

# A Multimodal Critical Analysis in Business Discourse: the Case of the Corporate Annual Report of Tesco

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**Abstract**—Drawing on the theory of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), this paper explores the language use in the strategic part of Tesco’s corporate annual report. By focusing on both visual and verbal modes employed in the selected text, the paper not only discusses their discursive features separately, but also investigates how they work as a whole in conveying the integrated messages and reflecting the ideology of the speakers. In addition, it adopts a new framework to further dig out the social issues and power relations hidden behind the discourse from three different layers. The main finding is: the text producers of the annual report intend to create a positive image of Tesco and narrow the relationship with their target readers via the employment of discursive strategies.

**Keywords**—Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis; non-verbal language; visual grammar; annual report

## I. INTRODUCTION

A mode is a semiotic resource that is shaped by society and makes meaning [1]. In today’s digital era, with the popularity of modern technology, people’s daily communication involves a range of modes, mainly including visual image, gesture, gaze, posture, sound, 3D and so on. There has been previous research into the interplay between language and visual image in terms of meaning making [2]. However, most traditional methods of discourse analysis place emphasis on the layers of verbal text and neglect the other modes involved in discourse [3]. It was not until the 1990s that Kress and van Leeuwen [4] set up a comparatively reliable and complete theoretical framework for visual grammar. This was based on the theory of Hallidayan systemic functional grammar. They discuss the language and visual communication within the social semiotic landscape, which includes the notion of Hallidayan three metafunction. These include: ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. They offer a theoretical base for multimodal discourse analysis.

Currently, the Systemic-Functional (SF) approach is considered the ideal tool for Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) by many scholars [5]. The Systemic-Functional approach has been adopted in many researches for modeling multimodal analysis, such as artworks [6], visual imagery [7], and film texts [8]. By contrast, there is a loose combination

between Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (widely seen as a significant programme for discourse studies) and multimodal discourse. This was until the publishing of How to do critical discourse analysis: a multimodal introduction [9]. This research established a theoretical framework that uses the CDA approach to MDA, and clearly defines the term Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). The study of MCDA has mushroomed, which mainly involves studies of print advertisements [10], media and crime [11], and online posts [12]. However, there are fewer studies that focus on the annual corporate report, which is not only a frequent genre in business discourse, but also “brings multimodality Instrumentalization to a higher degree.” [13].

This paper presents a case study of Tesco in 2015. It examines the strategic part of their corporate annual report. It has been chosen not only due to the large group of potential readers but also because of its ample and creative use of visual language. The paper aims to investigate the uses of verbal and visual texts and how they work together to position the target reader. Furthermore, this essay will discuss the interrelationship between written language and visual data. It will employ the approach of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), in order to analyze the multimodal data. The paper will pay particular concern to the broader social issues and power relations below the surface of the text.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) started from the research conducted on social semiotics, based on the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar. As mentioned above, according to Halliday [14], there are three metafunction in language system. To be specific, the ideational function serves the expression of context and the transmission of information; the interpersonal function serves the expression of social roles, which focuses on the relationship between the speaker and the listener; the textual function mainly concerns how parts of a text is linked to preceding and following parts of the text. However, they are not exclusive to language, but common features of all semiotics. According to the visual grammar Kress and van Leeuwen proposed [4], the meaning of image is composed of three meanings, namely, the interactive meaning, the

representational meaning and the compositional meaning, which corresponds to the three functions in systemic functional grammar.

The early study about MDA mainly focuses on visual images [4], gestures [15] and music [16]. Through the deeper study of multimodal discourse analysis, scholars have extended the boundary of systemic functional grammar to a broader field. They not only incorporated more social semiotics modes into the multimodal analysis (e.g. advertising, film texts), but also started to study MDA from more complex perspectives.

Based on Jewitt's study [17], Feng et al. [18] conclude that there are five major perspectives for the current study of multimodal analysis, including interactional sociological analysis [19], the analysis of multimodal metaphor [20], the corpus-based analysis, the social semiotics [4] and Systemic Functional Grammar.

