Multimodal Food Discourse and Narrative Analysis: Culinary Persona, Ingredients, and Environment

Yutian Pang
College of Foreign Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China
Corresponding Author: Yutian Pang, E-mail: pangyutian@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT
The study mainly investigates multimodal food discourse, such as socially constructed food videos rich in modes. It took Li Ziqi's "Life Series" food video as an example for analysis, aiming to find out three semiotic resources, namely “culinary persona”, “culinary ingredients”, and “culinary environment”. The research methods are: First, it combined the visual narrative at the level of experiential meaning in Painter et al. (2013) with the auditory one. Second, it slightly adjusted the narrative structure of Labov (1972) to suit the analysis of the narrative structure of food discourse. Next, combined with the given case, this article analyzed the experiential meaning of food discourse from the situational context of the case. Finally, it generalized several cultural keywords based on the case study and discussed their cultural insights. Research has found that the culinary persona, ingredients, and the environment interact with each other, and the cultural connotation behind them is a manifestation of the way of food.

KEYWORDS
Multimodal food discourse, multimodal narrative, culinary persona, culinary ingredients, culinary environment

ARTICLE DOI: 10.32996/ijls.2022.2.2.4

1. Introduction
1.1 Food linguistics and multimodal food discourse
Food linguistics, suggested by the name, is the linguistic study of all aspects of food. In the book The Language of Food: A Linguist Reads the Menu, Dan (2014) explores the etymology of some of the food words in menus. However, the scope of food linguistics is rather broad, and Gerhardt et al. (2013) provide an overview of food and language research in Culinary Linguistics: The chef's Special, for example, looking at the evolution of language in terms of historical-comparative linguistics; the composition of food vocabulary in terms of morphological construction; the syntactic structure of recipes or other genres of food discourse in terms of syntax and grammar. The study of semantic aspects, including regional attitudes to particular foods and metaphors about food; the analysis of table conversations and other food-related conversations in terms of spoken discourse; the study of food writing, including cooking guides, recipes, menus, food labels, etc.; and finally, the analysis of media food discourse, including food advertising and television and radio programmes based on media contexts. This last category of research not only belongs to the discourse of media but also to that of multimodality, representing a much-needed area of expansion for food discourse research.

Discourses, socially constructed, denote that they develop in a particular social context and conform to the interests and norms of the social actors in that context (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p.5). Furthermore, discourse appears in the forms of multiple modes, or rather, all those symbolic modes, appearing in a given culture and realizing meaning, can be extracted from that context to represent discourse (ibid: 24). Modes, including images, words, layouts, music, gestures, sounds, etc., are also symbolic resources constructed in society, being assigned values by culture, and can be used to create meaning and communicate (Kress, 2010, p.79). Thus, multimodal discourse analysis not only focuses on the functions and significance of various semiotic resources but also places them into a broader socio-cultural context for discussion. Swarowski (2014, p.9) in Language and Food: Verbal and Nonverbal Experiences, instead of focusing on food and language as separate objects; take a dynamic approach, seeing them as part of social...
activity, arguing that the relationship between the two arises in natural interaction. Regarding a specific definition of food discourse, Matwick & Matwick (2019, p.9) in *Food Discourse of Celebrity Chefs of Food Network* suggests that food discourse is written, spoken, and visual texts about food, dealing with themes such as food preparation, presentation, and consumption, and expressing individual and collective socio-cultural values about food. Food discourses containing visual texts set the stage for investigating multimodal food discourses.

Multimodal food discourses include food-related, socially constructed, and modally rich ones such as food advertisements, food blogs, and food videos. Food videos combine verbal, visual, and auditory modes, each expressing different social symbolic meanings, and the choice of each one is also a choice of different ways of meaning expression. The process of the video narrative from the beginning to the end is the narrative process of the whole story. The video consists of a frame of visual images, and the specific episode can be paused at a particular image to be analyzed.

