

A Review of Research on Multimodal Translation

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Abstract— By means of the documentary analysis method, the paper reviewed domestic and foreign multimodal translation studies systemically. It found that film translation had received the most attention, followed by translation of illustrated texts, advertisement translation and literary translation. Apart from the four topics, multimodal translation studies in other fields were rare. Based on the research status of multimodal translation, the authors believe that present researches still need to be deepened and new areas are worthy of exploration. It is anticipated that scholars responsible for future multimodal translation studies could define “multimodal translation” and its research content, expand its research subject into other fields, and strengthen its theoretical construction, with a view to broadening and deepening multimodal translation studies.

Keywords— Multimodal translation; research; review; future research directions.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st Century when the technologies of network-based information, multimedia and translation service are booming, interlingual translation which are restricted to words cannot fully satisfy the needs of cross-cultural communication and transmission. Under the circumstance, it's time for multimodal translation to show up, because products of multimodal translation integrating words, images, sounds and other semiotic resources effectively will make up for the insufficiency of traditional communication modes, in order to realize the best communication effects. In the recent dozen years, multimodal translation has been paid close attention from scholars both at home and abroad. Firstly, the paper will figure out the basic concepts in multimodal translation studies and summarize the remarkable characteristics and significant values of multimodal translation. And then it's going to point out the research gap after having reviewed the present research outcomes, followed by the discussion on the future research directions of multimodal translation

at last.

II. BASIC CONCEPTS

Concept is the footing stone of a subject. Multimodal translation studies, as a subdiscipline of translatology, include at least the following basic concepts: modality, multimodality, multimodal discourse, multimodal discourse analysis and multimodal translation.

Modality derives from five sensory channels of humanity: vision, audition, olfaction, gustation and tactility. When the five sensory channels are applied into communication, five modalities of communication including visual modality, auditive modality, olfactory modality, gustatory modality and tactile modality are produced (Wang & Qiao, 2018). Modality is considered to be any organized or regular communication mode (Jewitt, 2009). While Gu (2007) defines it as the mode adopted by human beings to interact with external environment through sensory organs. Specifically, modality refers to the

channels and media of communication which include language, technology, image, music and other semiotic resources (Zhu, 2007).

Multimodality means multiple semiotic resources appearing in one discourse, including verbal resources, like oral and spoken language, and non-verbal resources, like images used to construct textual meanings (Baldry & Thibault, 2006). According to Kress & van Leeuwen (2001), it refers to the combination of different modalities when designing a sign or an event. In the communication of multimodalities, modality can play its role independently and interdependently, constructing meanings by itself or through interacting with each other (Chuang, 2006).

Multimodal discourse indicates the discourse applying two or even more modalities simultaneously (Zhu, 2007). In multimodal discourse, varied modalities coordinate with each other and construct the whole meaning of discourse (Braun, 2011).

Multimodal discourse analysis requires that we need to incorporate image, movement, expression in one's eyes, posture and other non-verbal symbols into the communication process of meanings, and pay attention to the relationship between verbal and non-verbal symbols in the meanwhile when conducting discourse analysis (Jewitt, 2009).

Up to now, it seems that no scholar has given multimodal translation an explicit definition. Liu (2011) holds that multimodal translation indicates that translators deliver verbal information through visual elements, in other words, translating texts with images. Obviously, he ignores the meaning construction function of auditive elements. Xu (2017) came up with three implications of multimodal translation: 1) translation of multimodal discourse; 2) transformation/integrated combination among different modalities; 3) flexible application of multimodal theories into translation teaching and practice. The first two implications are worthy of reference to some extent, but the third implication belongs to the category of translation teaching which couldn't be the part of multimodal translation.

