. Limited translation has become a barrier inhibiting people outside China from appreciating Zhuang folklore. Advancements in digital technologies have significantly changed the landscape of translation, making it increasingly multilingual, multicultural, and multimodal. This has led to a growing interest in multimodal translation research. Rather than focusing on a single mode of communication, such as written or spoken text, multimodality integrates various modes, including verbal, visual, and auditory modes. This article examines the translation of Zhuang folklore from a multimodal perspective. It reviews the studies on the translation of Zhuang folklore, explores the potential of multimodal discourse analysis as its theoretical basis, and presents a multimodal approach to translating Zhuang folklore. In today's interconnected world, a multimodal approach to translation is an effective method for improving cross-cultural communication.

2. Literature Review

As Sims and Stephens (2011) state, folklore is informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures and our traditions that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviors and materials. According to this definition, Zhuang folklore can be divided into four main categories: folk literature, performing arts, customs, and material culture.

Some Chinese scholars have published books on specific elements of Zhuang folklore, including a Zhuang-Chinese-English trilingual book entitled *The Epic of Baeuqloxgdoh* (Han & Pan, 2013) and English-Chinese bilingual books entitled *Two Thousand Zhuang Proverbs from China with Annotations and Chinese and English Translation* (Zhou, 2017) and *Pingguo*

Zhuang Liao Songs: Songs of Lunar March (Chen, 2022). However, due to language barriers posed by Zhuang dialects, only a small number of international scholars have engaged in this area of research. One prolific international researcher is D. Holm, who published translated works on various elements of Zhuang folklore, including the ritual texts of buffalo sacrifice (Holm, 2003), the Baeu Rodo scriptures (Holm, 2004), the Hanvueng epic (Holm & Meng, 2015), and the Brigands' song (Holm & Meng, 2022). These books play an important role in the study of Zhuang folklore, providing valuable material for researchers and offering a unique perspective from which international and domestic scholars alike can gain insight into this field of study.

This paper analyzes data from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database to investigate the current status of research on the translation of Zhuang folklore. The data show that the research began in the 1980s. In the initial stages, studies were mainly concerned with the intralingual translation from Zhuang dialects to Mandarin Chinese. The research covered various subjects, including Zhuang folk songs (Qin, 1982), Zhuang long narrative poems (Nong, 1984), and Zhuang folk wisecracks (Li, 1990). These studies have improved the understanding of Zhuang folklore among people from different ethnic groups. Since the mid-1990s, scholars have directed their attention to interlingual translation, investigating methods for translating Zhuang dialects into languages such as Esperanto (Lu, 1994), English (Zhou, 2012), Thai (Wei et al., 2022), and Vietnamese (Luo, 2023).

Existing studies mainly focus on the strategies for translating specific Zhuang folkloric elements. Translations of folk legends and ethnic classics, including Zhuang scriptures and Liao songs, receive the most attention. The majority of these studies were conducted under a specific theoretical framework, such as eco-translatology (Huang, 2014), eco-aesthetics (Zhou, 2016), functional equivalence (Li, 2018), and memetics (Wang & Li, 2019).

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in scholarly publications that examine translation from a multimodal perspective. These include studies about multimodal discourse analysis, multimodal metaphors, and multimodal corpus. Nevertheless, studies on multimodality remain scarce concerning the translation of Zhuang folklore. Advancements in digital technologies have greatly facilitated the process of using multimodal techniques in translation. Therefore, it is necessary to extend the scope of translation research beyond the domain of text-based translations, directing attention towards a multimodal translation of Zhuang folklore. The research on translation should investigate various modes of communication, including text, images, audio, video, and gestures. Moreover, studies should be expanded to cover a wider variety of aspects in order to promote the dissemination and reception of Zhuang folklore among international audiences.

3. Theoretical Framework

Mode is a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning. Image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack, and 3D objects are examples of modes used in representation and communication (Kress, 2010). In the digital age, communication has extended largely beyond languages, thus giving rise to the study of multimodality in translation. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), multimodality is the use of several semiotic methods in the design of a semiotic product or event. Zhuang folklore covers diverse elements, including Zhuang opera, Zhuang folk songs, and Zhuang folk festivals, most of which contain multimodal characteristics. For example, Zhuang opera includes three principal modes: verbal mode (such as written and spoken text), visual and tactile modes (such as makeup, clothes, gestures, and movements), and auditory mode (such as sound and music). Therefore, it can be reasonably argued that multimodality should be employed in translating Zhuang folklore. The objective of this paper is to examine methods for constructing meanings in multimodal discourse in order to develop effective translation strategies.