However, as Jewitt [17] argues, the micro description of non-verbal semiotics is separated from broader social issues and cultural contexts. Therefore, it is important for MDA to have an approach that focuses on the wider social and cultural structures behind the discourse.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which "has developed in the direction of social semiotics" [21] draws on the theory of Social Semiotics and Systemic Functional Grammar as well as MDA. CDA emerged from Roger Fowler's work, *Language and Control* [22] and originates from Critical Linguistics. According to H.G. Widdowson [23], CDA is concerned with the broader issues of ideology and social belief in a text. The aim of CDA is to, "reveal to the unwary language user the ideological influences they may be unwittingly subscribing to." In other words, CDA goes beyond the study of language itself and focuses on the real function of discourse. Through efforts made by many scholars, there are various approaches to CDA, such as discursive practice [24]; socio-cognitive approach [25]; discourse historical approach; and Foucauldian discursive analysis.

However, over twenty years' of development in CDA, the system continues to lay emphasis on the written language, and regards other non-verbal modes as having a secondary position to verbal texts. Although Kress and van Leeuwen's [4] make attempts to broaden CDA into non-verbal analysis, until recent years there has been few remarkable effects or an improvement of the situation. Van Leeuwen [26] focuses on the necessity to adopt the CDA approach in multimodal discourse, and claims that an interdisciplinary study should be considered. Machin and Mayr [9] pay attention to how images, photographs, graphics, and verbal texts make meaning from a critical perspective. They put forward a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) that aims to uncover the power relations and ideology behind the surface of linguistics and visual strategies. Nevertheless, if we investigate their studies further, the CDA approach is still mainly applied in the verbal text [27].

Based on previous studies on the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and the different branches of visual

sociology and semiotics, Jancsary et al. [13] offer a concrete methodological approach and explain it in detail through an analysis of two different genres. They divide the structure into three layers based on a three-dimensional view of discourse analysis [24]. Also, they construct an analytical framework that uses five steps and raises a series of questions targeted for each stage. In particular, their framework lays great emphasis on the associations and differences between verbal texts and non-verbal modes, which compensates for the shortage of practical employment of previous multimodal analysis in the CDA-approach.

The theoretical framework utilized in this essay draws on the methodological approach of Jancsary et al. [13]. It includes some minor modifications and simplifications in order to make their research more applicable to the paper's research data. Overall, it adopts the multimodal CDA approach, and the theory of visual grammar will be applied to the visual analysis in the first layer.

In order to clarify the situation, the diagram below outlines the structure.

As "Fig. 1" shows, verbal and visual analysis will be done separately in the first layer. For the verbal analysis, I will focus on personal pronouns, vocabulary, and rhetoric devices. What should be mentioned here is that although personal pronouns could to some extent be categorized as a part of vocabulary, I still list it separately since it is an essential element to be considered. In the analysis of vocabulary, I will just lay emphasis on the content words, especially the nouns and nominal phrases. In the visual analysis, color, gaze, social distance and layout will be discussed in detail. The following is the integrated analysis, which focuses on the relationships between modes, and the integrated messages they together intend to convey. In the third layer, all the previous analysis of the research data will be concluded and evaluated from the broader social context.