III. CHARACTERISTICS AND VALUES OF MULTIMODAL TRANSLATION

The characteristics of multimodal translation are embodied in three aspects: text composition, synthetic technology and communication effect. First of all, the translated products contain several multimodal elements such as text, image, sound, color and so on. If the original work is a purely verbal text, translators need to convert it into a multimodal product with the help of non-verbal semiotic resources. Another situation is when the original work is a multimodal one, translators should consider the cultural background of target readers, adjusting some multimodal elements and the layout of translated work in addition to bilingual transformation, so as to reduce the barrier to understanding caused by cultural differences. Additionally, the integration of varied modal elements involves the cooperation between translators and technical experts. While conducting multimodal translation, translators have to adjust some multimodal elements in the original work or even create new ones in accordance with target culture. Special tasks, like synthesis of verbal and non-verbal symbols, design of layout, audio processing, editing and test of translated product with multimedia technology and so on, are in need of the support and coordination from technical experts. Last but not least, translated products with multimodality will produce two-dimensional or three-dimensional communication effects. When a translated product involves two modalities of text and image, target readers could obtain information from the two symbols, which generates a kind of two-dimensional communication effect. Apart from text and image, some translated products even turn to the auditive channel for delivering original messages, and thus a three-dimensional communication effect is realized.

Multimodal translation studies are of distinct disciplinary values. As a new field of translation studies, multimodal translation studies expand the scope of translation studies which are no longer confined to a single modality of text. In the past dozen years, more and more scholars have explored translated works from the perspective of multimodality, which promotes the complementary and joint development of multimodal

studies and translation studies. In the meantime, the essential value of multimodal translation in terms of cross-cultural communication can not be ignored. For instance, applying Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory to translating the profiles of human landscape not only conforms to the trend of the times, promoting the development of relevant researches, but also does benefits to the dissemination of Chinese culture in the western world (Li, 2013); It is hard to achieve the international communication of Chinese mythology merely through the interlingual translation of classic texts. Only under the macro system of multimodal narration, combining it with intralingual translation, intralingual intertextual rewriting and intersemiotic translation, can the multimodal intertextual reconstruction of Chinese mythology and its dissemination in foreign countries be facilitated (Wang & Luo, 2107); By virtue of multimodal modes like video, the translation of technical terms could be interesting, which

will provide a specific and vivid context for foreign readers (Liu, 2108). Generally speaking, multimodal translation with the help of multimedia and network-based information technology, integrating varied non-verbal resources like image, music and sound effects, could achieve more feasible and effective dissemination.

IV. RESEARCH FIELDS OF MULTIMODAL TRANSLATION

With “multimodal translation” as the key word, we have collected 38 articles of relatively high quality on CNKI and Google Scholar, which can be categorized as follows: film translation (15 articles), translation of illustrated text (9 articles), advertisement translation (6 articles), literary translation (5 articles) and other fields (4 articles).

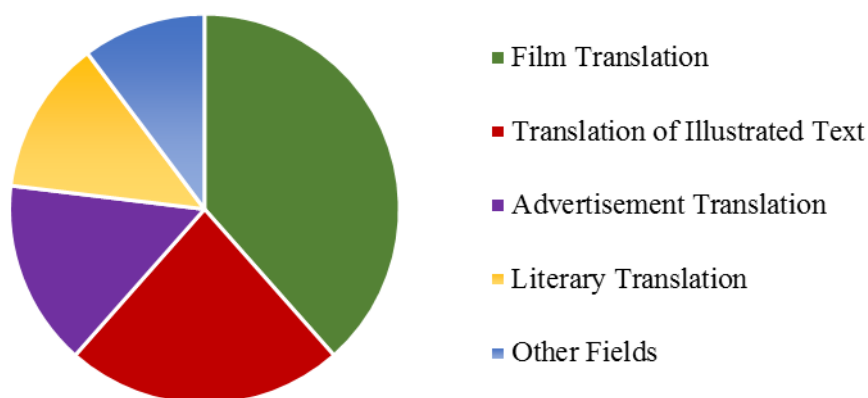


Fig.1: Research Fields of Multimodal Translation Studies *

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4.1 Film Translation

As typical multimodal discourse, the translation of film and television works cannot be separated from the coordination of visual modality and auditive modality. Only when the non-verbal resources of film and television works are taken into consideration, can a translator fully reproduce the meanings contained in the multimodal texts of source language to target audiences (Taylor, 2016). Subtitle translation could be regarded as intersemiotic translation in essence, and varied semiotic resources

involved in film and television works construct meanings according to their specific functions (Chuang, 2006). Therefore, translators should pay attention to the specific meanings generated by different symbols when dealing with subtitle translation.