This study adopts approaches of multimodal discourse analysis within the theoretical framework of Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The SFL theory, founded by M.A.K. Halliday, has been expanded by numerous scholars over the years. Guided by the SFL theory, Martin (1992) introduced a framework for discourse analysis, comprising the following five levels: culture level, context level, meaning level, form level, and media level. Following Martin, Lim (2004) conceptualized three planes for analyzing semiotic resources: the expression plane, the content plane, and the context plane composed of register, genre, and ideology. Based on previous SFL studies, Zhang (2009) proposed a four-dimension framework for multimodal discourse analysis: cultural dimension, contextual dimension, content dimension, and expressive dimension. In this framework (Zhang, 2009), the cultural dimension refers to the cultural context. This context is regarded as a foundation upon which the situational context is built and is an essential component in producing effective multimodal communication. The contextual dimension includes the situational context and is associated with the contextual variables of field, tenor, and mode. The content dimension is divided into two sub-dimensions: the dimension of meaning and the dimension of form. The discourse meaning is composed of three elements: ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning. The meaning of discourse is determined by the contextual variables of field, tenor, and mode. The form of discourse comprises a variety of modes, including verbal, visual, auditory, and tactile modes. These modes are interconnected in either complementary or non-complementary relationships. The expressive dimension refers to the media through which meanings are constructed, which can be classified into verbal and non-verbal media.

Zhang's framework provides a comprehensive perspective for scholars to use multimodal discourse analysis in translation studies. This paper utilizes the framework developed by Zhang to examine the construction of multimodal discourse in translating Zhuang folklore.

4. A Multimodal Approach to Translation

4.1 The Cultural Dimension

Culture is often divided into two categories: material culture and non-material culture. The elements of culture cover various aspects of human life, including artifacts, epics and legends, social customs, rituals, and values and beliefs. Given the ethnic minority status of the Zhuang people, some of their folkloric elements may be unfamiliar to individuals of other nationalities. Therefore, translators should be able to perceive potential cultural differences between the source and target cultures and accurately convey the cultural connotations of Zhuang folklore to a target culture.

A variety of techniques can be used in multimodal translation. One commonly used method is addition, which refers to adding words or phrases to create a complete cultural image. A case in point is the translation of Liu Sanjie, a legendary figure in Zhuang folk stories. Although the stories are well-known among the Zhuang people, the cultural image of Liu Sanjie may be unfamiliar to those from other nationalities. To overcome cultural barriers, apart from a verbal translation of the name Liu Sanjie itself, translators may consider adding a textual explanation and translating it into Liu Sanjie, a Zhuang song fairy. Apart from adding words, the technique of addition can be employed in many other instances. For example, translators can add pictures of Liu Sanjie as a visual supplement to the translation. The addition of text and images in this example reinforces the verbal meaning and illustrates the cultural image of Liu Sanjie. In addition, when translating Zhuang folklore for museums or websites, translators can add audio or video recordings of Liu Sanjie's folk songs. The use of multiple modes can enhance the presentation of the legendary figure. It should be noted that multimodal translation is not simply a piling up of different modes; rather, the modes should interact with each other to produce a good translation. A multimodal translation of Zhuang folklore can help people from different cultural backgrounds better understand Zhuang folklore, thereby promoting the dissemination and reception of Zhuang culture.

4.2 The Contextual Dimension

The environment of the text is the context of situation, which is an instance of a social context, or situation type (Halliday, 1978). In the digital context, technologies such as AI and big data are exerting an increasing influence on translation. The advent of new media and technologies has resulted in a notable shift in international communication and translation and significantly facilitated communication in a technology-assisted multimodal context. Information is now conveyed through a variety of media, including text, images, web pages, and social media platforms. It is readily accessible through multiple channels, including hyperlinks, live streaming, augmented reality, and virtual reality. The digital multimodal context, characterized by virtual interconnectedness, has broken down the barriers of physical existence, offering individuals the opportunity to engage in a digital experience without being constrained by space or time.

As Halliday (1978) asserts, all language functions in contexts of situation, and is relatable to those contexts. Given the function of translation as a bridge between different languages and social contexts, translators must adopt proper translation techniques to match the changing contexts. For example, to enhance global communication, translators may reconstruct the context of situation in the target language. The key principle of contextual reconstruction is that it should be conducted on the basis of common values of humanity while preserving the unique Chinese Zhuang folkloric culture. The purpose of contextual reconstruction in translation is to construct a discourse with shared global values and distinct Chinese characteristics.