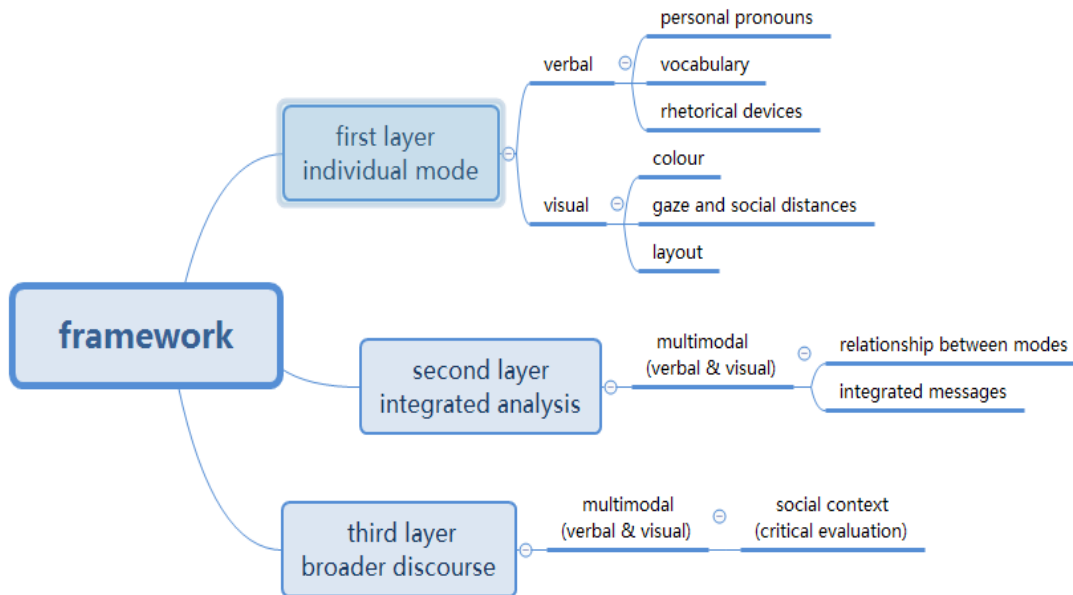


Fig. 1. Overview of the Methodological Approach.

### III. EMPIRICAL FOUNDATION AND DATA COLLECTION

Frequently seen in business discourse, corporate annual report is regarded as an essential marketing tool for many companies [28]. According to Jancsary et al. [13], the main priorities of an annual report are to show the company’s financial conditions, main strategy, and their investment on public welfare. Because it is usually placed on the corporation’s official website, the public has access. Different from other business discourse like advertising which is mainly designed for the customers who are interested in the brand, corporate annual report pays more attention to people who have relevant and close interest or stakes within the company (such as shareholders). And it will also be used by professionals like analysts, rivals, and supervision officers. Although there is a regular format for most corporate annual reports, the report designer is still able to take advantage of color, images and graphics to create a piece of characteristic work.

Tesco, a retail giant in the UK, experienced an economic crisis in 2015. According to the relevant news reports, the reason for its loss is complex, mainly involving a scandal within the company, the personnel changes of management and the fierce competition caused by the rapid development of online shopping. Under this circumstance, it is necessary for Tesco to rebuild its corporate image and re-establish its friendly relationship with shareholders. Evidently, the annual report will be helpful to Tesco to fulfill these goals by showing their determination and confidence to overcome the difficulties and turn around the losses.

There are a total of 185 pages to the annual report.<sup>1</sup> This paper will analyze the first twenty-five pages, namely, the section that outlines the company’s strategy, and includes the CEO’s report, which is regarded as the most important section of the annual report [29]. Furthermore, this part uses rich visual modes over other content.

Based on the discussion above, there are three major research questions this essay will answer:

How will the verbal and visual modes in the chosen data work individually?

What is the interrelationship between verbal and visual modes, and how will they work together to position the target readers?

What are the broader social and cultural issues?

### IV. VERBAL ANALYSIS

#### A. Personal Pronouns

The choice of personal pronouns in discourse is generally tightly connected with the communicative intention and ideology of the writer. As the most widely read section in a corporate newsletter, the CEO’s letter to the shareholders is a reflection on the company’s position, and it contains valuable information about the current situation and the future strategy of the corporation. Since he is the new CEO of Tesco, it is not surprising that Dave Lewis will make full use of this letter to build a positive image for both Tesco and himself. Therefore, in this part, I will focus on the pronouns Dave Lewis employs in his letter.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.tescopl.com/files/pdf/reports/ar15/download\\_annual\\_report.pdf](http://www.tescopl.com/files/pdf/reports/ar15/download_annual_report.pdf)

By using Antconc 3.4.4TM, I calculated the frequencies of different pronouns in Dave Lewis' letter, which in turn was shown back in "Fig. 4".