Many scholars have adopted professor Zhang Delu’s Comprehensive Theoretical Framework for Multimodal Discourse Analysis to study subtitle translation of films or documentaries from the four aspects of culture, context, content and expression. For example, Lv and Wu (2012)

explored subtitle translation of the film *The Flowers of War* and found that the subtitle translator had combined words with image and sound to convey its humanistic concern to target audience better. Huang & Du (2019) and Chen (2017) discussed subtitle translation of documentaries and explored the characteristics of their subtitles towards which the latter put forward corresponding translation strategies. It is believed that studies on the translation strategies of subtitles helps to strengthen the readability of translated subtitles, so as to present the most favorable effects of storytelling. Taylor (2003) studied the translation strategies of film subtitles from the perspective of Multimodal Transcription Theory, which shows that the theory is conducive to representing the multimodal information of original discourse. In addition to theories related to multimodal discourse analysis, there are scholars who conducted studies on the multimodal translation of film and television discourses based on corpus. Jimenez Hurtado & Soler Gallego (2013) applied the multimodal corpus linguistics into the translation studies of audio description, having proved that multimodal corpus linguistics is a feasible and effective research method. Hurtado & Martínez (2018) selected 52 international films of different types and then carried out corpus-based analysis on the translated subtitles that are specially targeted at hearing-impaired or deaf people, which concluded that corpus analysis on marked multimodal texts is an effective tool for exploring the cognitive characteristics of intersemiotic translation. Balirano (2013) integrated the methods of multimodal analysis and corpus analysis to study the humorous utterance in the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* and its Italian dubbing version. The multimodal framework constructed in the research will provide worthy reference for adaptors' translating audio-visual humor utterance.

The role played by image in the translation of film subtitles also received the attention from many scholars. Mubenga (2009) stated that image could supplement or explain the meanings of shots constructed by verbal modality. Chuang (2006) made an attempt to probe how the interaction of image and words influences the translation of subtitles, but the research is limited to the relationship analysis of image and words in static scenes.

Chen & Wang (2016) investigated further the influence of dynamic scenes on the translation of subtitles from the three respects of representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, and they found six types of semiotic interplay which produced varied influence in subtitle translation in line with their specific functions. Chen & Zhang (2017) compared two Chinese versions of the American cartoon *The Croods* to discuss how the relationship between image and words could affect the translation of subtitles. It has been found that image not only determines the content of subtitles to some extent, but also endows image with the logical function to keep the correlation of information delivered by images and words in varied scenes and thus ensure the integrity of the narrative flow.

Research on the multimodal translation of film and television discourses requires comprehensive analysis frameworks as theoretical foundation, but related theoretical studies are rare. What is noteworthy is that Lv (2016) constructed macro-medium-micro contextual parameters and deeply analyzed the meaning-generating mechanism of subtitle translation in specific cases. The three-level contextual parameters have integrated visual modality and auditive modality into the meaning-generating mechanism of subtitle translation, and thus the idea could offer feasible theoretical model and technical map for subtitle translation.

4.2 Translation of Illustrated Texts

Apart from film translation, translation of illustrated texts has received scholars' concern. The first category is the translation of picture books. On the basis of multimodal discourse analysis and intersemiotic translation, Chen (2018) studied the translation of texts and pictures of *Mulan* in two bilingual picture books *Song of Mulan* and *Hua Mulan*. As a result of the research, *Mulan* was transformed from the legendary image of Chinese heroine to the image of American tomboy through bilingual transformation and visual adaptation, the image enjoying high popularity among global audiences. Under the guidance of Visual Grammar and Descriptive Translation Studies, Van Meerbergen (2009) explored how words and pictures interplay during the translation of picture books and how the semiotic meanings of pictures are changed in

translated version to adapt to the discourse and socio-cultural context of target language. Mateo (2015) made a comparative study on two Spanish versions of a picture book for children *The Story of Ferdinand*, with the aim of figuring out how words and images satisfy their specific communication needs in two versions respectively.

