

A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of the Imperial Power of England in 19th Century British Tea Advertisement

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Abstract: As society and technology advance, communication has transcended the boundaries of verbal language. The strategic integration of multimodal elements—text, imagery, and audio—has become increasingly vital for conveying messages with enhanced clarity and impact. This evolution has spurred the development of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) theory, which emphasizes the importance of these diverse modalities in shaping discourse and meaning. Applying MCDA as a framework, this paper offers an in-depth analysis of a 19th-century British tea advertisement. The study adopts a dual-modality approach to examine both the textual and visual components. The textual analysis explores the linguistic choices and rhetorical strategies that construct the advertisement’s narrative, while the visual analysis investigates the symbolic imagery that complements and reinforces the textual message. The aim is to uncover the subtle expressions of British imperial influence that are subtly embedded within the advertisement. By analyzing the synergy between text and image in evoking an image of grandeur and cultural supremacy, the study sheds light on the nuanced mechanisms through which historical narratives are disseminated and internalized via commercial media, reflecting the broader societal values and aspirations of the era.

Keywords: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis; Tea Advertisement; Imperial Power

1. Introduction

Multimodal discourse encompasses communication through various senses—such as hearing, sight, and smell — leveraging multiple symbolic resources like words,

images, sounds, and actions.[1] In this framework, images and sounds are accorded equal social significance as language, synergistically contributing to a more comprehensive message. As quintessential examples of multimodal discourse, advertisements integrate text and images to construct meaning. This paper analyzes the analysis of a nineteenth-century British tea advertisement, selected for its dual significance: it mirrors the zenith of British imperial power during a period of prosperity and encapsulates late-Victorian tea thinking.[2] During the Victorian era, Britain vigorously expanded its colonial empire, notably in East Asia, and established the East India Company in India to satisfy its appetite for tea and other commodities. By scrutinizing the advertisement’s textual and visual components, this study investigates how the tea trade became a symbol of Britain’s imperial prowess and economic triumph.

Since its inception, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) has seen ongoing refinement by scholars. Machin and Mayr propose a framework for integrating critical discourse analysis with multimodal discourse analysis,[3] while Wang advances this by developing a critical visual analysis within MCDA.[4] Hart identifies MCDA as a “multimodal turn” in discourse and critical discourse studies, essential for both communication and research, providing a rationale for studying linguistic communication.[5] Tian and Pan further explore MCDA’s conceptualization of its research objects and methods.[6] MCDA has been utilized in political discourse, everyday life discourse, terror and violence discourses, and gender discourse. The tea advertisement, while a form of everyday discourse, contains nuanced societal implications. An MCDA analysis elucidates the intrinsic cultural narratives and broader social messages.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Research Methodology

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

There are two main theoretical foundations for this paper, which are Halliday's Systemic Functional linguistics and Kress & van Leeuwen's visual grammar.

2.1.1 Halliday's systemic functional linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), founded by British linguist Halliday in the late 1950s, provides a framework for understanding language structure. In *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, [7] Halliday explains language through functional grammar, aiming to answer two key questions: "What is the meaning of a discourse, and why is it expressed that way?" and "Is this expression effective in achieving its purpose?" [8] Halliday's theory has significant implications for practical linguistic studies, exploring language from an anthropological perspective. His concept of metafunction, central to systemic functional grammar, identifies three core functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. This framework helps reveal the ideas and positions behind language use.

The ideational metafunction in language expresses people's experiences of the real world, reflecting events, participants, and their context in terms of place and time. Its purpose is to convey information and messages, primarily through voice and transitivity. The interpersonal metafunction expresses the speaker's identity, status, attitude, and perspective, relying on mood and modality as key grammatical elements. The textual metafunction organizes language into coherent discourse, focusing on the potential meaning within communication. As a key aspect of systemic functional grammar, it is essential for discourse analysis. Systemic functional grammar explains how language is structured to meet communication needs, emphasizing how linguistic elements are organized to serve specific purposes.

Halliday's three metafunctions in systemic functional grammar elucidate the core characteristics of language. He argues that these metafunctions can coexist within a single sentence, though in practice, some sentences may express only one. Their

manifestation intimately correlates with text genre, underlining the practical application-centered theoretical foundation of systemic functional linguistics.

