

## Reciprocal Pattern of Power in *The Thorn Birds*\*

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This paper explores how reciprocal pattern of power is realized in fictional texts. Taking a few episodes from the novel *The Thorn Birds* and the transitivity process as analytical framework, this paper holds that reciprocal patterns of power may be mutual-targeting or disjoint. A systematic network of both non-reciprocal and reciprocal pattern of power in fictional works is drawn on the basis of the analysis.

*Keywords:* power, reciprocal pattern, systemic functional grammar

### Introduction

Power has mainly been studied in sociology, critical discourse analysis and stylistics. In stylistic study power is treated as a type of interpersonal meaning that is usually revealed by the authorial depiction of the action, mentality and words of the fictional characters. However, the lexico-grammatical patterns that realize power in literary works have not yet been systematically explored. Based on the theory of systemic functional grammar and a previous study of non-reciprocal pattern of power in novel, the present paper aims to draw a systematic network of power including both non-reciprocal and reciprocal pattern.

### A Review of Previous Study

“Lexico-grammatical pattern” is a key notion in systemic functional grammar (abbreviated as SFG) (Halliday, 1985). In light of the SFG theory of transitivity, lexico-grammatical patterns could be transitivity patterns that includes processes used to describe various world experiences. Material process describes the actions or doings, which could be transitive or intransitive and each type suggests specific power relations between fictional characters. Li (2020) studied the non-reciprocal power relation between Meggie and her brothers in one chapter of *The Thorn Birds*. On the basis of her analysis, two types of non-reciprocal patterns have been found: both characters as Target and one character as Target, as is shown in Figure 1.

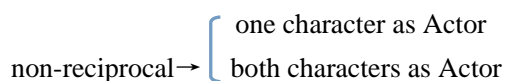


Figure 1. Systematic network of power: non-reciprocal pattern.

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In the novel *The Thorn Birds* (McCullough 1977/1978) Meggie's life experience can be divided into three periods (childhood, early marital life and later on). In terms of power relation, the first period is mainly about Meggie and her elder brothers. The second period is about Meggie and her husband Luke and her lover Ralph. The last period is about Meggie in her later life and the young generation. In the second period, there are abundant description of Meggie and her husband Luke. The present paper just chooses a few episodes to illustrates the reciprocal pattern of process that the author uses to depicts Meggie and Luke respectively.

### Analysis of the Reciprocal Patterns

As previously discussed, reciprocal patterns focus on the similarity or sameness of the pattern of process. Power, as a type of interpersonal meaning, indicates that the status role between two participants is actually gradable and relative, which means for one specific character, he or she could be more powerful at this moment and less powerful the next. In addition, the inferior side might attempt to gain more control of the situation from time to time; therefore make the moment that both sides gain roughly equal status possible. Linguistically these are realized by the lexico-grammatical patterns in the text.

In episode 2 (Chapter 7) of *The Thorn Birds* Meggie was in a romantic relation with a local shearer Luke. Luke invited Meggie to a party. On their way back Luke attempted to kiss Meggie but she refused. The following excerpt describes this plot:

He (Luke) took Meggie's hands, put his arm around her waist, drew her against him....He turned her suddenly, gripped her more closely. (McCullough, 1978, p. 307)

For Meggie, she had not yet developed affection towards Luke just a few days after their acquaintance and her reactions indicate her efforts to refuse Luke, which can be vividly shown by the following description:

When Luke kissed her, she moved her lips under his, but as his hands attempted to push her dress off her shoulder, she gave him a sharp shove... (McCullough, 1978, p. 307)

The above excerpts demonstrate roughly similar pattern of transitivity process used to describe both Luke and Meggie in terms of their actions: Actor ^ Material Process: transitive ^ Goal. The similar pattern used to depict each person leaves the readers the impression that one acts upon the other and vice versa. This pattern is therefore termed "mutual targeting pattern" and can be illustrated by Figure 2.

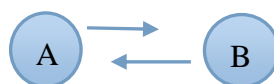


Figure 2. Reciprocal pattern: mutual targeting.

Mutual targeting is one type of reciprocal patterns, in which both Participants take their counterparts as Goal, therefore creates an impression that both sides have relatively equal power. Besides mutual targeting, there is another type of reciprocal pattern that involves two Participants as well, with both participants taking actions towards the same Goal; but the Goal is anything but the two Participants. A case in point is in Episode 3 (Chapter 11) when Meggie and Luke were on their trip to south Queensland shortly after their marriage. During the trip Meggie suffered from bus sick but Luke paid scant attention to her.

She could keep no food down, even when she glanced at the greasy pieces of batter-dipped fish, she put her handkerchief to her mouth, and bolted for the toilet. When she came out some time later, she was white and shaking. ...Luke, however, was at his ease, yarning with two men.... Later he flung a rolled-up newspaper out the window to some event-hungry gang of tattered men beside the line. (McCullough, 1978, p. 321)

The lexico-grammatical patterns used to describe both characters are quite similar: Actor ^ Material Process: transitive ^ Goal; but the Goal of the process that describes Meggie’s actions are *food, fish, handkerchief, etc.* while that describes Luke’s actions are *two strangers* and *newspaper*. This naturally invokes the readers to infer that Meggie and Luke had very little or nothing common to share during their trip, therefore rather equal status and distant relationship is suggested. It is in this sense that the pattern is termed “disjoint pattern”.



Figure 3. Reciprocal pattern: Disjoint.

### A Summary of Findings

A review of the above analysis suggests that reciprocal patterns are used in the context where two Participants enjoy roughly equal power, but with different degree of intimacy. The pattern of mutual targeting suggests the interaction between two characters while the pattern of disjoint indicates distance between them. This seemingly coincidence between the interpersonal meaning of power and the corresponding lexico-grammatical expression is actually symbolic. The reciprocal patterns and non-reciprocal patterns (Li, 2020, p. 201) together form a systematic network of power, as is shown in Figure 4.

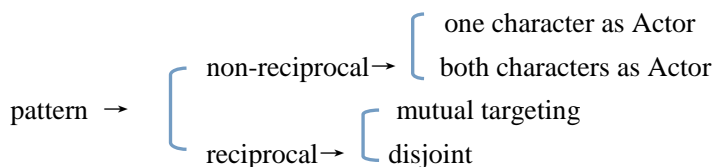


Figure 4. Systematic network of power.

This systematic network vividly demonstrates the possible patterns of power as a type of interpersonal meaning in literary works. For most cases the power between different fictional characters are unequal, as one dominating and the other being dominated. In terms of linguistic expression, one character as Actor and both characters as Actor are two types of pattern that symbolize the above non-reciprocal pattern. As the story plot develops there will be some moments when both characters gain roughly equal power, in which two patterns are most typical. The former is mutual targeting that is usually found when both characters tend to be in conflict. The latter is disjoint that usually indicate interpersonal distance.

### Discussion

The finding of this paper reminds us that power is not merely a state of dominance or inferiority. The very essential of it might concern being dynamic and changeable, therefore is open to negotiation in both real and fictional world. Besides, power as a type of interpersonal meaning might intersect with solidarity in literary text. Solidarity means the state of intimacy or distance between people.

Besides, systemic functional grammar proves a very effective tool for conducting the analyses of power in fictional text, and hopefully non-fictional text in the future study. Yet it should be remembered that the authorial depiction of fictional characters is not limited to their actions. Mentality and conversations are also the potential aspects that need further research.

### References

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