

# Multimodal Stylistic Analysis of the American Poster *Green Book*

Li Zirou

School of English Studies Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an Shaanxi China, 710000;

**Abstract:** As a multimodal discourse, movie posters are not only an important promotional method for distributors but also one of the ways for audiences to obtain information about films. Based on Halliday's systemic-functional grammar and Kress and Leeuwen's visual grammar, this paper takes the American promotional poster of the movie *Green Book* as an example to explore the foregrounding features of modalities such as language, image, color and typography, as well as the significance of the relationships among modalities for the overall construction of the multimodal text of movie posters. As a practice of multimodal stylistic theory, it is expected that this paper can provide further verification for multimodal stylistic theory and offer useful references for more people to read and understand multimodal texts such as movie posters.

**Keywords:** Multimodal stylistic analysis; Systemic-Functional grammar; Visual grammar; Movie poster; *Green Book*

**DOI:** 10.69979/3041-0843.26.01.053

## 1 Introduction

Directed by Peter Farrelly, *Green Book* won the awards for Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor at the 91st Academy Awards ceremony in Los Angeles at the 91st Academy Awards in 2019. Co-written by Nick Vallelonga (the son of Tony Lip), Brian Hayes Currie, and Farrelly, *Green Book* recounts the unlikely bonding between the two men in the form of a road movie; it shows how Tony's racism was cured in the course of their journey, and how Shirley learned to loosen up and love life a little bit more. *Green Book* is a film with profound connotations and artistic charm.

Movie poster is one of the focuses of static multimodal stylistic analysis. It can quickly catch people's eyes and convey the key information of the movie. The American poster of *Green Book* is a treasure in multimodal stylistic analysis because of its foregrounding features of modalities, such as language, image, color and typography. Thus, this paper chooses Halliday's systemic-functional grammar and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar as the theory to study the foregrounding features of these four modalities in detail, aiming to explore how the different modalities in movie poster work together to express the overall meaning, and provide richer perspectives to interpret the movie.

## 2 Literature Review

The theoretical basis of multimodal functional stylistics is Halliday's (1994) theory of the three metafunctions. Norgaard (2010) first proposed the concept of multimodal stylistics, arguing that it is the product of the combination of stylistics and semiotics theories. In 1996, Kress and Van Leeuwen proposed the visual grammar, and in subsequent research, they continuously refined the grammars of different modalities. Kress and van Leeuwen (Kress G, Van Leeuwen T, 2002, 345) proposed the grammar of color, identifying color as a semiotic modality and, like other modalities, having multiple functions in a specific cultural context. Van Leeuwen (2005.) improved the typographic grammar.

In 2003, Chinese scholar Li Zhanzi first introduced multimodal discourse analysis to China, and since then, Chinese scholars have conducted various explorations in this field. In 2009, Zhang Delu proposed a comprehensive multimodal analysis framework based on modality grammar, incorporating cultural context, situational context, semantic level, formal level, and medium level into the analysis, and explored the relationships among modalities. In 2012, Zhang Delu and Mu Zhigang proposed a multimodal functional stylistics analysis framework in their article "Exploration of the Theoretical Framework of Multimodal Functional Stylistics", but the content only involved language and image modalities. In 2015, Lei Qian and Zhang Delu added print layout and color modalities to Zhang and Mu's analysis framework.

Movie posters are typical multimodal discourses composed of different linguistic and visual symbols such as language, images, and colors. The analysis of movie posters belongs to static multimodal stylistics. Poster research mainly focuses on the relationship between language and image modalities as well as other modalities and the synergy among them. From the perspective of the relationship between language and image modalities, Liu Zhiyuan (2020) analyzed the synergistic effect of the language and image modalities in the Disney live-action version of "Mulan" poster in revealing the theme of the film and promoting it vigorously based on the theory of visual grammar. Zhang Lingzhi (2023) analyzed the multimodal construction of the movie poster A Little Flower from the five modalities of image, language, typography, color, and layout and the synergy among them based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar and Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar, further verifying the effectiveness of multimodal functional stylistics in poster interpretation.

