

# On the English Translation of Classic Cantonese Cuisine—A Multimodal Approach

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**Abstract:** As the world becomes more globalised and cultures grow ever more intertwined, a great number of Chinese dishes are known and enjoyed by guests from all over the world. It offers a crucial channel for them to know Chinese catering culture. Cantonese cuisine as one of the eight famous traditional Chinese cuisines is renowned for its distinctive characteristics both in China and abroad. However, the study of the translation of Cantonese cuisine is far from enough, especially the classic ones. Based on a synthetic framework of multimodal discourse analysis, this study explores the collaboration of different modalities in the English translation of classic Cantonese cuisines and its effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Multimodal Translation; Translation Effectiveness; Classic Cantonese Cuisine

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## 1. Introduction

Cantonese cuisine is a strong representation of Cantonese people's hospitality, inclusiveness and genuineness, conveying their culture and philosophy, and making it a worthy part of Guangdong culture. As the most representative part of Cantonese cuisine, classic Cantonese cuisine (CCC hereafter) refers to those tasty dishes with a rich history and cultural connotations. It is widely appreciated by people at home and abroad and is indicative of the local food habits. There is much to be discovered in CCC, such as its cultural contents, historical background, development, etc.

However, the common problems with existing English translations of CCC are that they suffer from cultural omissions. For example, in some English translations of CCC, the cultural flavour is erased, leaving only the cooking methods and ingredients, which is unhelpful in the communication and development of Cantonese culture with foreign cultures. As the world grows more intertwined, the importance and necessity of the English translation of Cantonese cuisine have become increasingly clear, and the existing English translation studies need to be further developed.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is the study of how language is used communicatively in a context (Zhu YS, 2003). Since discourse analysis was put forward by the American linguist Harris, scholars around the world have endeavoured to come up with various theories and methods of discourse analysis. Traditional discourse analysis mainly focuses on language. It only concerns the relationship between language system and semantic structure, social culture, and psychological cognition, ignoring the contribution of other forms of expression such as image, sound, colour, animation and so on to meaning-making (Zhu YS, 2007). Language is by no means the only means of conveying meaning. Therefore, traditional discourse analysis has great limitations.

### 2.2 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA hereafter), which emerged in the West in the 1990s, offers a new way to overcome the limitation of traditional discourse analysis. Multimodality refers to the use of multiple senses, such as hearing, viewing and touching, to communicate through a variety of means and symbolic resources such as language, images, sounds

and actions.

By modality, we mean the channels and media of communication, including symbolic systems such as language, images, colours and music. According to (Zhang DL 2009), living organisms exchange information with the outside world through five sensory modalities: visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and taste. Discourse that uses two or more modalities at the same time is called “multimodal discourse”.

Although it has only been more than ten years since the introduction of MDA in China, It situates discourse within multiple modalities and multiple sign systems, examining how different modalities of language and other sign systems work together to participate in the construction and communication of thematic meaning. This is of great significance for the translation and communication of culture, in that it points out the bias of traditional translation studies that focus on language and offers new perspectives and approaches to the translation and communication of culture.

## **2.3 The Synthetic Framework of MDA**

The synthetic framework of MDA is built on the theory of systemic-functional the level of context of culture, the level of context of the situation, the semantic level, the formal level and the level of media (Martin, 1992). Based on this framework, Zhang comes up with his synthetic theoretical framework of MDA, which includes four levels, namely, cultural level, contextual level, content level, and expression level.

### **2.3.1 Cultural Level**

From the perspective of Zhang, cultural level is the key to making multimodal communication possible. In general, the cultural level includes the ideology consisting of human patterns of thinking, life philosophy, living habits and all the unspoken rules of society. During translation, cultural factors should be the primary consideration for a translator. There are huge differences in thinking patterns, ideologies and living habits between the West and China. Even today, with increasing globalisation, cases of communication failure due to such cultural differences are frequently seen. The translation of Chinese food names should be carefully considered to minimise the barrier to reading caused by social and cultural differences.

### **2.3.2 Contextual Level**

In context of situation, communication is subject to contextual factors, which include the field of the discourse, the tenor of the discourse, and the mode of discourse. At the same time, this process has to be carried out in a certain communication mode. Under the dish name translation circumstance, the diet context provides much information besides the text version.

### **2.3.3 Content Level**

The content level consists of two aspects: meaning and form. Meaning is made up of ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning that are conditioned by the field of discourse, the tenor of discourse and the mode of discourse. The formal level contains the formal features of the different modalities and the relationships between them.

In the study of multimodal discourse, it is important to discover how the different modalities of media relate to each other and work together to achieve the meaning the speaker is trying to convey. Therefore, we need to study the relationship between the different modalities of media. Zhang (2009) created two categories to classify these multimodality relations: complementary and non-complementary.

