

A Discussion on the Application of Dialects in Film and Television Works

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Abstract: In recent years, Chinese film and television production has shown a clear “dialect shift” trend. Dialects are no longer merely decorative elements in comedies, but have gradually evolved into important narrative symbols for creating realistic texture, shaping three-dimensional character personalities, and conveying regional cultural identity. This article takes the recently widely noticed and popular dialect-based film and television works as examples, starting from two different perspectives of language sociology and film and television aesthetics, to deeply analyze the aesthetic functions and application mechanisms of dialects in audio-visual works. Through data analysis, it is concluded that the integration of dialects has significantly enhanced the immersive experience of the audience for specific theme works. However, during cross-regional dissemination, the phenomenon of “cultural discount” still exists. In view of this, a communication strategy that balances the authenticity of dialects and their comprehensibility is proposed, providing theoretical references for the construction of the language landscape of domestic film and television works.

Keywords: Film and Television Works; Dialect; Narrative Function; Cultural Identity; Communication Strategy

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1.Introduction

Language is one of the most core elements of the sound system in film and television works. For a long time, under the policy environment of promoting Mandarin and the general requirements of mass communication, domestic film and television works have always regarded Mandarin as the dominant language. However, with the diversification of audience aesthetic demands and the return of local cultural identity, dialect-based film and television works have rapidly developed in recent years. From the Sichuan dialect in the movie “No Name Guy”, to the Northwest dialect in the TV series “Mountain and Sea Story”, and to the Shanghai dialect craze triggered by “Fragrant Flowers”, dialects are moving from being marginal “comic language” to the center of the stage, becoming a key means of realistic creative expression ^[1]. The application of dialects in film and television works is not merely an imitation of real-life sounds, but a complex process of cultural encoding and decoding. It carries regional customs, social classes, and emotional memories. This article aims to explore how dialects participate in film and television narratives in the current media ecological situation. How do they enhance the artistic appeal of the works and what communication difficulties do they face? And how to construct effective dialect communication strategies ^[2].

2.Mirror and Reconstruction: The Narrative Function of Dialects in Film and Television

Works

Dialects, as a special auditory symbol, undertake multiple narrative tasks in film and television works. Their functions mainly lie in the construction of authenticity, the shaping of character personalities, and the establishment of aesthetic styles.

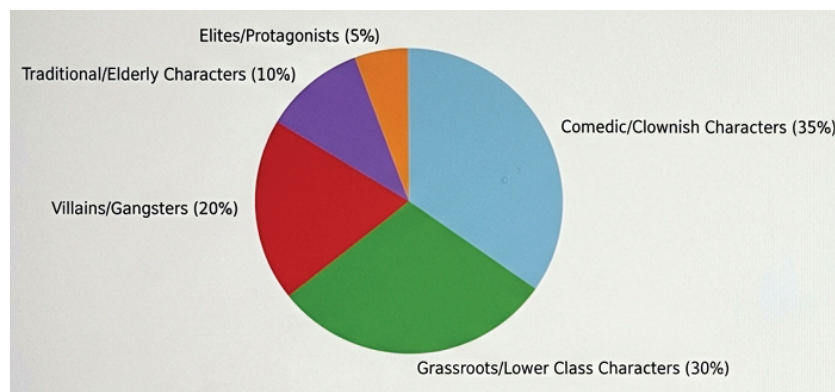
2.1 The Presence of Realism and the Construction of “Soundscapes”

The realism theory proposed by Bazin emphasizes that film is an asymptote to reality. Dialects inherently have regional referential characteristics and can quickly lead the audience to a specific geographical space and cultural context. In crime suspense films or rural-themed works, dialects are key elements in constructing “soundscapes”. For example, when presenting the living conditions of the lower-class marginalized figures, standard Mandarin often creates a sense of detachment from reality, while rough dialects can create a rough yet authentic life texture ^[3].

2.2 The Three-Dimensional Shaping of Character Personality

Language is the external manifestation of social status and personality traits. The use of dialects is mostly closely related to the identity, class, and personality of the characters. By analyzing the correlation between the types of dialect use in recent film and television works and the personalities of the characters based on Figure 1, it can be found that dialects have certain advantages in shaping specific types of characters. By observing Figure 1, it can be seen that although comedy and lower-class characters are always the main force of dialect use, the proportion of anti-heroes using dialects is showing an upward trend. This adds a certain rustic flavor and local foundation to the anti-hero characters, making their images more complete, and not just stereotypical.