The main narrative symbolic resources summarised from the multimodal food discourse are the cooking character, the cooking ingredients, and the cooking environment, expressing the core conceptual meaning of “who cooked what dish in what environment and with what ingredients.” The cooking personas are the narrators or participants of the multimodal food discourse. Their dresses, styles, ways of treating ingredients, and choosing and creating the cooking environment, are all objects to be described. The food materials are associated with dynamic processes, and multimodal food discourse unfolds around the growing, preparing, and ultimately cooking of foods. The environment component of cooking includes time, place, tools used, etc. In short, the cooking persona, the cooking ingredients, and the cooking environment mutually interact. At present, narrative analysis based on multimodal food discourses, especially at the level of conceptual meaning, is still to be developed.

**1.2 Multimodal narratives at the level of ideational meaning**

Page (2010, p.1) points out the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary narrative studies, analyzing texts that extend beyond classic narrative texts to a variety of audiovisual texts, such as films or television series; texts that foreground images, such as various scenes and cartoon comics; and musical texts, from opera to hip-hop. These texts integrate multiple semiotic resources such as text, picture, sound, hyperlinks, and animation, serving a powerful narrative function and showing potential to link with multimodal research.

The ideational function is expressed by transitivity, covering participant, process, and environment (Halliday & Mattissen, 2004). *Reading Visual Narratives* (Painter et al., 2013) provides a new theoretical tool for multimodal discourse analysis level of ideational meaning. The “character representation” in illustrated books corresponds to the ‘participant’, focusing on the manifestation of characters and their relationships in visual narratives; “event relationships” corresponds to “process”, focusing on the connection between different events in the visual storytelling; and “environmental components” focuses on the continuity and change of adjacent images in the visual narrative (Feng, 2015).

In addition to the analysis of picture books, more complex multimodal narrative discourses can adopt new developments in visual narrative mentioned in the book, such as the analysis of food videos, needed to include the human voice, background music, and other natural sounds of the video. Because the shots of a film are the smallest ‘minimal unit’ of representation (Wildfeuer, 2014, p.33), scenario-related shots are significant resources for realizing the meaning of a video. Based on a static perspective, each shot is an image, mainly represented as a visual element; based on a dynamic angle, different shots are combined and can incorporate rich aural elements. Therefore, the analysis of film and television works should include the visual layer of still or moving pictures and the auditory layer of sound and music (ibid, p.34). This paper, based on this, combines the characteristics of multimodal food discourse and modifies Painter et al.’s (2013) ideational meaning framework based on a simplified version of Feng (2015), as follows.
Figure 1: Ideational meaning of multimodal food discourse.

The analytical framework, connected visual and auditory narratives, is more applicable to analyzing the ideational meaning of multimodal food discourses, such as food videos.

Concerning the analysis of specific narrative structures, this study focuses on the six narrative structures proposed by Labov (1972, p.363), referring to Matwick's (2017, p.23) adaptation of TV food programme narratives with Labov's categories to detail the narrative structure categories appropriated for this study. Labov's (1972) narrative structure are: abstract; orientation; complicating action; subordinate plot; result or resolution (narrative node); evaluation; and coda. Matwick & Matwick (2017) divides the complicating action into a recipe narrative and a voiceover, and this study distinguishes the main plots from the secondary ones.

Besides, it divides the abstract or opening into a title introduction, a written introduction, and a verbal introduction. Food bloggers usually start their videos by introducing the food they are about to make, while some bloggers reflect this through the video title or place it in the introductory section of the video. Orientation or background pointers include brand pointers, time pointers, cooking pointers, etc. The main plot of a food video revolves around food materials' growing, preparing, and cooking, while the secondary stories involve derivative character relationship narratives interspersed with the main one. The evaluation or event commentary focuses on evaluating food and includes other emotions triggered by the subplots. Each episode will contain various narrative nodes and the final node, the coda after the last shot, where the whole narrative process ends.

However, the multimodal narrative at the level of ideational meaning also has to incorporate a discussion of socio-cultural values, with a detailed discussion presented below.