2.1.2 Kress & van Leeuwen's visual grammar Building on Halliday's meta-functional theory, Kress and van Leeuwen developed visual grammar to analyze images by extending the concepts of ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions, treating image elements as social symbols. In visual grammar, they introduce three key meanings: representational, interactive, and compositional, offering a solid theoretical framework for image analysis.

Representational meaning is divided into narrative and conceptual representations, distinguished by the presence of a vector or oblique line between image elements in narrative structures, which is absent in conceptual ones. Narrative representation further includes action, reaction, speech, and mental processes. [9]

Interactive meaning examines the relationship between the image producer, the depicted world, and the viewer, reflecting the viewer's attitude toward what is represented. This meaning is conveyed through four elements: contact, social distance, attitude, and modality. Contact refers to an imaginary interaction between the participant and the viewer, formed when participants "demand" something by looking directly at the viewer. When participants simply present information, an "offer" is formed, which does not constitute contact. [9]

Compositional meaning integrates representational and interactive meanings to create a cohesive whole. Its realization depends on three factors: information value, salience, and framing. Information value assigns significance based on the positioning of elements (left/right, top/bottom, center/margin). Salience determines the prominence of elements, while framing refers to connections or separations within the image, either explicitly or implied through spacing or lines.

2.2 Research Methodology

This paper employs both qualitative and quantitative methods, with a focus on qualitative analysis to examine typical scenes in 19th-century British tea advertisements that

reflect the construction of British national power.

3. Analysis of the Tea Advertisement

The advertisement analyzed in this paper is a typical static multimodal discourse, integrating image, text, and color. It is a 1895 advertisement from the United Kingdom Tea Company, distributed both in Britain and its colonies.

The advertisement features a depiction of a female figure representing Britannia, adorned in flowing Roman robes and a plumed military headdress, as she reclines at a small table and pours herself a cup of tea. Drawing upon the glory and military strength of the Roman Empire to assert similar praise for the empire of Great Britain, this advertisement suggests that, far from enervating and destroying the imperial power of England, commercial trade in luxury goods supported and strengthened the nation. Like Tea Dealer remarks, tea trade is intricately linked to the wealth and prosperity of the English nation.[10] Moreover, The image of Britannia sitting on a tea crate symbolizes the establishment of international trade and the widespread domestic practice of tea consumption among women across the diverse ethnicities and cultures within the British Empire.[11] In the background, figures representing China, India, Ceylon, and Assam — the major regions of tea production—bring chests of tea to Britannia. In the foreground, she calmly focuses her gaze on her tiny teacup, into which she is pouring tea from a small, round teapot labeled, in case there was any doubt, “United Kingdom Tea Company’s Teas”. Thus, Britain consumes and enjoys teas imported from around the world, supported by the labor and the service of numerous foreign nations and colonies, represented by various forms of cultural dress and racial appearance in the advertisement.

The following is the text in the advertisement: GRASP THESE FACTS! WHY DRINK INFERIOR TEA? WHY NOT BUY **YOUR TEA FIRST HAND?** If you are satisfied, however, to continue drinking indifferent and common Tea, well and good—in that case there is nothing more to be said; but if you wish to enjoy the Luxury of a really Delicious Cup of Tea, and if you study economy in

Household Expenditure, you can, by writing to the UNITED KINGDOM TEA COMPANY. Limited, Mincing Lane London, obtain the BEST TEA IN THE WORLD, of simply delicious Quality, FIRST HAND, direct from the MINCING LANE LONDON TEA MARKET, at IMPORTERS’ PRICES (and not hampered with half a dozen middlemen’s profits), 1/- ,1/3, 1/6, 1/9, and 2/- a lb.. all amazing value at the respective Quotations There is no trouble whatever in the matter— you have merely to send your Order, and the Teas are promptly Delivered at your own Doors anywhere in the Kingdom, CARRIAGE PAID. Thousands of Packages sent out Daily. UNITED KINGDOM TEA COMPANY’S TEAS are used in the Households of H.R.H. THE PRINCE OF WALES and of H.R.H. THE DUKE OF CONNAUGHT: In the Members’ Refreshment Rooms of the HOUSE OF COMMONS; in all the GORDON HOTELS; in the Hotels and Restaurants of the Principal RAILWAY COMPANIES; in upwards of **1000** other HOTELS, etc.: in Clubs, Colleges, Hospitals, Schools, and Public Institutions too numerous to mention; by the LEADING COUNTY FAMILIES. throughout the land; and by HOSTS of PRIVATE CUSTOMERS everywhere. The Tea trade revolutionized, and old-fashioned prices utterly exploded.