### **2.3.4 Expression Level**

The expression level refers more to the media. Media is the material form in which discourse can ultimately be presented in the real world. Media can be subdivided into language and non-language.

## **3. Application of MDA into the English Translation of Classic Cantonese**

## Cuisine

### 3.1 MDA and the English Translation of Classic Cantonese Cuisine

Sara Dicerto (2018) discusses the application of MDA and argues that case studies or the analysis of specific bilingual issues can be approached through multimodal text analysis. MDA is applicable to both static and dynamic texts. Texts including images and written language are said to be static multimodal texts, such as newspapers, comics and user manuals. Texts with moving images, spoken language or sound sources are said to be dynamic multimodal texts, such as subtitles and plays.

Most restaurant menus, usually composed of dish names and images, belong to the static multimodal text. Menus tend to include common illustrations like pictures of dishes, photos of scenic spots or historical sites in China, images of local customs, the title of the restaurant and so on. It only makes sense when illustrations and texts are combined to make the content more engaging, convincing and appealing to the customers. Therefore, written language and images used in the menu both play a significant role in meaning construction.

### 3.2 Modality Relations in Classic Cantonese Cuisine

In the study of multimodal discourse, it is important to discover how the different modalities of media relate to each other and work together to achieve the meaning the speaker is trying to convey. Therefore, we need to study the relationship between the different modalities of media.

Usually, in a menu, there are some common illustrations, including pictures of dishes, photos of scenic spots and historic sites in China, images of local customs, the title of the restaurant and so on. It only makes sense that illustrations and texts are combined to make the content more engaging, convincing and appealing to the customers. Therefore, the modes in the menu all have a certain function of conveying meaning and play a significant role in the meaning construction, thus they all constitute the complementary relation.

Due to the uniqueness of the translated text of the menu, the modalities that can be used are rather limited, with only two modalities, language and image, unlike subtitle translation, where the sound modality can also be considered. As a result, the relations between the modalities involved in the translation of menus are also limited. Most of the modalities involved in menu translation have the enhancement relation, as one modality (usually the image mode) is the primary form of information transfer and another modality (usually the language mode) reinforces it.

#### 3.2.1 The Primary-secondary Relation

The primary-secondary relation refers to how one modality complements and elaborates on another to be able to better communicate communicative purposes or intentions. For example, some dishes contain less information, so constructing a primary-secondary relation between the language mode and the image mode can convey the information about the name of the dish very well. Specifically, language mode can be used to convey messages as to how the dish is prepared and what are the main ingredients, and image mode can be used to fill the diner's imagination of the dish and whet their appetite.

#### 3.2.2 The Intersecting Relation

The intersecting relation refers to the intersection of two modalities that deliberately create an asymmetry of information, allowing the reader to have more interpretation of the communicative purpose.

Some dishes contain a lot of background information, so it is better to construct the intersecting relation between the language mode and the image mode to facilitate the transfer of information. When the discourse relies on the situation to achieve its meaning construction, the translator should not be confined to the texts but translate information in the situation in a more extensive manner. More importantly, it is important to be aware of the intersection of the language mode and the image mode in the narrative. Words and pictures are not divided, on the contrary, they are closely linked. The images go

some way to verifying the authenticity of the text, which in turn provides more material for the images. In the end, they complement each other.

## 4. Application of MDA to the English Translation of Classic Cantonese Cuisine

### 4.1 English Translation of Classic Cantonese Cuisine at the Cultural Level

Influenced by different historical and geographical factors, there are huge differences between Eastern and Western countries in terms of cultural practices. Therefore, while translating CCC into English, translators should not only help the English reader to understand the Chinese culture but also take into account the understanding and acceptability of them.

Taking “广州文昌鸡” as an example. Figure 1 shows a restaurant menu of it.



Figure 1 Guangzhou “Wenchang” Boneless Steamed Chicken

Table 1 Texts in Figure 1

Chinese Text	English Text
C1: 广州文昌鸡	
C2: 爽滑鸡肉、咸香火腿、细嫩鸡肝，如此丰富口感体验，只有您亲自体验尝过，才能知道其中美妙，80多年前创新，今天依然经典。	E1: Guangzhou Restaurant’s “Wenchang” Boneless Steamed Chicken
C3: 厨师推荐	E2: THE CHEF RECOMMEND

On this menu, the image shows that the main ingredient of the dish is chicken and the topping has choy sum (a type of leafy green vegetable), but it is difficult to identify what is sandwiched between the two pieces of chicken. As for the text, there are three parts of Chinese text and two parts of English text included in this menu.

C1 identifies the name of the cuisine, making it immediately obvious that the subject of the cuisine is chicken. Any Chinese diner, with a little knowledge of China’s administrative divisions, will know that “Guangzhou” belongs to Guangdong Province and “Wenchang” to Hainan Province. The combination of two place names shows that there must be a blend of cultures and innovations in this cuisine.