4.3 The Content Dimension

In terms of content, meanings should be constructed through a combination of modes, such as verbal, auditory, and visual modes. A combined use of these modes can facilitate the process of multimodal translation. Take verbal modes for example. In addition to written and spoken texts, verbal modes include hypertext, which is a text that has gained popularity in the digital age. Hypertext makes it easier to appreciate Zhuang folklore because relevant information is readily accessible. Besides verbal modes, translators can also use auditory modes to assist in the translation process. For example, translators can add audio material to the translation to illustrate the translated texts. A case in point is Zhuang folk songs. This folkloric element is often characterized by rhymes and structured lyrics, as in the case of Zhuang Liao songs (Chen, 2022). Therefore, translators should try to preserve the original auditory characteristics and ensure that the translated lyrics are easy to sing along. In this way, it is possible to improve the transmission of Zhuang folklore among people of other nationalities. Another mode that can be used is the visual mode. By employing visual elements, translators can vividly present the translations of Zhuang folkloric items. Examples include comic books based on ancient Zhuang legends and audiovisual translations of Zhuang folkloric items. A multimodal translation method has proven effective in promoting cultures, as evidenced by existing translations for Chinese performing arts, including theatre performances, television programs, and movies. However, there are not so many translations

available about Zhuang folklore. Therefore, it is necessary to use multiple modes to construct discourse meanings and achieve an effective multimodal translation of Zhuang folklore.

4.4 The Expressive Dimension

In translation, meanings are conveyed through media. These include languages and paralanguages, including spoken or written text, volume, pitch, and font size. In addition to verbal elements, it is also essential to utilize non-verbal elements. These include movements related to the human body and the platforms or environments in which communication occurs, including PowerPoint presentations, the Internet, and simultaneous interpretation booths (Zhang, 2009).

The expressive dimension can help translators achieve what words alone cannot. Translators can use gestures, facial expressions, and body movements to facilitate the translation of Zhuang folklore. Take the Zhuang opera for example. This performing art is notable for its richness in artistic presentations, with artists employing a range of verbal and non-verbal elements to convey their emotions or the implied meanings of the opera. Translators can use paralanguage as an effective audio-visual supplement to textual meanings in translating promotional videos or documentaries related to Zhuang folklore. To illustrate, when translating Sanyuesan Festival, a folk song festival of the Zhuang people, translators may consider including videos of Zhuang people dressed in festival clothes, singing songs, and dancing to the music in order to convey the joyful atmosphere of the festival. By employing different media, translators can utilize digital multimodal technology to enhance their translation of Zhuang folklore.

5. Conclusion

The Zhuang ethnic minority group is an ethnic group with a population second only to that of the Han nationality. There are numerous folkloric elements in the cultural reservoir of Zhuang folklore. However, research into the translation of Zhuang folklore is limited, which has impeded the ability of individuals from other nationalities to comprehend the Zhuang culture. This paper examines the current status of research on Zhuang folklore and proposes a multimodal translation approach to its translation. The paper begins with a review of the scholarly literature on Zhuang folklore, with a particular emphasis on translation studies. It finds that the studies are primarily concerned with various elements of Zhuang folklore, including folk festivals, ritual practices, folk legends, folk literature, and folk songs. It also shows that previous studies mainly concentrate on translation techniques within theoretical frameworks such as eco-translatology, aesthetics, functional equivalence, and memetics.

In the contemporary digital age, technologies are exerting an increasingly significant influence on translation. In this multimodal landscape, scholars have examined the vast potential of multimodality in translation studies. Nevertheless, the impact of multimodality on the translation of Zhuang folklore remains to be fully investigated. In order to facilitate the dissemination of Zhuang folklore, it is essential to explore the potential of multimodality in translating Zhuang folklore. This paper employs the multimodal discourse analysis framework of Zhang Delu (2009) to investigate translation from four dimensions of discourse: cultural dimension, contextual dimension, content dimension, and expressive dimension. The cultural dimension serves as the foundation for the construction of meanings. The contextual dimension determines the modes by which content is presented. The content dimension uses various modes to present meanings. The expressive dimension covers the media through which meanings are conveyed. These dimensions are interrelated in constructing meanings when translating Zhuang folklore. Since we live in a multimodal age, translation should be conducted with due consideration of the four dimensions of discourse. In particular, translators should examine cultural similarities and differences, consider social contexts, and utilize multiple modes in translating Zhuang folklore. Furthermore, it is also essential to use multimodal media through which meanings are conveyed. The techniques discussed in this paper offer a multimodal approach to translating Zhuang folklore. In addition to multimodal discourse analysis, we can explore the translation of Zhuang folklore by investigating other aspects of multimodality, including multimodal corpus or multimodal metaphors. Effective multimodal translation of Zhuang folklore can improve people's understanding of the folk culture and help them know more about the Zhuang people.

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