A Cognitive Study of the Construction of Killing Scenes in Chinese TV Series

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Abstract

Killing scenes are bloody and can make people feel sick and uncomfortable. Therefore, they are usually partially presented in film and TV works. Yet the audience can still work out the whole killing scene. The underlying mechanism has been sparsely investigated. The current study explores the underlying mechanism by devising a model integrating the Killing Scenario and the concept of multimodal low-level situational metonymy. Through case studies of killing scenes in some Chinese TV series, the paper finds that multimodal situational metonymy is the underlying cognitive mechanism and can well explain how the audience construct the whole killing scenes on the basis of partial clues.

Key words: Killing scenes; Multimodal low-level situational metonymy; Chinese TV series; Killing scenarios

1. INTRODUCTION

In many Chinese TV series, there are, more often than not, killing scenes, especially in some crime shows or war-related TV series. The killings scenes are usually bloody and probably make the audience feel sick. Therefore, they are, most of the time, partially presented instead of being completely presented. Interestingly, the audience can still figure out the whole scene based on what have been presented. How do the audience recover the whole scene? What is the underlying cognitive mechanism? This question has been sparsely investigated.

In the current study, we try to provide an explanation for how the audience manage to construct the whole killing scene with what has or have been presented to them. Section 2 presents a brief review of the previous multimodal-cognitive studies of Chinese TV series. Section 3 attempts to construct a theoretical framework by devising the Killing Scenario (Or Killing ICM) and the concept of multimodal low-level situational metonymy.[1] In section 4, we delve into how the theoretical framework can effectively explain the successful construction of the whole killing scene. In the last section, we summarize the present study, present the major findings and offer suggestions for further research.

2. PREVIOUS COGNITIVE STUDIES OF CHINESE TV SERIES

Cognitive linguists have been using theories such as conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, prototype, conceptual blending, Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM), etc. to analyze human verbal language, trying to reveal the underlying cognitive mechanism of human language and communication. In recently years, with the emergence of multimodal discourse analysis, theories in cognitive linguistics are being more and more widely used in the analysis multimodal discourses such as cartoons, posters, advertisement, films and so on. Though there are a large number of studies of Chinese TV series, yet only a small number of them are conducted from the cognitive perspective.

Ma Aimei (2018) studies the meaning construction in the TV Series *Red Sorghum*. In particular, she explores

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[1] In the current study, ICM and scenario are used interchangeably, unless otherwise mentioned.

how modes such as music, picture and color contribute to the meaning construction. However, the theoretical framework is Visual Grammar, a theory that is based on systemic-functional grammar. Li Jiaxin (2019) does a case study of the TV series *Nirvana in Fire*. Her study explores how the multimodal sources are employed to convey meaning and help the audience better understand the theme. Though the two studies both fall within the scope of multimodal discourse analysis, they are not done from the cognitive perspective.

Wang Min'na (2014) studies the multimodal metaphors in the TV series *Ups and Downs*. She explores the underlying conceptual metaphors and how these metaphors are constructed multimodally. Yang Xinyu (2021) studies some TV series with the same theme—the long struggle of Communist Party of China (CPC). More specifically, she explores how three types of metaphors are constructed in these TV series and how they reflect the spirit of the CPC. Wu Shichen (2021) analyses three kinds of multimodal metaphors in the TV series *The Time of Awakening* and explores how they contribute to the output of mainstream values. Zhang Min (2022) also studies the multimodal metaphors in the TV series *The Time of Awakening*. Compared with Wu (2021), Zhang (2022) covers more multimodal metaphors and shows in greater detail how the multimodal metaphors are represented. Han Tao (2022) studies the TV series *The Time of Awakening* as well. He claims that the TV series incorporates a number of multimodal metaphors and deliberate metaphors in its presentation, and these metaphors include conventional metaphors, imagery metaphors and poetic metaphors. He shows how these metaphors contribute to the theme of the series.

Looking through the literature, we find that, although there are cognitive studies of Chinese TV series, they mainly focus on the conceptual metaphors in the TV series, showing how the metaphors are manifested by different modes and how they contribute to the meaning construction. It can thus be reasonably concluded that the construction of killing scene in Chinese series remains an area to be touched upon.

3. MULTIMODAL LOW-SITUATIONAL METONYMY AND THE KILLING SCENARIO

Many Chinese TV series contain killing scenes, and most of the time they are represented partially to the audience. Nevertheless, the audience can still work out the whole scene. The underlying mechanism remains to be explored. In this part, we attempt to construct an explanatory framework on the basis of some existing theories concerning metonymy and multimodal discourse analysis.