C2 tells diners the price of the cuisine and also tells the Chinese reader side ingredients of the cuisine, which are ham and chicken liver. This section also tells the history of the cuisine. It was innovated over 80 years ago, which refers to Liang Rui’s innovation and improvement of Wenchang Chicken in 1930s. Combined with C1, it is easy for Chinese diners to know this cuisine well.

C3 indicates that this cuisine is recommended by the chef and one cannot miss this cuisine when dining in this restaurant.

E1 shows the name of the dish to English diners, informing them that it is Guangzhou Restaurant’s “Wenchang” Boneless Steamed Chicken. For those who do not know China well, “Wenchang” does not give them the same perception as Chinese diners. But this makes sense, as “Wenchang” represents another place other than Guangzhou. Foreign diners will be able to understand that this is a mixture of two flavours when they see “Guangzhou” and “Wenchang” show up together in the name of this cuisine. The skilful translator has added its boneless feature to the English translation perfectly.

E2 is a literal translation of C3, telling foreign diners the cuisine is super in the chef’s eyes. In western countries, chefs are widely receiving respect from the public, who would even thank them after tasting the food. At some feasts, the organizers would invite the chef out at the end of a banquet and introduce the chef to the guests in a grand manner. The chef’s recommendation is, therefore, a great advertisement for the dish.

Upon comparison, it is quite clear that the part of C2 has been omitted by the translator. That is, the information on raw materials, background introduction, etc. are not shown to foreign diners. If this key information is not displayed on the menu, some diners will likely have a bad experience. It is the translator’s responsibility to consider this aspect and label the ingredients clearly in the translation. Therefore, translators should be aware of the cultural context when translating menus and it is not just the name of the dish that needs to be translated.

## 4.2 English Translation of Classic Cantonese Cuisine at Contextual Level

Taking “黄埔炒蛋” as an example. Figure 2 shows a restaurant menu of it.



Figure 2 Stir-fry Eggs

Table 2 Texts in Figure 2

Chinese Text	English Text
C1: 黄埔炒蛋	
C2: 黄埔炒蛋如一块亮金色的布，因出自黄埔船民之手，故名黄埔蛋。传入广州市区后经过师傅们的研究改进，成为一款价廉物美的传统名菜。	E1: Stir-fry Eggs

C1 is the name of this dish with a location, indicating that the dish originated in the Huangpu district of Guangzhou.

C2 uses a metaphor to describe the colour and shape of the dish; the colour of the stir-fry eggs is bright gold and the

eggs are piled together like a cloth. This is a fitting description to go with the picture, as the eggs in the picture are exactly as it is described. In C2, a brief description of the origin of the cuisine is also given.

E1 is the English translation of the dish, telling diners only the ingredients and the cooking method. For foreign diners, the picture and the text of E1 constitute the entire menu, from which they can obtain information about the ingredients, colour, shape and cooking method of the dish.

In fact, the name of the dish originally comes with a place name, informing diners of the origin of the dish, but the translator removes it when translating, making it difficult for diners to remember the place of Huangpu in Guangzhou. Also, the full context of C2 is completely omitted by the translator, so that diners are not informed of the origin of the dish and are not aware that it is a dish created by fishermen.

Therefore, when translating menus, translators shouldn't omit important geographical information, as place names not only mark the origin of a dish but also bring the place to the attention of foreign diners. If this part is ignored, then the external communication of food culture will be cut.

### 4.3 English Translation of Classic Cantonese Cuisine at Content Level

Taking “蜜汁叉烧” as an example, Figure 3 shows a restaurant menu of it.



Figure 3 Honey-Stewed BBQ Pork

Table 3 Texts in Figure 3

Chinese Text	English Text
C1: 烧味 shao wei	
C2: 30年烧腊老师傅匠心制作；选用西班牙伊比利 亚黑毛猪；一头猪只选取3斤梅头肉；坚持传统港	E1: Honey-Stewed BBQ Pork

式烧腊制作；自制桂花蜜汁，当餐制作

C3: 十大必吃

C4: 蜜汁叉烧

There are four pictures on this menu in total, the combination of these images can be interpreted by both source and target language readers, the pictures take up three-quarters of this menu section. The rest is the text:

C1 is the category this dish belongs to. C2 introduces the source of the ingredients of the dish. Honey-Stewed BBQ Pork is a dish made by an old chef with more than 30 years of experience in barbecue. This means that the dish is both classic and authentic. C3 marks the place of this dish in the restaurant. C4 is the name of the dish and E1 is the English name of the dish.