Through reading the literature, it is found that the research on other modalities and the synergy among them is more than that on the relationship between language and image modalities, and there are few studies on the American poster *Green Book*. The only one is a comparative study of the poster from two versions, without specific analysis of the American poster of the movie. Therefore, based on the theory of multimodal functional stylistics, this paper focuses on the American poster *Green Book* and explores the foregrounding features of each modality and the significance of the relationships among modalities for the overall construction of the multimodal text of the poster. As a practice of multimodal stylistic theory, it is expected that this paper can provide further verification for multimodal stylistic theory and offer useful references for more people to read and understand multimodal texts such as movie posters.

## 3 Theoretical Background

Halliday's (1994) functional grammar analyzes the language modality from three aspects: ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Ideational meaning expresses people's experiences of the external and inner worlds. Interpersonal meaning builds and maintains interpersonal and social relationships. And textual meaning expresses the way of organizing language information.

Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar (1996) analyzes the image modality from three aspects: representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. Representational meaning refers to the people, events, objects in the image and their interrelationships, which can be divided into narrative representation and conceptual representation. Interactive meaning refers to the relationship among the image creator, the content, and the viewer, and it also implies the viewer's attitude towards the things in the image, which can be analyzed from the aspects of gaze, distance and perspective. Compositional meaning refers to the relationships among the various elements in the image and the overall composition method, which can combine to form a meaningful whole, which can be analyzed from the aspects of information value, salience and framing.

The typography grammar proposed by van Leeuwen (2006) can be used for typeface analysis, including distinctive features such as weight, expansion, slope, curvature, connectivity, orientation, and regularity.

The color modality can be analyzed using the color grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) from two aspects: the associative meaning of color and its distinctive features. Associative meaning refers to the source associated with the color. Distinctive features include characteristics such as value, saturation, and purity.

Multimodal discourse analysis not only focuses on each modality itself but also pays attention to the interaction among modalities. Zhang Delu (2009) believes that when one modality cannot convey the full meaning, other modalities need to be used for supplementation. Therefore, he proposed a theoretical framework for intermodal relationships, dividing the intermodal relationships into complementary and non-complementary relationships, and further dividing the complementary relationship into enhancing and non-enhancing relationships. Lei Qian and Zhang Delu (2015) further refined the complementary enhancement into consistent enhancement and opposite enhancement.

## 4 Multimodal Stylistic Analysis of the American Poster *Green Book*

### 4.1 The Brief Summary of the Film

Set in the 1960s, *Green Book* tells the story of Dr. Don Shirley (Mahershala Ali), a highly talented African-American pianist, and Tony "Lip" Vallelonga (Viggo Mortensen), an Italian-American bouncer from the Bronx. Don Shirley embarks on a concert tour through the racially segregated Deep South and hires Tony as his driver and bodyguard. As they travel together, the two men initially clash due to their contrasting backgrounds and personalities. Tony is initially racist and holds prejudiced views, while Don is refined and cultured. However, as they face the harsh realities of racism and discrimination, they develop a deep bond and understanding. Throughout their journey, Tony introduces Don to his Italian-American culture, while Don educates Tony about classical music and high society. They rely on "The Negro Motorist *Green Book*," a travel guide for African-Americans, to navigate the racially hostile territory. As they encounter various challenges, including racist encounters, segregated establishments, and physical threats, Tony and Don learn to rely on each other for support and protection. Their friendship transcends racial barriers and transforms both of their lives.

### 4.2 Multimodal Stylistic Analysis



#### 4.2.1 Language modality

Ideational Meaning: There are four groups of linguistic modalities in the poster. The first group is "VIGGO MORTENSEN" and

“MAHERSHALA ALI”, which inform the audience of the names of the two actors in the film. The second group is “ACADEMY AWARD NOMINEE” and “ACADEMY AWARD WINNER”, which conveys the award-winning information of the two leading characters in the film, increasing the film's attractiveness. The third group is “INSPIRED BY A TRUE FRIENDSHIP”. It belongs to the relational process, telling the audience the authenticity of the plot, highlighting the theme of friendship in the film. This is close to real life, stimulating the audience's curiosity, attracting their interest in watching, meeting the purpose of the poster, and forming a foregrounding feature. The fourth group is the film title “*Green Book*”. The Green Book was an essential guide for black travelers in the southern United States during the 1960s, recording information such as local hotels and restaurants that blacks could visit, revealing the film's theme of racial segregation. The last group is “THANKSGIVING”, which expresses gratitude to the audience.