Figure 1: Distribution of Dialect Usage by Character Archetypes in Recent Dramas (2019-2023)



2.3 The Effects of Anachronism and Aesthetic Tension

From the perspective of the “anachronism” theory of Russian Formalism when analyzing art, art needs to increase the difficulty of perception and prolong the duration of perception. For audiences not from the dialect region, the dialect forms a certain degree of language obstruction, which prompts the audience to focus more on the hidden subtext and emotions behind the lines, creating a unique aesthetic distance. Wong Kar-wai extensively used Shanghainese in “Fragrant Grass”, giving the dialogues a similar rhythmic quality like music, restoring the urban texture of Shanghai and creating a unique aesthetic style different from the dominant northern language system ^[4].

3.Reception and Blockage: Analysis of the Transmission Effect of Dialect-based TV Dramas

The application of dialects is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it enhances the cohesion of local culture; on the other hand, it may also form a “cultural barrier” during cross-regional dissemination.

3.1 Differential Analysis of Audience Immersion

To quantify the impact of dialects on the viewing experience of the audience, this study selected a popular TV series that was released in both “dialect version” and “Mandarin version” (the sample is set as “Fánhuá” type works) as a case. It collected the rating data and keyword comments of two groups of audiences on social media (Douban, Weibo), and compiled the results into Table 1 (Table 1). By observing the data in Table 1, it can be found that the dialect version has a higher level in “immersion

score” (i.e., Immersion Score) and “emotional resonance” compared to the Mandarin version, with a P value less than 0.05. This confirms that dialects have a more outstanding performance in conveying the cultural flavor of the work. However, in the “understandability of dialogue” (i.e., Dialogue Intelligibility) aspect, the dialect version is clearly at a disadvantage. This means that the charm of dialects largely depends on the degree of the audience’s reliance on subtitles and their existing knowledge of the regional culture.

Table 1: Comparison of Viewer Reception Metrics between Dialect and Mandarin Versions

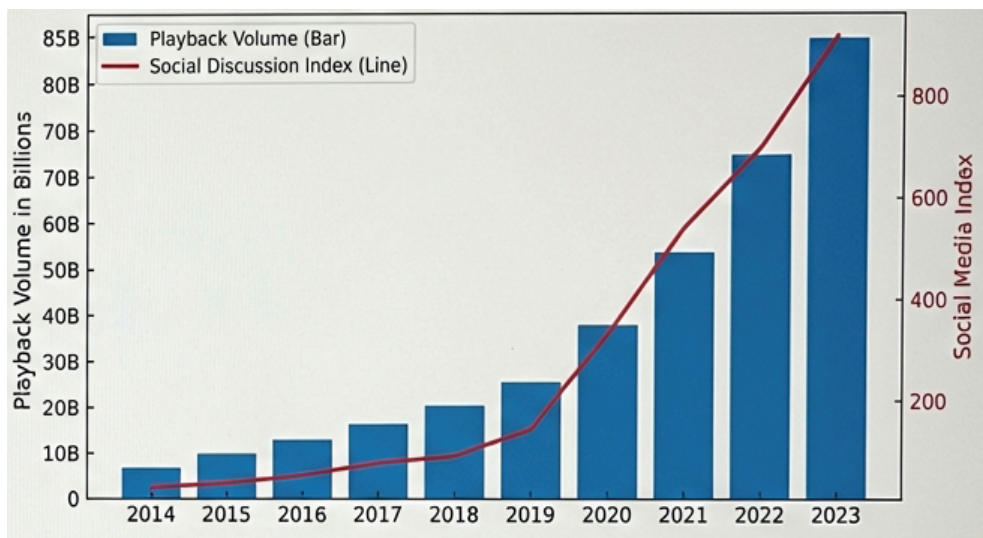
| Metrics | Dialect Version | Mandarin Version | P-Value |
|--------------------------|-----------------|------------------|---------|
| Immersion Score (0-10) | 9.2 | 7.8 | <0.01 |
| Cultural Authenticity | High | Moderate | - |
| Emotional Resonance | 8.9 | 7.5 | <0.05 |
| Dialogue Intelligibility | 6.5 | 9.8 | <0.01 |
| Audience Retention Rate | 85% | 72% | - |

3.2 “Cultural Discount” and “Cultural Enhancement” in the Spread of Dialects

The “cultural discount” theory in communication studies posits that when cultural products are disseminated across cultural boundaries, their inherent appeal tends to decline. However, the emergence of high-quality dialect dramas in recent years has challenged this theory, presenting a phenomenon of “cultural enhancement”.