The second category is the translation of comic books. Yang & Qin (2018) took the comic book *Zhuang Zi Speaks—More Music of Nature* adapted by Tsai Chih-Chung and its English version as research objects, and explored translation strategies of different modalities including words, pictures and font design. As a result, the domestication strategy had been adopted to transform words and font design with taking the acceptability of target readers into consideration, while the foreignization strategy was used with respect to pictures due to the influence of economic cost. Tang (2014) analyzed how Tsai Chih-Chung constructed the image of Confucius and his thoughts through non-verbal symbols in the comic book *The Analects of Confucius*, claiming that picture as a kind of non-verbal symbol could be an auxiliary means for translating Chinese classics into foreign languages. Borodo (2015) explored the relationship between the verbal modality and visual modality, focusing on how the two modalities interplayed to construct the whole meaning of discourse together.

The third category is the translation of illustrated texts related to technology. Ketola (2016) discussed the cognitive meanings of translating illustrated technical texts, investigating the meaning construction of multimodalities during the cognitive process of obtaining meanings of varied modalities. Wang & Liu (2019) took three sub-categories of Chinese technological and scientific classics, agronomy, military and medicine, as their research object, with the methods of qualitative research and case analysis, exploring how to coordinate the verbal and non-verbal translation strategies in order to facilitate the foreign dissemination of Chinese technological and scientific classics.

Additionally, there are scholars who have studied the multimodal translation of illustrated political texts. Chen & Dong (2107) combined the Multimodal Intersemiotic
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Model and Comprehensive Theoretical Framework for Multimodal Discourse Analysis to investigate the process and paradigm of translating words with pictures in *Xi Jinping—The Governance of China*. The research certainly expands the traditional research pattern which is limited to textual modality. However, we hold that a conclusion drawn from a larger number of corpora will be more reliable and persuasive.

4.3 Advertisement Translation

In most different forms of advertisement especially magazine, the visual elements play a distinct role. A responsible advertisement translator has to consider the corresponding transformation of other symbols from the intersemiotic perspective in addition to finishing interlingual translation (Torresi, 2008). Zhai (2017) compared the Tea Expo Website of Shanghai and American Global Tea Expo Website, and put forward that the translation of website is not just the transformation at the linguistic level and that all-round display of dynamic pictures, audio information and video materials is in need of consideration. Sun & Cao (2019) summarized the difficult points and principles related to the modal coordination of multimodal discourse and the translation of business advertisement discourse, towards which they came up with six effective translation methods from the angle of modal coordination including literal translation, free translation, omission, amplification, transliteration and calque.

Apart from business advertisement discourse, there are some scholars conducting studies on the multimodal translation of magazine discourse. Chueasuai (2013) combined Systemic-functional Grammar and Visual Grammar to discuss the transformation of varied symbols in the Thai version of American female magazine *Cosmopolitan*. With the method of questionnaire survey, Liu (2011) studied the multimodal translation of bilingual flight magazines published by Greater China, exploring the interplay among modalities and the complex interaction among translator, editor and designers of pages, which contributes to researchers' and practitioners' understanding of the translation process in another different situation.

Undoubtedly, practical research on the translation of

advertisement discourse based on the multimodal perspective has broadened the research horizon of the field, but it should be noticed that theoretical research plays an equally significant part which could provide adaptive operational guideline and research map for the translation of multimodal advertisement discourse. Through figuring out the relationship between pictures and words and the translation process of multimodal print advertisement based on picture-word coordination, Ling (2018) explored the influence of picture-word coordination on delivering advertisement originality and proposed four translation strategies directed against multimodal print advertisement, accompanied by a model of translation process constructed by the scholar: recognizing coordination, analyzing effects, clarifying purposes and choosing strategies.

4.4 Literary Translation

In the era of big data, it's not only necessary to study translation from the perspective of multimodality, but also to study multimodal expressions from the angle of translation (Lee, 2013). When it comes to studies on the multimodal translation of literary works, scholars have carried out relevant researches on poems with paintings, picture books about myths and legends, literary works for children and illustrated novels respectively. Jia & Gong (2015) studied the English translation of *The Painted Hawk* written by Du Fu from the perspective of multimodality, and explored the problems existing in the English translation process of poems with paintings as well as possible translation strategies. Wang & Luo (2017) adopted the methods of qualitative research and case study, with cultural presupposition as the starting point, and made a multi-dimensional text analysis on the English versions of *Shan Hai Jing*. Lu (2018) analyzed specific cases to explore translation methods and strategies of literary works for children from the field of discourse, tenor of discourse and discourse expression in multimodal context. Chen & Hu (2018) applied the multimodal model for intersemiotic translation to discuss the rhetorical features of multimodal translation in Lu Xun's novels, which could provide useful reference for further studies on his novels.