3.1 Low-Level Situational Metonymy

The earliest approach to conceptual metonymy in cognitive semantics was developed by Lakoff and Johnson (Evans & Green, 2006, p.311). They claim metonymy is also a conceptual phenomenon. But it is quite different from conceptual metaphor. As Lakoff and Turner (1989) suggest, conceptual metonymy does not involve a cross-domain mapping. Instead, it is something takes place in a single domain. On this basis, Kövecses and Radden put forward the following definition of conceptual metonymy:

> Metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same idealized cognitive model.
>
> (Kövecses & Radden, 1998, p.39)

Panther & Thornburg (1998) try to explain conventional speech acts in terms of the operation of metonymy on illocutionary scenarios. They classify conceptual metonymy into three types on the basis of the pragmatic functions it performs: referential metonymy, predicational metonymy and illocutionary metonymy. Under this framework, conceptual metonymy study is no longer confined to referential metonymy, which is a great improvement and progress. However, this classification of conceptual metonymy fails to give an explanation for the scene in the following sentence:

The poor dog left with its tail between its legs.

In the example sentence above, the dog left with its tails between its legs is used to represent the whole scene (scenario) which shows how the dog left after it was punished (Hui Zhang & Mingzhi Sun, 2005).

In trying to find a unified framework for inferential and grammatical description, Ruize de Mendoza (2007) distinguishes high and low levels of description, on the one hand, and situational and non-situational cognitive models, on the other hand. In this way, metonymy is divided into four types: high-level situational metonymy, high-level non-situational metonymy, low-level situational metonymy and low-level non-situational metonymy. For present purpose, we choose only to introduce low-level metonymies.

Low-level metonymies whose operation is on non-generic ICMs (or scenarios). Non-generic ICMs are ICMs established on the basis of one's personal experience. Consider the following examples:

a. The school is in urgent need of more hands.

b. The White House has not said anything about this accident.

A: You forgot to take the key with you. How did you open the door?

B: My cousin brought me my spare key.

The two sentences are example of low-level non-situational metonymy, in which one concept is used to stand for or provides access to the other in the same conceptual domain. In (2a), what the school really needs are not real human hands but human beings as intelligent

animals. In other words, the word "hands" is used to refer to (or stands for) human beings, of which hand is an important part. The underlying metonymy is "PART FOR WHOLE". In (2b), the White House is literally the official residence of the US president. It is lifeless and thus cannot speak or talk. What the "White House" stands for is, in a certain context, the US president. The underlying metonymy is "RESIDENCE FOR RESIDENT".

B's reply in (3) is an example of low-level situational metonymy, which is a cognitive process in which a part of the scenario activates or provides access to the whole scenario. In this case, the scenario involved is the Door-Opening scenario. It prototypically includes the following elements:

Precondition: having a key or any other device can unlock the door.

Embarkation: put the key/or any other device in the keyhole.

Center: turn the key in a certain direction, hold the handle and push the door.

Finish: take out the key, close the door or leave the door open.

B's reply here actually means he or she opened the door with the key his or her cousin brought him. According to the scenario we devise here, having a key is usually the precondition of opening a door. As a part of the whole scenario, "having the spare key" metonymically activates the entire door-opening scenario.

3.2 Multimodal Low-Level Situational Metonymy

A mode is a sign system interpretable because of a specific perception process (Forceville, 2009: 22). The mode system includes, at least, the following: (1) pictorial signs; (2) written signs; (3) spoken signs; (4) gestures; (5) sounds; (6) music (7) smells; (8) tastes; (9) touch (ibid.: 23). Unlike purely verbal discourse, TV series involves more than one mode, including picture, sounds, spoken language and written language, so on and so forth. Therefore, TV series is a kind of multimodal discourse. Though low-level situational metonymy has been widely used in the study of human verbal language, it has to be adapted for the analysis of multimodal discourses such as TV series.

Unlike multimodal metonymy, multimodal metonymy is not explicitly defined. In human verbal communication, the source concept or structure of conceptual metonymy is presented only linguistically. Referring to relevant studies of multimodal metonymy such as Forceville (2009b), Ning Yu (2009), Pérez-Sobrino (2016a), we define multimodal metonymies as metonymies whose internal mapping takes place across different modes, or to put it in a different way, metonymies which are exclusively or partially rendered in different modes (Pérez-Sobrino, 2017, p.102). Thus, multimodal low-level situational metonymy is defined as a cognitive process in which the part or parts used to activate or provides access to the whole scenario is or are presented in totally or partially different modes.