2. Research Methods

This study analyzes Li Ziqi’s "Lifetime Series" videos. The "Lifetime Series", produced by online food blogger Li Ziqi, belongs to the category of gourmet cooking videos, which is also one of the research areas of multimodal food discourse. The series includes three essential symbolic resources of multimodal food discourse: cooking persona, cooking ingredients, and cooking environment. In addition, Li Ziqi’s videos are not only sought after by the Chinese people but have also become popular overseas as part of popular culture and a cultural phenomenon, allowing traditional Chinese culture to land in different cultural contexts, playing a role in spreading and passing on Chinese culture.

Therefore, this study will adopt a multimodal narrative approach to interpret the unique charm of the "Lifetime Series" videos. The specific analysis steps are: searching for "Li Ziqi" on Weibo or Bilibili, both are Chinese social media platforms, and finding the
"Lifetime Series" related food videos according to their titles. By watching the videos, one of the representative videos was selected from the three dimensions of cooking persona, cooking ingredients, and cooking environment, conducting multimodal narrative analysis at the ideational level. Finally, based on the entire series of videos, the discussion rises to the cultural level, aiming to explore the cultural significance underlying the multimodal food discourse "Lifetime Series" videos through multimodal narratives.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The narrative structure and ideational meaning of Li ZiQi’s “Lifetime Series” videos

Li Ziqi’s “Lifetime Series” videos share the same narrative style, unfolding around the entire process of growing and harvesting one or more crops to become a delicacy. This paper focuses on Li Ziqi’s video “The Life of Potatoes”, released on 3 June 2020, to explore the ideational meaning of multimodal food discourse (https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1nz411i7dW) as it is particularly rich in primary and secondary plots.

3.1.1 Narrative structure

1) Opening introduction. “The Life of the Potato” with a full title as “The Potato’s Life: The Joy of Farming, the Beauty of Working, the Way of Eating”. This title opens and summarises the video. In addition, Li Ziqi also left the video production process and filming tips and experiences in the comment area, giving the audience a general understanding of the video theme.

2) Background pointing. The icons of Li Ziqi’s videos are all located in the bottom right corner of the video as if a Chinese red smear is spread out on a piece of paper with a paintbrush and then dipped in white ink to write the words “李子柒”, meaning Li Ziqi. This icon is a brand pointer, guiding and welcoming the viewer into the food culture space created by Li Ziqi. The background pointing also includes time pointers, i.e., specific time points presented in the middle of the video, e.g., “The Life of the Potato” has the following crop time pointers: “Beginning of Winter in 2019”, “Major Snow in 2019,” “Waking of Insects in 2020”, and “Grain Full in 2020”. In addition, there are also cooking pointers, i.e., tips and guidelines in the videos, such as “salt”, “beef”, “minced meat”, and “stir in boiling water with corn starch”, etc.

3) Main plot. All the processes leading up to the final serving of the dishes form the main story of the food video. The “Life of the Potato” is the story of nine courses with a pot of tea, including Pan-fried Potato Pancakes; Salt-roasted Small Potatoes; Six Mashed Potatoes; Random Crayfish; Roast Pork Ribs with Potatoes; Missing shredded Potatoes; Roast Meat and Potato Chips; Happy Potato Noodles; Hello! Steamed Dumplings; and Herbal tea. All the dishes are named by Li Ziqi and number 10 in total. In China, “十” means the number 10 but also signifies something perfect. Thus, the video is about the "perfect" life of potatoes.

4) Subplots. Sometimes there are hidden stories behind the names of the dishes. "The Life of the Potato" is interspersed with rich derivative narratives. Firstly, Li Ziqi wraps potato pancakes and baked potatoes with lotus leaves, then picks peaches to give to neighbours and relatives, who then provide plums in return, meaning "to exchange gifts”. Secondly, the whole video shows the love between Li Ziqi and her grandmother. Finally, the implied narrative of missing shredded potatoes and the extra cup of tea prepared signifies a sense of nostalgia and cherishing.

5) Narrative nodes. The final serving of each dish is the key narrative point, while the secondary narrative points reveal along with the editing and switching of the footage.