As shown in "Table I", it is evident that first person plural pronouns are most frequently employed, 64 times in all, whereas second person pronouns are employed the least frequently, in that they do not occur at all in the whole chosen text. Here are some examples from the letter:

- 1) *"It was a huge honor for me to be asked to lead Tesco."*
- 2) *"I arrived at a time of significant challenge."*
- 3) *"A few months after I arrived at Tesco...this kindness and spirit is also in the DNA of Tesco and I'd like us to show it just a little more."*
- 4) *"In many cases this has involved very difficult decisions. The consequence on our business and importantly on our colleagues has been significant."*
- 5) *"We firmly believe that if we give colleagues more power to choose the right actions, we'll do a better job for customers and achieve greater success for our business."*
- 6) *"As we embark on this journey of renewal and change, we recognize the responsibility and opportunity that comes with the choices we make."*

Generally speaking, the usages of the first plural pronouns can be classified into two types: exclusive pronouns widen the distance between the speaker and the listeners, while inclusive pronouns usually have the opposite effect. Interestingly, nearly all the first plural pronouns in this letter are inclusive, which shows that Dave has made an attempt to form a close relationship with the Tesco shareholders and to earn their trust. However, it does not mean that these "we", "us" and "our" pronouns refer to the same groups of people in his letter. In examples (4) and (5), it is clear that "we" refers to Dave, shareholders and other board directors in Tesco; but in example (6), frontline Tesco colleagues are included under "we" as well. This is because in example (5), he presents himself as a leader and extends an olive branch to the employees; as quoted in example (6), he regards himself as a member of Tesco like all the other staff members. By doing so, Dave demonstrates his determination to work with all staff members to help Tesco weather the challenges of the market, and he suggests that Tesco is one giant united team.

The purposes of the first person pronouns are to convey Dave Lewis' position and attitude, and to highlight his unique status within the company, as shown in examples (1) and (2). In example (3), Dave recalls his own experiences of when he first entered Tesco, and he conveys his strong emotional attachment to the company, both of which build a positive image.

The third person pronouns refer to both Tesco's customers and employees, and help to differentiate between the relationships of these participants. Besides, the reason why second person pronouns cannot be found is that the

speaker is that the writer intends to narrow the distance between him and the readers.

TABLE I. USAGE OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN DAVE LEWIS' LETTER

First person pronouns		Second person pronouns	Third person pronouns	
Singular	Plural		singular	Plural
I/my/me	we/us/our/ours /ourselves	you/your /yourself	he/his/she /her	they/them/their /themselves
22	64	0	2	10



Fig. 2. Two double-page spreads from the research data (pp2-5).

**B. Vocabulary**

Because the usages of personal pronouns are discussed in the last part, as mentioned previously, in this section, I will place emphasis on the content words. Like most corporate annual reports, Tesco's report, especially the financial review section, is rich in technical language. For example, the data shown above contains technical language including "cash flow", "net pension liability", "asset swap", and "one-off items". Technical language is different from most of the words and expressions used by people outside the workplace, and it can sound confusing to people who lack the relevant professional knowledge or experience. Therefore, it can be inferred that these parts that are peppered with technical language are specially designed for people with a strong expertise in finance or management.

As well as technical language, this corporate report also employs much positive language, which in turn is used to construct the image of Tesco. Examples include words or phrases such as "greater success", "stronger financial position", and "strengthening". It is worth noting that even though Tesco has experienced an economic crisis in 2015, the financial review writer still tries one's best to avoid negative expressions as much as possible. The example quotation listed below is one illustration of this (The original sentence is in the second picture in "Fig. 3").:

- 7) *"In addition we have taken the difficult decision to close 43 unprofitable stores and not to proceed with 49 new store developments."*

In example (7), Alan Stewart, the Chief Financial Officer of Tesco, uses "unprofitable" instead of "deficit" (the figures are shown in the diagrams in pages 12 to 13) to describe the financial status of these 43 stores; the former adjective is a euphemism realized by negation.



Fig. 3. Two double-page spreads from the research data (pp10-13).

C. Rhetorical Devices

There are some rhetorical devices that can be found in the chosen data, among which the numbers are easiest to identify. According to Jancsary et al. [13], numbers are used for “operationalization” and “objectivation”. In this report, the employment of numbers can be seen everywhere, since an annual report is supposed to offer accurate and reliable statistics to the readers, and numbers can clearly show the real situation of the corporation.