3.3 The Killing Scenario (ICM)

In *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*, the word "kill" is defined as "to make sb/sth. die". Here are some of the example sentences:

She tried to kill herself with a knife.

The leader of the robbers killed one hostage.

John was killed in the accident.

A woman in Indonesia was killed by a crocodile.

Yesterday my grandfather killed a kitchen.

What these sentences show is that there are many different types of killing: a person can kill himself or other people, accidents such as car crash, explosion can kill people, animals can kill themselves, other animals and even human beings, and so on. For the present purpose, we mainly focus on the first type: killing oneself or others. Following the postulation of Lakoff (1987, pp. 78-79), we tentatively construct the Self-Killing Scenario and Others-Killing Scenario. Of course, there are numerous ways in which a person can kill himself or be killed by others. Devising a scenario with the utmost explanatory power is really a great project. Space does not permit the construction of such a scenario. That is why we say we tentatively construct the scenarios.

The Self-Killing Scenario

Precondition: creating preconditions for suicide.

(1) One has access to some tools which can result in death, for example, strings or white damask, guns, knives, explosives, poisons, and so on.

(2) One finds himself someplace extremely dangerous, for example, on the train track, in the middle of road or highway, the top of a high building, etc.

Embarkation: getting ready to commit suicide

(1) One gets all the tools at work, which can cause deadly harm to his body. For instance, if he intends to hang himself, he may knot the white damask or anything else can work for the same purpose; if he intends to kill himself with a gun, he may get the gun loaded with the muzzle pointed at his head and then pull the trigger, etc.

(2) One places himself on the place he found for committing suicide. For example, if he plans to kill himself by jumping from the top of a building, he needs to stand on the edge of the top; if he plans to kill himself on the train track, he needs to stand or lie on the track, to name only a few.

Center: committing suicide, which causes deadly injuries to human body.

(1) The strings or damask strangles one's neck, making one stop breathing, or body blown into pieces because of the explosion, or severe head injury with blood spurts from the wound, and so on.

(2) The train or car runs over and destroys the human body; falling down from a height at a high speed, body destroyed because of the great impact and momentum.

Finish: becoming unconscious, destroyed body without vital signs, losing lives on the spot.

Others-Killing Scenario

Precondition: creating preconditions to kill.

(1) The killer has access to some tools which can kill people, for example, knives, guns, swords, grenades, strings, etc.

(2) The killer finds someplace where he can kill others, for example, the edge of a cliff, someplace that is very high, etc.

Embarkation: getting ready to kill.

(1) The victim is together with the killer, kneeling down, standing or lying; the killer loads the gun, aiming at the victim and pull the trigger; the killer holds the knife, swords or any other weapons of the similar function and is about to cutting, chopping or piercing the body of the victim, etc.

(2) The killer stands in front of the victim and is about to pushing the victim down, etc.

Center: killing the victim and causing deadly injuries to the body.

(1) The bullet enters the body, causing severe damages to the organs and tissues; the weapons the killers use pierce into or cut open the body of the victim, causing deadly injuries to the body; blood spurting from the wounds, inner organs destroyed; the victims shrieking or giving out cries, etc.

(2) The victim falls from the height, causing fatal fracture or injuries to inner organs, with bodies becoming misshapen or even scattered because of the impact, etc.

Finish: The victim becomes unconsciousness or with no vital signs, suffering from massive loss of blood, lying on the ground or being dead with scattered body parts; the weapon used in killing the victim is stained with blood…

To summarize, in this section, we construct the theoretical framework adopted in the current study. In particular, we introduce the low-level situational metonymy and put forward the multimodal low-level situational metonymy on the basis of multimodal metonymy. We also tentatively put forward a Killing Scenario following the postulation of Lakoff. In the next section, we will explore the underlying mechanism of how the audience construct the whole scene on the basis of partial clues.

4. CONSTRUCTION OF THE KILLING SCENES IN CHINESE TV SERIES

Killing scene may, if it is presented as it is, make the audience feel sick or uncomfortable. Therefore, in most cases, it is partially presented. However, the audience can still figure out the whole scene on the existing information. In this section, we first analyze how the audience work out the self-killing scene and then the others-killing scene in some of the Chinese TV series.