This paper analyzes this advertisement within the framework of MCDA, focusing on textual and visual modalities in the cultural and historical context. Text modality is examined through systemic functional linguistics, while visual modality is critiqued using visual grammar.

3.1 Textual Modality

Drawing on Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics, this paper analyzes the textual modality of the tea advertisement to interpret its functional meaning, exploring both the content it conveys and how it expresses meaning.

3.1.1 Ideational metafunction

The ideational metafunction focuses on the subjective or objective message conveyed by the advertisement, primarily through the transitivity system, including material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential processes. In textual modality, the phrase “Grasp these facts!” represents a material

process where the actor is the viewer, the process is “grasp”, and the goal is “these facts”. This immediately draws the viewer into the message, emphasizing the importance of the following information.

The sentences “If you are satisfied...with indifferent and common Tea” and “if you wish to enjoy the Luxury of a really Delicious Cup of Tea” represent mental processes. The viewer is the sensor, with “satisfied” and “enjoy” as the processes, contrasting the experience of drinking good versus bad tea. The sentence “UNITED KINGDOM TEA COMPANIES’ TEAS ARE THE PERFECTION OF HIGH QUALITY” is a relational process, stating that the company offers the best tea, urging the viewer to buy it. Behavioral processes such as “you send your order” further encourage action, while existential processes like “it is not hampered with half a dozen middlemen’s profits” highlight the company’s direct trade benefits, tied to British colonial expansion.

3.1.2 Interpersonal metafunction

The interpersonal metafunction conveys the speaker’s identity, attitude, stance, and motivation, reflecting judgments, inferences, and evaluations. It primarily includes mood and modality. Mood refers to how the subject and verb are arranged in a clause. Most sentences in the advertisement are declarative, presenting facts. Additionally, the text uses interrogative and imperative moods. “Grasp these facts!” is an imperative, commanding action, while “Why drink inferior tea? Why not buy your tea firsthand?” uses the interrogative mood, implying the company’s authority to ask questions.

Modality represents a middle ground between affirmation and negation. The advertisement uses the modal verb “can” without strong subjectivity, suggesting that the viewer has the option to enjoy good tea if desired.

3.1.3 Textual metafunction

The textual metafunction connects elements of discourse through themes and cohesion, focusing on grammatical and lexical structures. Techniques such as repeated words, reference terms, transition signals, substitution, and ellipsis achieve cohesion.

In the advertisement, the pronoun “you” positions the viewer at the center, empowering them to choose to buy quality tea. The text also employs contrasting transitive

words to emphasize the superiority of their tea over competitors’, highlighting both its quality and the nation’s prestige. At the end, frequent use of “by” and “in” illustrates that celebrities and royalty enjoy their tea, creating a celebrity effect that encourages consumers to purchase from the company.

3.2 Image Modality

As a key modality in advertising discourse, image modality is vital for conveying information and meaning. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual grammar, this section examines how image modality constructs and expresses meaning from three perspectives: representational meaning, compositional meaning, and interactive meaning. This analysis reveals the deeper connotations conveyed by advertisements.

3.2.1 Representational meaning

The image integrates narrative and conceptual processes. It features narrative processes through the glances of six participants. A British woman leisurely pours tea from a chest while five others transport tea, representing action processes. Their gazes, along with the folds of their clothing, angles of their hats and boxes, and the woman’s posture, create intersecting vectors, illustrating reactional processes. In terms of conceptual processes, the woman on the right assumes a superordinate role, while the five men on the left are subordinates, reflecting classificational processes. This dynamic indicates that Britain consumes and enjoys teas imported from around the world, supported by the labor of various foreign nations and colonies, as depicted through their cultural attire and racial diversity in the advertisement.

Additionally, each tea chest, including those carried by figures representing China and India, as well as the one on which Britannia reclines, features the trademark image of the United Kingdom Tea Company: three young women in distinct national costumes. This also represents a narrative process, shaped by the direction of the women’s glances.