The purpose of a classic Cantonese menu is to inform diners of the dishes available in a restaurant and to help the TL audience understand a restaurant and even Cantonese food culture. This aspect is mainly related to the ideational meaning. The translator translates the textual information of the menu and presents it to the target audience. The translator is responsible for providing diners with complete information about the menu and plays an important role in the presentation of food culture. This is mainly related to interpersonal meaning. In the menu, language dominates the construction of the textual structure, because it mainly shoulders the responsibility for cohesion, interpretation, promotion and cultural transmission.

#### 4.4 English Translation of Classic Cantonese Cuisine at Expression Level

With the development of Internet technology, menus are now more varied and are not limited to paper menus per se. Some restaurants use electronic screens for diners to order food, others provide applets for diners to order food on their mobile phones, and this undoubtedly provides a wider scope for the multimodal expression of CCC.

This part focuses on paper menus, using “唐宫烧鹅皇” as an example. Figure 4 shows a restaurant menu of it.



Figure 4 Roasted Goose

Table 4 Texts in Figure 4

Chinese Text	English Text
C1: 自然放养的品质，每一口都是酥脆香滑	E1: BECAUSE THE GOOSE IS NATURALLY RAISED, EVERY TASTE OF IT IS CRISPY AND SMOOTH
C2: 唐宫烧鹅皇	E2: Roasted Goose
C3: 来自清远自然放养的黑鬃鹅，每日按需分时段出炉。新鲜出炉的烧鹅，皮脆、肉嫩、肥而不腻。唐宫烧鹅皇荣获深圳十大招牌名菜称号，是必食的人气菜。	E3: Black goose, which are naturally raised in Qingyuan, are released on different time as daily needs. The freshly roasted goose is crispy, tender, fact but not greasy. The Goose was awarded the title of Shenzhen Top Ten Famous Brands, and it is a popular dish for customers in Tang Palace.
C4: 唐宫·十大招牌菜	

In this cuisine, the language media includes pure language media consisting of written language and images. The non-language media involves physical media: the menu. The CCC is presented to the diners through the menu. The translator can take advantage of the language media and the non-language media to deliver messages to foreign diners effectively. The text also occupies a considerable amount of space in this menu, with a half-portion of Chinese text and a half-portion of English text.

C1 informs diners that the goose is freely ranged. Free-ranging is an effective way to improve the quality of goose meat. E1 is the direct translation of C1. When diners see the words “naturally raised”, they can easily associate the hanging roast goose with a goose running freely on the ground, foraging for food.

C2 is the Chinese name of this dish and E2 is the English name of the dish. The name of the restaurant is Tang Palace, and the translator has omitted the name of the restaurant from the translation, so that diners can focus more on the dish itself, rather than associating it with the restaurant.

C3 explains the dish’s origin and also declares the status of the dish, which has been awarded the title of Shenzhen’s top ten famous dishes. E3 is the translation of C3. Informing diners of the awards that the dish has won will let them know that it is a well-loved dish. There is a grammar mistake in E3, in which the translator has confused the singular and plural.

C4 informs diners that this is one of the top ten signature dishes in this restaurant, which is a recommendation to diners.

In all, the language media are formed by pictures of the dish and texts describing it. The texts make the picture of the Roasted Goose look richer and fuller and evoke more associations for the diner, but this effect cannot be achieved by looking at the picture or reading the text alone; only by putting the two modalities together can the overall meaning of the dish be conveyed. The dish is presented by non-language media, the menu, as a physical entity to provide information to the diners.

Upon analysing the above cases, it is found that most many dish names are translated in a way that ignores other textual information in the menu, resulting in an inadequate transfer of meaning. It is important to note that the cases selected for analysis are more representative of a particular level, but it does not mean that only one single level needs to be considered when translating. The four levels all need to be taken into account during the translation; they are inseparable.

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis takes CCC as an example to analyse the English translation of it within a synthetic framework of MDA.



After detailed analysis of the culture, contextual, content, and expression levels of the carefully chosen cases of CCC, we have the following findings.

Firstly, for static multimodal text of CCC menus, the image mode and the language mode work together to convey the full meaning of the menu. They often form the primary-secondary relation or the intersecting relation.

Secondly, most English translations of CCC only focus on the translation of the name of the dish, neglecting other textual information beside it, such as notes in the menu and explanations next to the picture of the dish. If these additional explanatory and descriptive texts are ignored, it may lead to misunderstanding and the amount of menu information received by Chinese diners and English ones differs.

Lastly, when translating CCC into English in a multimodal context, it is necessary to consider the four levels of culture, context, content and expression. CCC is not only delicious, but also rich in cultural connotations. Therefore, when translating it into English, the historical background behind the name of the dish should be paid attention to in order to better convey the basic information of the dish and its cultural connotation. Since the translation of CCC occurs in specific context, only by taking full account of the characteristics of the environment in which diners order their meals can translations be more conducive to their understanding of the dishes. Therefore, it is hoped that further studies can be conducted in a wider scope where MDA can be applied.

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