Another rhetorical device used frequently here is lexical repetition. It is a direct and general device that is used to organize information and link parts of a text together. In Example (5), the pronouns “we” and “our” appear four times in a sentence; these are used to strongly emphasize the importance of the participants involved, an indication that Dave Lewis has great confidence in both his colleagues and in himself.

In addition, contrast is employed to some extent, and there is a simple but vivid example taken from “Fig. 4”:

8) “Small actions, big difference.”



Fig. 4. A double-page spread from the research data (pp2-3).

This is the slogan Tesco proposed for its staff and customers. “Small” and “big” possesses opposite meanings, which are in sharp contrast with each other. In this way, Tesco presents a positive and diligent image, which is most likely to be favored by its customers.

V. VISUAL ANALYSIS

A. Color

As the prime visual property that is perceived by nearly all humans, color reflects the reality of the world we live in, and can also reflects our feelings and thoughts. As Kress and Van Leeuwen [30] state, colors “increasing are colors in a color scheme” and color has much to do with modality in visual grammar.

The term modality originates from linguistics. It “refer[s] to the truth value or credibility of statements about the world” [30]. Color is a marker of naturalistic modality; the lower its intensity (in terms of saturation, differentiation, modulation or brightness), the lower the modality.

In Tesco’s corporate report, it is easy to see that blue is the most popular background color for the text (see “Fig. 2” and “Fig. 3”). It conveys a sense of calmness and stability, and also mirrors, even underscores, the Tesco logo. However, although they are within the same color spectrum, there are some obvious differences between these shades of blue in the text. The blue text in pages 10 and 11 in “Fig. 3” is lighter and less saturated than the blue text in page 4 in “Fig. 2” This suggests that the modality in the former pages is lower in that in the latter page. The reason is that Page 4 is all about the CEO’s letter, which involves the writer’s emotions and attitudes, but the latter is more like a reflection of genuine statistics, which is more objective and contains less personal emotions.



Fig. 5. A double-page spread from the research data (pp18-21).

Besides blue, green is also used as a background color (see “Fig. 5”). It is well known that green is closely associated with nature and hope, and often appears in the environmental discourse. Therefore, this text color is used by Tesco to convey an environmentally friendly image.

B. Gaze and Social Distance

According to the theory of visual grammar, the represented participants involved in the image could establish an imaginary interpersonal relationship with the viewer by the gaze. To be more specific, if the represented participants look at the viewers’ eyes directly, that image could be defined as “demand” picture. Otherwise, it could be defined as “offer” picture. In the chosen data of the corporate annual report, most of the images belong to the “offer” picture, which mainly aims to provide the viewers

with certain information, such as the pleasant attitude of the staff in “Fig. 6”, which is even strengthened by the facial expression of smiling, and customers’ happy mood when or after shopping from Tesco (see the left corner of “Fig. 3”). Also, there are some “demand” pictures shown in the previous cases. For example, in “Fig. 2”, the Chairman and the CEO of Tesco both have the direct eye contact with the viewers. By doing so, the producers of the image establish an interactional relationship between the represented participants and the viewers, not only stressing the dominant position of the Chairman and the CEO in Tesco, but also showing their confidence and power.

Social distance of images has much to do with the shot, which could be categorized as “close personal distance”, “far personal distance”, “close social distance”, “far social distance” and “public distance”. [30] Social Distance is determined by social relation, and the long or short distance depends on the alienated or close interpersonal relationships. [31] The producer of the images could expand or narrow the distance between represented participants and the viewers by the chosen of shot, and establish an imaginary relationship between them. For example, in “Fig. 4”, the long shot is taken to present all the people’s figures clearly involved in that image, and may make viewers look at these people as strangers; but in “Fig. 2”, we can see that the close shot is taken to show the image of the CEO and the Chairman, which seems to set up a dialogue between the represented participants and the viewers, and largely narrow the distance between them.



Fig. 6. A double-page spread from the research data (pp8-9).

**C. Layout**

Kress and van Leeuwen [31] proposed that there are three principles of composition in multimodal text: information value exists where the value of elements are determined by their location within the text; salience concerns the placing of elements either in the foreground or background in order to highlight their importance and attract readers’ attention; and, framing usually “focuses on the presence or absence of framing device” [30]. These principles can be applied both to single images and to integrated texts, such as layouts in this case.