4.1 Self-Killing Scene: Two Case Studies

The TV series *Divine Order of Things* tells the story of a legendary man Yuanying Ding (Ding hereafter) and a policewoman Xiaodan Rui. In it there is a character named Bing Liu. He was born in a worker's family. He ran a small record store before he met Ding. When he knew that Ding established a stereo company named "Metrical Poem", he requested to join the company and become a shareholder. After the company won the lawsuit with the "Music Master" company, Ding gave Bing Liu a document envelope, telling him what this envelope contained were files which could overturn the conviction. Bing Liu later threatened the Xue Ouyang with the envelope. But when he opened the envelop, he found nothing but blank papers. He himself felt he was cheated and decided to commit suicide.

The three pictures are screenshots of the TV series *Divine Order of Things*. In picture 1, Bing Liu was stepping to the rooftop of a high building. In picture 2, he was standing on the edge of the rooftop. In picture 3, he was jumping from the edge. As is known to all, if one jumps from a high building, he will most probably die. According to the model we construct above, stepping to the rooftop of a high building is the precondition of killing oneself and standing on the edge of the rooftop and jumping down are parts of the embarkation stage of killing oneself. It can thus be concluded that Bing Liu is committing suicide. The inference or construction involves the operation of low-level situational metonymy. The precondition and the embarkation of the self-killing scenario, both presented in pictorial mode, activate or provides access the whole self-killing scene.

The TV series *Snipping* is a police drama. It is about the story of murder, revenge and the war between good and evil. In the series, Xiaofeng Yao is a professional killer. He tried to kill himself with a gun, but he didn't die but was saved by Mao Mao. After he fully recovered, he killed Shidong Liu, a suspect. When he found Gang Jin, he was told that it was Zhaoqiang Qiu who framed him up. He came to kill Qiu but failed because of the pullet left in his brain. To draw the snake out of its hole, Jie Xiao kidnapped Fei Wang, Yao's girlfriend. Jie Xiao brutally splashed sulphuric acid on her face and disfigured her. Yao was extremely furious and decided to take his revenge. But for Fei Wang, all hopes were dashed to pieces. At last, she killed herself with a gun.
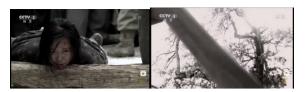
The three pictures above are screenshots of the TV series *Snipping*. In picture 1, Wang is standing on a small hill, determined to leave the world forever. In picture 2, Yao is running to Wang on hearing the shot. In picture 3, Yao is holding Wang's body in his arms. Moreover, in this picture, we can see Wang's head and arms are drooping, which is a typical sign of one's death. That is to say, Wang is already dead.

In the original episode, when picture 2 is presented, the audience can hear clearly a gun shot. When we pull the gun trigger, we can hear the shots. In other words, shot is the result of firing a bullet. And firing a bullet at vital parts of one's body, for example one's head, will probably kill him or her. According to our Self-Killing model, firing the gun falls into the embarkation stage of committing suicide. It can be reasonably concluded that Wang committed suicide. The whole process involves the operation of low-level situational metonymy. The gun shot, which is presented in the sound mode, provides access to the act of firing a gun, and firing a gun provide access to the scenario of committing suicide.

4.2 Others-Killing Scene: Three Case Studies

The TV series *Liberation* is produced in memory of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. It tells about how the People's Liberation Army and Chinese people defeated the Kuomintang and their troops in the 1940s under the leadership of Chairman Mao and his colleagues.

During the War of Liberation (1945-1949), many revolutionary martyrs sacrificed their lives for the cause of Chinese people's liberation. On January 12, 1947, a heroin was killed by the enemy. Though she was then only 15 years old, she didn't betray. Though she was tortured by the enemy, she didn't surrender until the last moment of her life. Her name is Hulan Liu. In the 12th episode of the TV series *Liberation*, the scene of how Hulan Liu sacrificed is reproduced.
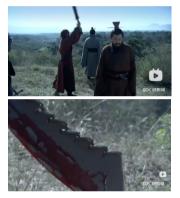

The two pictures are screenshots of the TV series *Liberation*. In the first picture, Hulan Liu is placing her head on the wooden sheath of the straw chopper. In the second picture, a man is forcefully pressing the huge chopper down. As most of the Chinese audience know, the straw chopper is a tool used to cut bales of straw. But in ancient times, it was once used to execute criminals by chopping off their heads. According to the Others-Killing model, the victim exposes his or her neck is a part of the embarkation stage of others killing, and the man forcefully pressing the chopper is also a part of the embarkation stage of others-killing. It can be concluded that the man in picture is killing Hulan Liu. The whole process involves the operation of low-level situational metonymy. In this case, Liu's exposing her neck and the killer's pressing the chopper, which are parts of the embarkation stage and presented in pictorial mode, provide access to the whole killing scene.

