

Lexico-grammatical Realization of Power in *The Thorn Birds*

LI Han-bing

School of Foreign Studies, Beijing Information Science & Technology University, Beijing, China

This paper explores how the interpersonal meaning of power is realized by the lexico-grammatical patterns, taking one episode from the novel *The Thorn Birds* as examples. The analytical framework is drawn from systemic functional grammar. The findings suggest that as a type of interpersonal meaning, power could be realized by non-reciprocal language patterns. The finding is meant to deepen our understanding of the relation between the meaning of text and the lexico-grammatical patterns that function to realize that meaning.

Keywords: power, lexico-grammatical pattern, systemic functional grammar

A Review of Power

Power could be understood as a relation between at least two persons, and it is nonreciprocal in the sense that both cannot have power in the same area of behavior (Brown & Gilman, 1960, p. 255); it could also be treated as “the ability of people and institutions to control the behavior and material lives of others” (Fowler, 1986, pp. 61-75). In the area of linguistic study, Halliday and Hasan (1985/9, p. 12) approached power by analyzing the word choices that are used to describe the participants of an event or a communicative event.

Previous study of power between different fictional characters are quite abundant, such as lady Britomart and her son Stephen in Bernard Shaw’s novel *Major Barbara*, Howard and Willy in Arthur Miller’s *The Death of the Salesman*, Mabel and her brother Fred in Lawrence’s novel *The Horse Dealer’s Daughter*, Jimmy and Alison in Osborne’s play “Look Back in Anger”, to name just a few. The study of power between different characters in these works are mainly realized by specific language patterns.

Patterns could be the repetition of individual words, or language units larger than words, for example, parallel structures. What the current paper will study is termed “lexico-grammatical pattern”, which is a key notion in systemic functional grammar (abbreviated as SFG) founded by Halliday (1985). Transitivity system is a type of lexico-grammatical pattern, which includes various types of processes used to describe different types of world experiences. These processes function to bridge the linguistic expressions and the experiential world. Each process is represented by a series of grammatical labels. For example, material process could be represented as:

Actor ^ Material Process: transitive ^ Goal, or

Actor ^ Material Process: intransitive

LI Han-bing, Ph.D., lecturer in theoretical linguistics and discourse analysis, School of Foreign Studies, Beijing Information Science & Technology University.

This paper is funded by BISTU. (本文得到北京信息科技大学校基金资助。项目编号：2035018；项目名称：《荆棘鸟》中权力关系的语言表征)。

“Actor” is the participant who initiates the process which equals to an action. If the verb that is used to describe the action is a transitive verb, then it exerts influence on the “Goal” that receives the impact as a result, for example, John kicks the ball (Actor ^ Material Process: transitive ^ Goal). If the verb is intransitive, then “Goal” is omitted, for example, John runs (Actor ^ Material Process: intransitive). The label “^” means “to be followed”. Each of these processes could be treated as a pattern. The above terms will be used in the following analysis.

Analysis of Power in *The Thorn Birds*

The Thorn Birds (McCullough, 1977/1978) is chosen as the data for it is a good example to illustrate the author’s skillful word choices in revealing the power relations between the female protagonist Meggie Cleary and her male counterparts in a series of plots across the storyline.

An early research previous to the present paper has covered the analytic work of altogether twenty-eight episodes. Due to the limited space here only data from one episode are selected to illustrate the language patterns that realize power, with a focus on the non-reciprocal patterns of Material process.

Non-reciprocal patterns refer to the patterns that the lexico-grammatical realization that are used to describe two characters differ from each other in terms of transitivity process, for example, “Actor ^ Material Process: transitive ^ Goal” and “Actor ^ Material Process: intransitive” are non-reciprocal patterns because the first is transitive and the second is intransitive, as illustrated by Figure 1.



Figure 1. Non-reciprocal pattern: one character as Actor.

Another example is “Actor ^ Material Process: transitive ^ Goal (Goal≠Actor)” and “Actor ^ Material Process: transitive ^ Goal (Goal=Actor)” (see Figure 2)

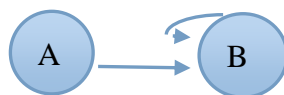


Figure 2. Non-reciprocal pattern: both characters as Actor.