Interpersonal Meaning: Most of the language materials in this poster use noun phrases, which simply and effectively provide objective information to the audience.

Textual Meaning: “INSPIRED BY A TRUE FRIENDSHIP” belongs to a single-item unmarked rheme, pointing out that the film is based on a true friendship story. Together with the language segments that are independent phrases in the poster, it conveys the power of cross-racial and cross-cultural friendship and tolerance to the audience.

#### 4.2.2 Image modality

In terms of representational meaning, the poster features a scene from the two characters' journey in the film. The black pianist, Don Shirley, looks firmly towards the left-front, directly at the audience. His eyes reveal his confidence, and his line of sight forms a vector, belonging to the action process of narrative representation. His arms are casually placed on the seats on both sides. The white driver, Tony, has a sidelong glance, with contempt and casualness in his eyes. From the arm resting on the car window, it can be seen that he is quite at ease. His line of sight also forms a vector, belonging to the action process of narrative representation. According to the film's content, the scene he sees is black people working in the fields, which shows his tendency towards racial discrimination. In the poster, the car is a conceptual representation with symbolic meaning. Judging from the direction the two protagonists are sitting and the position of the steering wheel, the car is moving from right to left. As the main background element, the car is not only an important vehicle for the two characters' journey in the story but also symbolizes their arduous journey through the American South under the racial segregation system. The blurred scenery passing by the car window implies the different regions and diverse social environments they have experienced, enriching the story's sense of layering. At the same time, the empty and simple sky and fields above the poster give people a feeling of hope and relaxation.

The interactive meaning is manifested in aspects such as gaze, distance and perspective. Firstly, the black pianist Don Shirley in the poster has eye contact with the audience, belonging to the “demanding” type of image. What he demands from us is the concept of racial equality. The white driver Tony has no eye contact with the audience and belongs to the “offering” type of image. According to the content of the movie, what he sees is the black laborers in the field. His contemptuous eyes reveal the thought of racial discrimination. Meanwhile, the design of this poster is conducive to arousing the audience's curiosity. As for the distance, Tony and Shirley both represent their arms, shoulders and heads, that is, personal distance in the picture. So even though a white man Tony is or a prominent pianist Shirley is, they are close to film viewers. In terms of perspective, from a horizontal angle, both protagonists in the poster are presented in a profile view. This showcases the characters' actions and the relationships between them, shortening the distance between the characters in the poster and the audience. It has the effect of guiding the viewers to further explore, which is in line with the creative purpose and forms a foregrounding feature. From a vertical angle, the audience views the characters on the poster at eye level, reflecting the equal status between the participants and the audience. In terms of the framing, the poster has an obvious one. The car windows form a natural frame, enclosing the two protagonists within it. This makes the audience's attention more focused on the characters. The car, as the vehicle of their journey, carries the stories and emotional exchanges between the two. At the same time, it symbolizes a bridge for them to cross racial and cultural differences, further emphasizing the theme and background of the movie.

The compositional meaning is discussed from three aspects: information value, salience and framing. In the poster, its ideal part is the upper section, blue sky, which presents the names of these two characters. Under these characters' name, a phrase “INSPIRED BY A TRUE FRIENDSHIP” is presented. Therefore, this movie is a true story so that it will intrigue people to know what the story is. And at the second half of the poster, it is the name of this film “*Green Book*” with a larger size. Tony is in the left while Shirley is in right. It probably tells the information that black man Shirley is new for viewers' stereotypes. Under the “*Green Book*”, “THANKSGIVING” is printed with smaller size. This is the movie expresses thanks to viewers. In terms of salience, it can be expressed by intensifying size and color contrast to draw viewers' attention at first sight. The larger the depicted participant, the greater the importance is. Besides, the car is magnified and these two presented participants are placed in the foreground, which perhaps means more things will be taken place in the car. And we also can realize that Tony is the main character for Shirley because he is larger than Shirley. Similarly, the title “*Green Book*” is also magnified with a large size beneath the images of Tony and Shirley.