Cao Cao (155—220) was a very important figure Chinese history. He was a man with ambition, courage, perseverance. On the one hand, he made great political, military as well as literary achievements in his lifetime. On the other hand, he killed many people because of his suspicious nature. In the TV series *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (84-episode version), his suspicious nature is portrayed incisively and vividly.

When he failed to assassin assassinate Zhuo Dong, a warlord of the Eastern Han Dynasty, he was listed as the wanted. He was then captured by Gong Chen. Gong Chen was deeply moved by Cao's valiancy and became a follower of Cao. On his way back to his hometown, he went to visit his father's good friend Boshe Lyu. Lyu told the servants to kill a pig to treat Cao Cao and he himself went out to buy wine. Seeing that Lyu didn't return, Cao Cao began to feel worried. He believed that Lyu was going to kill him. When he saw the servants whetting the knife, Cao mistakenly thought that they were about to kill him and then began to kill everyone in the family.

The four pictures above are screenshots of the 4th episode of the TV series. They well reproduce how Cao Cao kill Lyu's family. In the first picture, the woman and her child are shocked by Cao, who is standing in front with them with his clothes and sword are stained with blood. In the second picture, Cao Cao is holding his sword, looking at the mother and child furiously. In the third picture, Cao Cao thrusts at the mother and child with his sword and they shriek with the pain caused by the sword.

According to the Others-Killing model, if the victim is together with the killer, the killer is holding his weapon, then the killer embarks performing the act of killing; if the killer is about to causing harm to the victim, for example, thrusting the sword at a person, he beginning to perform the act of killing. Therefore, it can be concluded that Cao Cao killed the mother and the child, which can be evidenced by Gong Chen's remarks in picture four. The underlying mechanism involved here is again low-level situational metonymy. In the current case, parts of the embarkation stage, which are presented in pictorial mode, provide access or activate the entire killing scene.

In 2010, a new TV series *Three Kingdoms* came to the screen in China. The major plots are quite similar to the 84-episode version which came to the screen in 1994. As mentioned earlier, Cao Cao was wanted after he failed to assassinate Zhuo Dong. He was arrested but was then released by Gong Chen. Gong Chen then gave up his post and became a follower of Cao Cao. After Cao Cao kill the whole family of Boshe Lyu, Gong Chen was so disappointed that he left and became an adviser of the warlord Bu Lyu. At the Battle of Xiapi, Bu Lyu was defeated by Cao Cao. Gong Chen was then captured by Cao Cao. Cao Cao tried everything he could to persuade Gong Chen to work for him again. But Gong Chen refused him and just wanted to die.

The two pictures above are screenshots of the TV series *Three Kingdoms*. In the first picture, the man standing in front the executioner is Gong Chen. The man standing with his back to Gong Chen is Cao Cao. The executioner is holding high the huge knife. In the second picture is the bloodstained knife. According to the model we constructed, if the executioner is holding (high) his knife, he is beginning to kill the victim; if the knife he uses is stained with blood, he has just finished the act of killing. It can thus be concluded that Gong Chen is killed. The cognitive operation involved here is again low-level situational metonymy. Things done at the embarkation stage and the finish stage, which are presented in pictorial mode, provide access or activate the whole killing scene.

5. CONCLUSION

By constructing the Killing Scenario and the notion of multimodal low-level situational metonymy, the current study explores the cognitive mechanism underlying the construction of the killing scenes in some Chinese TV series. The major findings of the current study are: (1) the low-level situational metonymy can well explain how the audience construct the killing scenes in Chinese TV series. In most cases, what presented to the audience are just parts of the killing scenario. The audience construct the whole killing scene through the metonymic operation PART FOR WHOLE; (2) unlike its counterpart in verbal text, the source concept in a metonymic operation is presented in modes other than linguistic signs. It is found that the source concept can be presented in the mode of pictorial signs or sounds.

The current study also has some limitations. On the one hand, the current study just does case study of only a few Chinese TV series. The conclusions drawn from the current research need support from further quantitative studies. So future studies can be done by setting up a multimodal corpus. On the other hand, only the killing scenes in Chinese TV series are analyzed. The killing scenes in other types of multimodal discourse such as films and documentaries are also of high research value.

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