In terms of information value, the left column of text in the corporate report contains historic data, while the right column contains new information. In “Fig. 6”, the left

column contains details of the business model that Tesco has relied upon over the years; while the right page comprises a clear, salient picture with some brief text boxes on Tesco’s future strategy.

In addition, summarized information tends to be placed on the top of the column, while more detailed information is placed further down. In “Fig. 4”, the top left part of the page contains some choice comments from Tesco’s customers, and the columns on the right page mainly concern Tesco’s mission, which is the essence of all the messages involved in this double-spread. By contrast, the bottom of the double spread contains financial headlines, which are concrete statistics of Tesco’s financial performance in 2015. The intention of the page designer was probably to attract readers’ attention to the more ideal text and make them focus on key information.

In this corporate report, every single page has its own salience. For example, in “Fig. 6”, the saleswoman (as well as the logo in her clothes) placed in the foreground is salient, while in “Fig. 5” (page 21) the customer in blue is salient. The most popular way in this report to emphasize a person or an object is to put him/her/it in the foreground and to blur the background via digital technology.

**VI. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MODE AND THEIR INTEGRATED MEANINGS**

Barthes [2] proposed that there are three relationships between language and visual image: anchorage exists where text is used to compensate the shortage of image (in its ambiguity) and to explain the connotative meaning of an image; an illustration exists when imagery is used to explain a text to some extent; and relay exists where a text and an image are complementary of each other. In the chosen data in this study, the linkages between visual imagery and language mainly involve anchorage and relay.

In terms of anchorage, there is a metaphoric example in the left picture (page 6) of “Fig. 7”. In this photo, a lady in red (red also mirrors the logo of Tesco) holds an umbrella for a boy. And the first paragraph of this page reads, “We need to protect and strengthen our financial position so that we can maintain the flexibility to invest in a better shopping trip for customers.” Therefore, we could easily draw a conclusion of this metaphoric example: “We” (Tesco) is the lady in red; “protect [ion]” is her holding the umbrella; “financial position” is the boy. In this way, the readers may be left with a deep impression of this page and the core information that the page producer intended to convey.

As for relay, an example exists in “Fig. 3”; the graphics offer straightforward and intuitive information so as to help readers capture key information from a large body of statistics; while the text could help the readers understand the whole event in a logical way. In these cases, verbal texts and visual imagery work together and help each other in meaning making in an effective way.

Overall, the verbal and visual language reinforce each other to present the situation of the company at great length to the target readers especially by the employment of charts,

tables, graphics and numbers, to make the report look as accurate and objective as possible. Moreover, based on the detailed reflection of the actual situation, the report producers, to a large extent, intend to build a certain image of Tesco, and try to establish some relationship with its potential readers by the creative uses of linguistic strategies and visual elements, which would be further discussed in the next section.



Fig. 7. A double-page spread from the research data (pp6-7).

## VII. CRITICAL EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

It can be inferred from the above analysis of the company's corporate report that text producers intend to repair Tesco's damaged image and rebuild its positive identity at this particularly tough moment. In doing these, they make attempts to show their confidence and good image by the usages of a great deal of positive language.

In addition to acting out of self-interest, they are also trying to do business in an environmentally friendly way, which could be observed through the uses of green color, since corporate social responsibility has become a common concern in society [32]. If they can demonstrate that they are showing greater social responsibility, both the public and the company's shareholders may be left with a good impression as to their behavior, and this could contribute to the rebuilding of Tesco's image.

Moreover, they make efforts to establish a close relationship with the readers, which could be seen from the employment of gaze and social distance. In particular, they are trying to win back the trust of shareholders by using a series of linguistic devices like personal pronouns to show their enthusiasm, determination, and unity. In the meantime, they still lay great emphasis on the support of their customers and their employees, which can be seen through their salience in the pictures or the usages of personal pronouns in Dave Lewis' letter. What they imply is that with the help of shareholders, customers and all staff, they exist as a united team to go through the crisis together even in this troublesome condition.

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