4.5 Other Fields

Previous researches have demonstrated that

multimodal translation studies mainly include film translation, translation of illustrated texts, advertisement translation and literary translation. Although some scholars have been involved in other fields, there are few literatures. In terms of tourism translation, Gong & Jia (2015) explored how to translate the introduction of scenic spots in Forbidden City from the multimodal perspective guided by Comprehensive Theoretical Framework for Multimodal Discourse Analysis. They emphasized that multimodality is a conspicuous characteristic of human landscape translation, and thus translators need to improve the communicative quality of translated texts in addition to favorable translation quality. Li (2013) discussed the multimodal characteristics and multimodal translation strategies of tourism translation, which implies that research on the multimodality of tourism translation is of essential practical meanings and theoretical values. Zhu (2015) compared the five English versions of *The Peony Pavilion* mainly from the perspective of visual modality and auditive modality. In order to avoid "double distortions" in the translation of Kunqu opera, she created a multimodal translation framework of Kunqu opera with the main principles of recognizing multimodal signs in the original text and contextualizing such signs in the target text. Evans (2013) took the card game *Caylus Magna Carta* as an example to investigate the translation of board game text that is a kind of multimodal text. He found that the multimodal elements in the handbook of game rules and game cards could help participants understand the rules and steps of game in order to ensure that the same game could go on smoothly in other different languages. And thus the scholar held that translators just need to transform the verbal information into another language. However, we believe that participants from varied cultural backgrounds may have different understanding towards the same modality, so the single language transformation can not produce satisfying communication effects in target audience.

Although scholars at home and abroad have made some achievements in multimodal translation studies, we find that there are some deficiencies in current researches. Firstly, it seems that no one clarifies the definition and research content of multimodal translation, which has led

to the problem that some articles are seemingly in harmony but actually at variance. In another word, the titles contain the words "multimodal" and "translation", but the articles doesn't discuss translation questions from the multimodal perspective or discussions guided by multimodal theories have nothing to do with translation. Secondly, previous research topics are limited to film translation, translation of illustrated texts, advertisement translation and literary translation, and thus the values of multimodal translation especially its value of cross-cultural communication and dissemination are not fully deployed or displayed. Last but not least, most existing studies are characterized by practical exploration, but theoretical researches are infrequent, the lack of which has restricted the further development of multimodal translation studies.

V. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Based on the review of studies on multimodal translation at home and abroad, it is not difficult to find that studying translated works from the multimodal perspective has greatly promoted the collaborative development of multimodal research and translation research, especially having broken through the limitations of traditional translation studies and opened up a new research field. As a consequence, we hold that multimodal translation is of great research value and that its disciplinary significance and value of cultural dissemination should be fully excavated and utilized. For the sake of expanding the research scope and improving the theoretical depth of research, we propose that future multimodal translation studies could focus on the following respects (Figure 2):