In the figure, the central woman is adorned in an early 19th-century English gown, slim and high-waisted, complemented by a small purse with a long ribbon strap, with her hair styled in curls around her face. To her left, a woman in Scottish highlander dress sports a long

plaid skirt, a tam, and a traditional sporran, a leather pouch adorned with three tassels. On the right, an Indian woman is draped in a flowing sari, intricately ornamented and wrapped around her waist and arms. This trademark image of the United Kingdom Tea Company visually represents the primary peoples of the UK (excluding Ireland, the West Indies, and other minorities within the British Empire). Each woman holds a teacup emblazoned with “UKTC”, and they stand linked arm-in-arm, symbolizing unity. Britannia, seated on a crate of tea, metaphorically underscores the foundation of foreign trade and domestic tea consumption among the diverse races and cultures of the British Empire.

The image modality combines narrative and conceptual processes to convey that the female figure of Britannia embodies England’s imperial power, while other figures represent the labor and service of various foreign nations and colonies. This composition reflects Britain’s global position in the 19th century, akin to the expansive Roman Empire. Britain’s colonization of India ensured a steady supply of tea and leveraged its power to utilize other nations. Thus, the advertisement communicates the high quality of its tea and encourages national patronage.

3.2.2 Interactive meaning

The figures in the image avoid direct eye contact with the viewer, making it an “offer” image. The visibility of all figures and the surrounding space suggests a public distance, creating separation between viewers and participants. However, the female figure appears closer to the viewer than the others, reflecting her closer connection to the British people. This proximity fosters a sense of empathy, implying that ordinary Britons can enjoy tea just like the women depicted.

The female figure is larger, more prominently positioned, and better dressed, while the others appear smaller and are attired more like servants. This creates an oblique angle, positioning the female figure as “part of our world” and the others as the “other”. This distinction underscores British national power, reinforcing a sense of pride and making Britons more inclined to buy tea that evokes this pride. The contrast between the brighter female figure and the darker, smaller figures

further emphasizes her dominance and superiority, bringing the British viewer closer to her.

3.2.3 Compositional meaning

Compositional meaning of the image can be analyzed from Information value, salience, and framing.

In terms of information value, the company’s name is prominently displayed at the top to immediately capture the viewer’s attention. The female figure of Britannia is the central focus, while the other figures are subordinate. On both sides of the image, the phrases “TEA FIRST HAND” and “Immense Saving” highlight the key benefits of the product. Accompanying these is the tea price, indicating that customers can purchase it without middleman fees. Britannia is depicted larger and in sharper focus, while the other figures are pushed to the background, appearing smaller and blurred. This contrast reinforces the dominance of Britannia, symbolizing Britain’s superior position. Lastly, subtle framing separates the female figure from the others, hinting at the unequal status between them, further emphasizing Britain’s dominance.

3.3 Intertextuality of Image Modality and Textual Modality

The image and textual modalities complement and reinforce each other. The textual modality further clarifies the information conveyed by the image. For example, in the image, tea is depicted as being given directly to the British, while the text emphasizes “first hand tea”, highlighting the favorable price. Similarly, the image vividly illustrates the textual claim that tea is sold at import prices, with colonial figures presenting tea directly to Britannia.

The interplay between the image and text makes the message more concrete and impactful. The advertisement underscores that this advantage stems from British imperial power, which enabled the colonization of Asia, ensuring both a steady supply and high quality of tea.

4. Conclusion

An advertisement for the United Kingdom Tea Company visually illustrates how luxury goods contributed to the strength and success of the British Empire. By drawing a comparison to the glory and military prowess

of the Roman Empire, it suggests that, rather than weakening, the trade in luxury goods bolstered British imperial power.

The advertisement shapes the “mythologem of Englishness”, positioning Britain as the leading global authority, with other nations in supporting roles. The ability to colonize and exploit other countries for the sake of British comfort and enjoyment is suggested as accepted and rightful. This perceived preeminence is not questioned but taken for granted, with pride in the nation’s colonial expansion and overseas dominance. The message is clear: Britain’s strength ensures access to fine tea, and the enjoyment of this tea, in turn, reinforces the perception of Britain’s power and prosperity.

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