6) Event commentary. Once all the dishes are plated and served, tasting food to give an evaluation forms the evaluation segment. Other comments that accompany the subplots change with the situation and the feelings of the roles. The characters in the video are the evaluators.

7) Coda. The entire food video ends with the last shot, just as “The Life of the Potato” ends with a specially prepared cup of tea. At the last moment, the camera fades out, and the screen goes dark, marking the story ends, but the implications are endless.

3.1.2 Culinary persona

According to Figure 1, the culinary character in the food video show through regular and metaphorical representations. The former can be represented together by facial and vocal, or by facial features alone, not by vocal traits alone. Many video bloggers do not show their faces to the audiences, and they use other parts of their bodies or other objects for metaphorical representation, such as symbolic clothing attire or hair and headwear. Some video bloggers do not use their voices or do not record a human voice and instead use other natural or synthetic sounds to assist the narrative. Images displayed in sequence can offer an observation of specific representations (see figure 2).
Figure 1.1 Ideational representation of culinary persona.

Figure 2: Examples of character representation of the culinary persona.

Figure (2a) captures a shot of Li Ziqi walking towards the rose bush. Although her whole body is not appeared at first, the red cotton and linen trousers reflected in the shooting are representative of the colour and style often worn by Li Ziqi. In (2b), the facial representation by way of a medium shot, but no sound representation here. Unlike other food bloggers, Li Ziqi’s video has fewer human voices and is dominated by sounds such as background and nature music, mainly conveying emotion through context. Figures (2c) and (2d) use a distant shot of Li Ziqi returning home after a “gift-changing”, as well as a conversation and warm interaction between Li Ziqi and her grandmother, reflecting the narrative of the two subplots. In (2e) alone, the two pairs of chopsticks refer to the interaction between Li Ziqi and her grandmother. Finally, (2f) is a close-up facial close-up in which the eating of the shrimp dumplings simultaneously contains a food commentary.

3.1.3 Culinary ingredients
The event relationships in the food videos develop around the growth, preparation, and eventual cooking of the ingredients, and the main plot of the food narrative is unwinded accordingly. Based on figure 1.2, event relationships are about time and cause. Temporal relationships are sequential or simultaneous, while causal relationships are explicit or implicit causality.
Figure 1.2 Ideational representation of culinary ingredients.

The first row of figure 3 reveals the growing process, the second row the preparation process, and the third row the final cooking process. The growth of the ingredients follows the natural process with the time-lapse photography used by the photographer to show the changes in food growth. Figures (3d) to (3f) show the procedures of washing, slicing, and shredding potatoes, which occur in chronological order. The cooking process can happen both sequentially or simultaneously, and the cooking process can be coupled simultaneously with the preparation process, which tests the culinary skills of the characters. In terms of causality, one of the explicit ones is the “beauty of toil”, which indicates the meaning of reaping the rewards of cultivation throughout the Lifetime series. Implicit causality is in the clever editing of footage, such as in other Lifetime videos, where one moment a chicken is taking a stroll, but the next the chicken is lying naked on a cutting board. This implied cause-and-effect relationship is also a side effect of the humorous narrative of food discourse.

3.1.4 Culinary environment

The culinary environment is not only within the kitchen but encompasses the entire cultural space created or constructed by food bloggers that contributes to the food narrative. According to figure 1.3, the culinary environment demonstrates a contextual
Multimodal Food Discourse and Narrative Analysis: Culinary Persona, Ingredients, and Environment

relationship. If the context remains constant, then the similarities and differences of the pictures are viewed from the shots and the background music. If the context changes, it is observed by camera switching or music changes.

![Diagram](image_url)

**Figure 1.3** Ideational representation of culinary environment.

The background of figures (4a), (4b), and (4c) remains unchanged, but from figures (4a) to (4b), the shot is into a closer perspective. And the background music is more upbeat than in the previous section, along with the stir-fry of the ribs in the back, offering the viewer a sense of inner joy. Generally speaking, the "Lifetime Series" is mainly soft and gentle, with a gentle rhythm that avoids ups and downs, while some food bloggers use different music to liven up the atmosphere and add vividness to the visual narrative. Figures (4d) and (4e) are shots that switch between backgrounds, the former shifting to the changing sky to symbolize time and the latter to the corner of the eaves to highlight the greenery. (4f) follows the previous background change with a shot of the bread kiln, accompanied by a switch in the music.