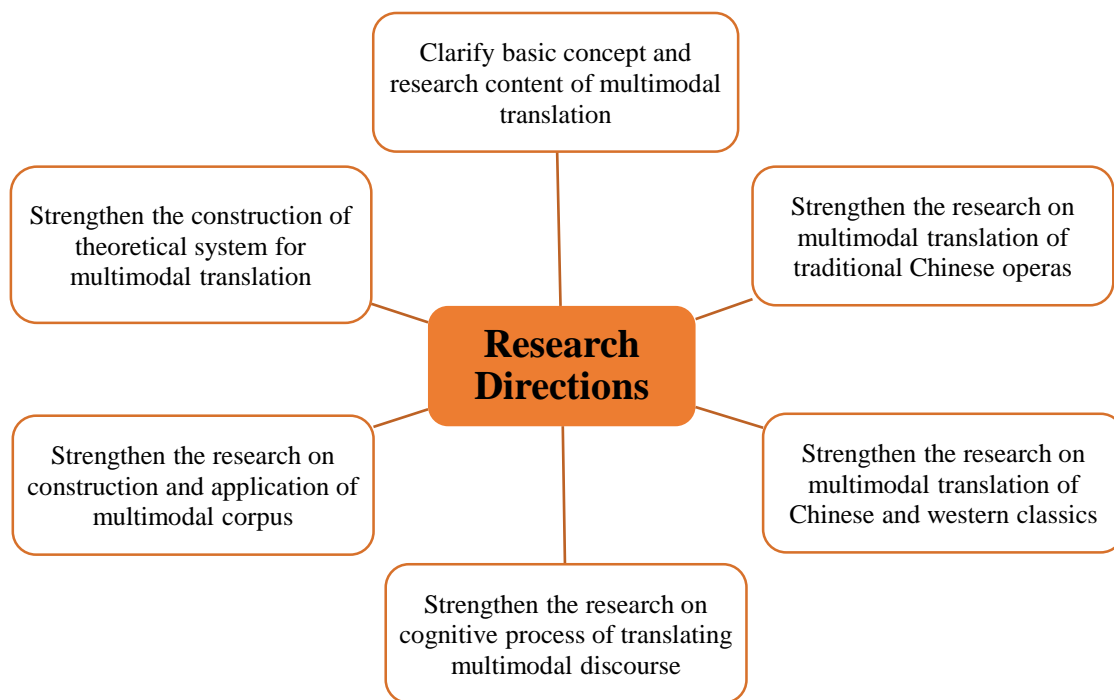


Fig.2: Research Directions of Future Multimodal Translation Studies

(1) Clarify basic concept and research content of multimodal translation. Only by this way, will the problem of disagreement between title and content be solved, and then the overall level of related researches as well as reference value could be enhanced.

(2) Strengthen the research on multimodal translation of traditional Chinese operas. As a

comprehensive art, traditional Chinese operas consist of language, music, singing, performance, props, setting and other elements, which could be regarded as a combination of multiple modalities and semiotics (Zhu, 2017). We believe that exploring the representation strategies of multimodal information in traditional Chinese operas should be the priority of both translators and researchers.

(3) Strengthen the research on multimodal translation of Chinese and western classics. At present, domestic and foreign scholars have not fully realized the theoretical significance and application value of multimodal theories for the translation of classics. For instance, a large number of scientific and technological classics contain varied modal elements like language and pictures. Therefore, related multimodal theories have strong explanatory power for the research of classics translation, which could be used to guide the translation and cross-cultural communication of classics.

(4) Strengthen the research on cognitive process of translating multimodal discourse. In fact, foreign scholars have paid attention to the research direction, such as Ketola (2016) and Hurtado & Martínez (2018), while it is almost blank in China. Research on cognitive process of translating multimodal discourse could reveal the roles played by varied modalities in terms of understanding original works and constructing translated versions (Xu, 2017).

(5) Strengthen the research on construction and application of multimodal corpus. Foreign scholars have built corpora of different scales and made many achievements in the aspects of corpus collection, processing and marking. However, there are a few large-scale corpora and the marking tools, processing efficiency and search function of small-scale ones need to be improved. After building multimodal corpora, we could apply them to conduct language research, teaching research, humanities and social sciences research (Huang, 2015).

(6) Strengthen the construction of theoretical system for multimodal translation. We consider that multimodal translation studies are surely in need of improved and integrated theoretical foundations. In addition, the analysis and evaluation of translated multimodal discourse should be guided by more reasonable analytical models.

VI. CONCLUSION

The paper reviewed previous studies on multimodal translation both at home and abroad with the documentary

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analysis method. It found that multimodal translation studies concentrate on film translation, translation of illustrated texts, advertisement translation and literary translation, while researches of other fields like tourism translation and translation of traditional operas are relatively few. There are also some deficiencies existing in previous studies, including inexplicit definition and research content of multimodal translation, limited research fields and shortage of theoretical research. In the end, we proposed six research directions for future multimodal translation studies based on the research status: clarifying the basic concept and research content of multimodal translation; strengthening the research on multimodal translation of traditional Chinese operas; strengthening the research on multimodal translation of Chinese and western classics; strengthening the research on cognitive process of translating multimodal discourse; strengthening the research on construction and application of multimodal corpus; strengthening the construction of theoretical system for multimodal translation. It is highly anticipated that the research scope of multimodal translation could be expanded and the research depth could be enhanced, so as to promote the formation of theoretical foundation for multimodal translation studies and the construction of disciplinary system.

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