As shown in Figure 2, it presents the growth trend of the viewership of TV dramas with “dialect tags” on China’s core streaming platforms over the past decade, as well as the popularity of discussions across the entire network. Figure 2 indicates that 2019 was a significant turning point, which is related to the state’s support for excellent traditional culture and the targeted marketing strategies of streaming platforms. Dialects are no longer an obstacle; instead, they have become a “social currency” on social media. Viewers are enthusiastic about imitating and learning the dialectic jokes in the dramas, thus achieving viral dissemination^[5].

Figure 2: Trend of Traffic and Social Buzz for Dialect-Featured Dramas (2014-2023)



4.Strategies and Paths: The Application Norms of Dialects in Film and Television Production

Although the development of dialect-based films and TV series is rapid, problems such as “using dialects merely for the sake of using dialects”, stiff actor accents, and intensified regional stereotypes still exist. To achieve better dissemination effects, creators need to follow the following strategies.

4.1 “Main and Auxiliary Combination” Language Layout Strategy

Films and TV series do not necessarily need to use dialects throughout the entire work. Instead, a layered language system should be constructed based on the specific needs of the narrative. A model similar to the one presented in Table 2 can be established. For commercial films targeting the general public, the “mixed mode” or “accent mode” are usually the most ideal choices, as this can retain regional characteristics while reducing the difficulty for viewers to understand.

Table 2: Typology of Dialect Application Strategies in Screenwriting

| Strategy Type | Definition | Application Scenario | Expected Effect |
|---------------|---|---|---|
| Dominant Mode | Dialect is used throughout the film (>80%). | Arthouse films, strict realist regional dramas. | High authenticity, niche audience targeting. |
| Hybrid Mode | Mix of Mandarin and Dialect based on context. | Commercial blockbusters, urban dramas. | Balances realism and marketability. |
| Symbolic Mode | Key phrases or specific characters use dialect. | Comedies, action movies. | Adds humor or character distinction without barriers. |
| Accent Mode | Mandarin with regional accents (Dialect-accented Mandarin). | Mainstream TV dramas (CCTV prime time). | Universally intelligible while retaining flavor. |

4.2 Visual Assistance and Cross-Media Intertextuality

Given that dialects present auditory barriers, the visual system becomes extremely crucial in conjunction with it. This includes high-quality subtitles, such as those providing literal translations for dialectal expressions, as well as all the information contained within the visuals themselves, as shown in Figure 3. We have constructed a model for the effective dissemination of dialectal TV dramas. This model emphasizes that a strong “support system” must intervene between the “sender” and the “receiver”. Modern film and television promotion and distribution should utilize short-video platforms to conduct “dialect teaching” or “plot summary interpretation”, achieving audience knowledge preheating before the drama episodes are aired, transforming language barriers into the motivation for cultural exploration.

4.3 Avoid Stereotypes and Explore the Deep Layers of Culture

The application of dialects should shift from “curiosity” to “stability”. Creators should not merely use dialects as a means to present ignorance, backwardness, or humor. Just like the Northeast dialect, it does not merely represent “the mafia” or “the duo show”. In “The Long Season”, the Northeast dialect can also reflect the sadness and depth of that era. The application of dialects should provide support for exploring the spiritual core of specific regional cultures, thereby presenting the rich diversity of Chinese culture.

The innovative use of dialects in TV dramas can reflect changes in the creative context and also mirror the development of cultural psychology in the era. In the future, dialect-based TV drama creation will enter a more conscious and diverse stage. On one hand, the maturity of artificial intelligence and speech synthesis technology can provide technical support for the standardized recording of dialects, speech recognition, and real-time subtitle translation, alleviating the problem of “understandability”, allowing cross-regional viewers to more conveniently experience the charm of dialects. On the other hand, with the deep development of the trend of localization on a global scale, dialects, as carriers of local knowledge, will become a distinctive logo for Chinese stories to “go global” - they are no longer merely symbols of internal cultural identity, but are more likely to become a window for international audiences to understand the diversity of Chinese society - through precise cross-cultural adaptation and translation, they can become a medium for international audiences to understand Chinese society.

Conclusion

The return of dialects in TV drama works is a manifestation of the maturation and confidence of China’s film and television industry, and also an illustration of the awakening of local cultural consciousness in the context of globalization. In terms of narrative function, dialects inject vivid content into the images, making the character images more real and tangible. From

the perspective of communication strategies, achieving a scientific balance between authenticity and popularity is the key to breaking through the boundaries of the genre for dialect-based TV dramas. In the future, with the development of artificial intelligence speech technology and the refinement of niche markets, dialect-based TV dramas will no longer be a special “genre”, but will evolve into a normalized creative ecosystem. Creators should cherish this precious cultural resource and tell detailed Chinese stories through the interweaving of sound and image, constructing an audio-visual aesthetics with Eastern charm.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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