#### 4.2.3 Color modality

Firstly, the color intensity of this poster features high saturation, cool tones, and medium-high modality. The poster is dominated by blue-green, echoing the film “*Green Book*” and emphasizing the importance of the *Green Book* in the film.

From the perspective of the artistic aesthetic approach in the cultural context, blue-green lies between blue and green. To some extent, blue and green respectively represent white culture and black culture. The integration of blue-green symbolizes the cross-racial communication, understanding, and friendship between the white Tony and the black Don Shirley. Through this journey, they break down the racial and cultural barriers and achieve spiritual integration.

In terms of color harmony, Tony's clothes, the car, and the sky are blue-green, and the collar of Don Shirley's shirt is also blue-green. However, Don Shirley's clothes are brick-red, which stands out particularly in the overall color tone of the poster, creating disharmony. This makes him the “most special” person in the entire picture, symbolizing that as an outstanding figure among black people, he has a unique identity and noble temperament, reflecting his important status in the film. Through the contrast with the blue-green background, the white linguistic modality in the poster is highlighted, presenting a clear visual effect, strengthening the actual information of the film, forming a foregrounding feature, and achieving the promotional purpose of the poster.

#### 4.2.4 Typography modality

Van Leeuwen proposed that letter forms have six distinctive characteristics, namely, weight, expansion, slope, curvature, connectivity, orientation, and regularity. With the larger, white, non-bold, capitalised word ‘*Green Book*’ in Avenir Next-Ultralight at the bottom, which has an overall square, rounded look to it, and communicates the film’s title to the viewer in an eye-catching and subdued way; and the top, white, capitalised and bolded word ‘VIGGO MORTENSEN’ and ‘MAHERSHALA ALI’, in Aira font size, symmetrical at the left and right ends, informs the audience of the names of the two actors of the film, so that the audience can learn the main information from the poster at first glance. Above these two lines of text, there is a small white line ‘ACADEMY AWARD NOMINEE’ and ‘ACADEMY AWARD WINNER’ in Aira font size, which conveys the film’s awards and adds to the attractiveness of the poster.

### 4.3 Inter-modality Relations

In the poster, the linguistic modality mainly elaborates on the film title, the reality of the plot, the theme, and the information of the leading actors. The image modality expands on the information not mentioned in the linguistic modality, enriching the content of the poster. For example, it includes the relationship between the white driver and the black pianist, as well as the symbolism of the car. Moreover, the ideational and interpersonal meanings of “INSPIRED BY A TRUE FRIENDSHIP” and “*Green Book*” in the linguistic modality are consistent with the representational and interactive meanings of the image modality. They convey the theme of racial equality and mutual tolerance and understanding among people from different perspectives. The image and linguistic modalities of this poster are complementary and reinforcing, showing an expansion-reinforcement relationship. It not only has a realistic effect but also contains idealistic implications, achieving a good promotional effect for the film.

The entire poster uses blue-green as the background, which is consistent with the idea expressed by the image modality. It also has a symbolic meaning. It symbolizes a special guidebook on racial equality, conforming to the film’s theme, forming a foregrounding feature, and enhancing the overall harmony. The image modality and the color modality present a consistent-reinforcement relationship, jointly strengthening the ideas of mutual tolerance and understanding among people, and racial equality.

The selection and enlargement of the typefaces for “*Green Book*”, “VIGGO MORTENSEN”, and “MAHERSHALA ALI” strengthen the ideational meaning expressed by the language itself. Therefore, the typography and the linguistic modality present a prominent-reinforcement relationship, and the font design aims to attract the audience’s attention.

The above-mentioned modalities collaborate and complement each other, making the multimodal text more coherent. While presenting the main information, they also create a visual impact, jointly conveying and strengthening the main theme of the poster, that is, mutual tolerance and understanding among people and racial equality.

## 5 Conclusion

This study analyzes the American poster *Green Book* by using Halliday’s Systemic-Functional Grammar and Kress and Leeuwen’s Visual Grammar. Movie posters utilize a combination of different modalities such as language, images, colors and typographies. These modalities not only convey the main content but also complement each other, seamlessly connecting with the theme. As can be seen from the analysis, in movie posters, multimodal stylistic analysis based on modalities such as language, images, colors and typography enable readers to better understand the meaning behind the movie and better comprehend the theme conveyed by the film.

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