A concrete example that best illustrates the above two patterns is from Chapter 1 of *The Thorn Birds*. When Meggie was a little girl she got her first birthday gift—a doll that she had been long for, but her two elder brothers Jack and Hughie snatched her dearest doll and almost smashed it. Meggie fought against their mischief courageously but her efforts were futile. The author uses the following sentences to describe what they did, with the words indicating their actions being underlined:

Hughie giggled, outflanking her (Meggie). His(Jack’s) dirty brown hands locked about her wrists, closing tightly. He(Jack) squeezed her skin in opposite directions....Hughie got hold of the doll’s skirts and pulled. ...The boys pushed and pulled at the doll.

These sentences all take Jack and/or Hughie as the Actor, *outflanking*, *locked about*, *squeezed*, *got hold of*, *pushed and pulled* as the Process, Meggie or her doll as the Goal, indicating what the boys did were devastating and Meggie and her doll were the victims as a result. Here the lexico-grammatical pattern that reveals the boy's dominance of this situation could be summarized as: Actor ^ Material Process: transitive ^ Goal (Meggie or her doll). While for Meggie, the sentences used to describe her reactions are:

She (Meggie) held the doll so her brothers could see. ...Meggie hugged the doll close again.

In spite of the cruel grip on her wrists she clung to the doll, sobbing and kicking....

Meggie dropped to her knees, scrabbling frantically to collect the miniature...

Compared with her mighty brothers, Meggie seemed helpless and her actions of held, hugged close, clung to, kicking, scrabbling actually had little or no use to defend herself, thus she was inferior to her brothers in their power relation. This inferiority is realized by the following pattern:

Actor ^ Material Process: transitive ^ Goal(Meggie's doll or herself), or

Actor ^ Material Process: intransitive

In this episode of story, Meggie and her brothers could be taken as two opposite sides. Her inferiority and her brothers' dominance of their relationship is vividly portrayed by the author's word choice of depicting their actions. This is a situation where both sides of characters perform as Actors. There are still the situations in which one character unilaterally acts on the other; but examples like this are omitted here.

A Summary of the Finding

A review of the above analysis will remind the readers that the non-reciprocal pattern is used in the context where two Participants are allocated uneven power. This seemingly coincidence between interpersonal meaning and the corresponding lexico-grammatical patterns that function to realize this meaning is symbolic. The systemic network that the finding indicates can be shown in Figure 3.

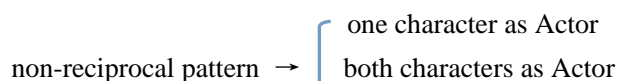


Figure 3. Systematic network of power: non-reciprocal pattern.

To symbolically reveal the power between or among different fictional characters especially in the story plot that is full of conflicts, the analysis of lexico-grammatical patterns help the readers to trace the plot development as well as the authorial intention of creating the works. This has since been one of the most significant motivation of studying lexico-grammatical patterns in fictional works, especially in the tradition of stylistic study of language patterns.

Conclusion

As has been stated in this paper, power is supposed to be in symbolic relation to the wordings that are used to realize power. This supposition has already been mentioned back to the days when Brown and Gilman (1960) reported that the usages of French, English, Italian, Spanish, German pronouns followed the rule of nonreciprocal addressing terms between persons of unequal status and similar or same addressing terms between persons of

roughly equivalent status. Following the tradition of stylistic study of power in literary works, this paper aims to explore the language pattern that can be found in the fictional portrayal of different characters' actions. The finding of this paper is far from depicting the whole picture of power pattern. Future research might explore the reciprocal patterns as well as the patterns of Mental Process and Verbal Process so as to demonstrate a panorama of language patterns of power. This will help reveal the nature of power and its corresponding linguistic realization.

References

- Brown, R., & Gilman, A. (1960). The pronoun of power and solidarity. In Thomas A. Sebeok (Ed.) *Style in language* (pp. 253-276). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. PRESS.
- Fowler, R. (1986). *Linguistic criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1971). Linguistic function and literary style: An inquiry into the language of William Goldings' *The Inheritors*. In J. Webster (Ed.), *Linguistics studies of text and discourse. The collected works of M. A. K. Halliday. Vol. 2* (pp. 88-125). London: Continuum.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1985/1989). *Language, context, and text: Aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leech, G., & Short, M. (1981). *Style in fiction: A linguistic introduction to English fictional prose*. London: Longman.
- McCullough, C. (1977/1978). *The thorn birds*. Harper & Row: New York.
- Turci, M. (2007). The meaning of "dark*" in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In D. R. Miller & M. Turci (Eds.), *Language and verbal art revisited: Linguistic approaches to the study of literature* (pp. 97-114). London: Equinox.