**Figure 4:** Examples of background relationships in a culinary environment.

3.2 The cultural significance of Li Ziqi's "Lifetime Series" videos

Through a multimodal narrative at the ideational level, this study briefly analyses the multimodal storytelling of the culinary character, ingredients, and environment, i.e. the participants, the process, and the environment, in a specific narrative structure, taking "The Life of Potatoes" from the "Lifetime Series" as a representative. Li Ziqi has already been the epitome of culture, whose works have a cross-cultural penetration (Li, 2020). Therefore, this study outlines three cultural keywords from the culinary persona, ingredients, and environment in the "Lifetime Series" videos, namely "women", "time", and "ecology". From situational contexts to cultural contexts, from ideational meanings to cultural meanings, the following section will further enrich the narrative analysis of multimodal food discourse.

3.2.1 Independent women

Cesiri (2019) explores the philosophical tenets of different chefs by analyzing the websites of famous British chefs. It shows that the culinary characters’ attitudes and approaches to ingredients reflect different culinary paths. Li Ziqi’s videos, on the other hand, show us a culinary figure who is well versed in the ways of cooking, including the philosophies of fermentation, knife work, fire, and so on (Bai, 2018). Chinese food culture is vast and profound, and Chinese food philosophy is even more intriguing. Li Ziqi’s image as a unique woman has become popular overseas, showing the world the charm of oriental cuisine and spreading the excellent traditional Chinese culture.
3.2.2 Seasonal ingredients

Based on the relationship between culinary ingredients and the role and environment of cooking, the "Lifetime Series" videos focus on seasonal ingredients that grow in the flow of time and the seasonal food that harmonizes the five flavours, containing sour, sweet, bitter, spicy and salty. Li Ziqi’s videos focus on time, rhythm, and context, and their narrative rhythm follows the flow of events according to the laws of life (Liu, 2020), just as Chinese people live according to the seasons (Bai, 2018). The "Lifetime Series" videos are about 20 minutes long, but the whole series needs shooting for a long time, with the food growing process using the seasons as a reference. Following the flow of time and the development of nature, the "joy of farming" and the "way of eating" of careful cultivation and slow cooking are contrary to the fast-paced life in the city, but they have refined the time and given the crops the most beautiful life.

3.2.3 The ecological environment

Based on the relationship between the culinary environment, culinary roles, and ingredients, the "Lifetime Series" videos portray an ecological idyl in which nature is in harmony and everything lives together. Li Ziqi’s video may be an idyllic imagination under the anxiety of modernity (Zeng & Shi, 2020), or it may be a wonderful dream created through a montage of editing techniques. But that ecological pursuit of transforming nature while respecting the laws of nature to achieve the unity of heaven and man is also one of the essential development concepts of modern civilization. By protecting the green environment, growing organic food, tasting healthy food, and responding to the changes in heaven and earth, industrial civilization can ultimately achieve sustainable development.

4. Conclusion

This article takes the multimodal food discourse of Li Ziqi’s "Lifetime Series" video as an example, aiming to find out three significant semiotic resources of food discourse, which are "culinary persona", "culinary ingredients", and "culinary environment". It reveals from the culinary persona that the video uses rich metaphorical representations to highlight individual styles, and from culinary ingredients that foods’ growth and preparation follow the change in time. Finally, an investigation of the culinary environment presents the poetic lens of language. The study further summarises three cultural keywords of independent women, seasonal time, and ecological environment to discuss from the cultural dimension. These uncover the positive attitudes of the culinary characters towards food and life and provide insightful reflections on how modern and primitive civilizations can co-exist in harmony. The study will contribute to further understanding of multimodal food discourse combined with multimodal narrative analysis. It suggests taking various styles of food videos into the discussion and making comparisons, which is also the limitation of the research in future studies.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1111-7514

References