The Application of Systemic Functional Linguistics in Literary Text Teaching

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One of the important jobs for the teacher teaching literary text reading is to develop the students' habit of detecting the linguistic clues to interpret the text or to discover linguistic evidence to support their interpretations. Systemic functional linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday, is both a theory of language and an approach to the analysis of texts and their contexts of use. This linguistic framework can be effectively applied to literary text teaching. The writer aims to explore the applicability of this linguistic theory in literary text teaching and the strategies by a tentative analysis of the novella *The Old Man and the Sea* in the SFL framework.

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Introduction

In teaching a literary text, it's not enough to ask students to draw on their intuitions to interpret the text, to decide whether it's good or bad, or why it's good or bad. The teacher's job involves developing students' habit of finding linguistic evidence in the text to support their intuitions. In other words, the teacher should guide the students to connect the linguistic features of the text to their personal interpretation and to what the writer actually intends to say. Of course, students should first of all have the awareness that literary discourse is different from other types of texts. The meaning a literary text writer tries to deliver is always much larger than the simple addition of all the words and sentences. It's especially true when the writer like Earnest Hemingway favors "Iceberg writing", showing only the necessary factual details, leaving the seven-eighths of what he really wants to say under the water for the readers to find out. As a result, the readers have to dig deeper into the text to read the implied meanings of the writer, mainly through the linguistic clues available to them. A principal goal of literature teaching therefore is to bridge the gap between language itself and the implied meaning the writer tries to convey. With this goal in mind, teachers should never be content with explanation of the literal meaning, which is, after all, only the tip of the iceberg of a literary discourse. The students can be guided to resort to linguistic forms to have a deeper understanding of a literary text.

According to M. A. K. Halliday (1994, F55), linguistics can be applied to "understand the quality of texts: why a text means what it does, and why it is valued as it is; to understand literary and poetic texts and the

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nature of verbal art". Systemic functional linguistics (also SFL), developed by Halliday in 1978, is both a theory of language and an approach to the analysis of texts and their contexts of use. It can be employed by college English teachers to teach literary texts and guide students to read what is beneath the language and what the writer intends to say.

Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic functional linguistics is the study of the relationship between language and its functions in social settings. Halliday believed that linguistics should describe actual sentences with many functions and without a deep structure. He was concerned with the function of the sentence, or in other words, the writer's purpose in writing the sentence (Matthiessen & Halliday, 1997).

In SFL framework, language has three metafunctions. They are ideational metafunction, interpersonal metafunction, and textual metafunction.

Ideational Metafunction

When language is used to construe our experience of the world and our consciousness, it fulfills its ideational metafunction.

Under the concept of ideational metafunction is the important Transitivity System. According to Halliday, transitivity is a kind of grammatical system to reflect as well as to "impose order on the endless variation and flow of events" in the real world, and Transitivity System construes the world of experiences into a manageable set of process types (Halliday, 1994). Each process consists of, apart from process itself, participants in the process and circumstances associated with the process. There are three principal process types: material process (the process of doing), mental process (the process of sensing), and relational process (the process of being). There are three subsidiary types of process: behavioral (physiological and psychological behavior), verbal (saying), and existential (representing that something exists or happens).

Transitivity analysis has been generally used to comprehend the language of speakers and writers because it analyses the structure of sentences which are carried out by processes, the participants associated with these processes, and the circumstances in which processes and participants are included. Using transitivity analysis, linguists have uncovered that language structures can deliver certain meanings and ideas which are not constantly clear for users. That's how it comes to the picture of literature reading, where the students have to decode what the writer tries to say by analyzing the linguistic clues.

Interpersonal Metafunction

This metafunction allows us to express the interactions and complex relations with the other person in society. In SFL, the interpersonal metafunction represents "the idea that language can be used as a means of communicating information" (Halliday, 1975). The fundamental nature of any communication process is that of dialogue (Halliday, 1975). When we initiate or respond to the act of giving or demanding for goods-&-services or information, language fulfills its function of exchange. The principal grammatical system here is the MOOD network, within which is a choice between imperative and indicative. If indicative is chosen, there is a choice between declarative and interrogative. According to the theory, the communicators' power relations can be shown through their lexical-grammatical choices in the dialogue. In literature reading, it's vitally important to figure out the relationships between different characters through those linguistic clues.

Textual Metafuncion

Textual metafunction helps organize discourse and preserve continuity and flow in our texts. It's about the internal organization and communicative nature of a text. Many devices are employed to achieve this function. They are mainly reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. And lexical cohesion can be realized by means of repetition, synonymy, and collocation, etc. These linguistic clues are the most obvious ones the readers cannot afford to miss.

A Tentative Literature Analysis Based on SFL Theory

With the theoretical framework discussed as a guide, the writer of this paper wishes to offer a sample teaching model as an attempt in this regard. The literary work under discussion is *The Old Man and the Sea* written by Earnest Hemingway. It was published in 1952 and won Hemingway the Pulitzer Prize in 1953 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954.

Transitivity Analysis

A close look at the book reveals that the development of the plot can be roughly divided into three stages. The table below shows how the stages are organized in the book.

Table 1

Narrative Structure

Beginning		p. 1-p. 2:10
	Stage 1	p. 2:10-p. 20:3
Development	Stage 2	p. 20:3-p. 89:2
	Stage 3	p. 89:2-p. 108:2
Ending		p. 108:2-p. 115:9

Next, if the teacher guides the students to have a thorough transitivity study of each part, they can generate the following table of statistics, showing how often each process is used by the writer to realize his communicative purposes.

Table 2

Use of Types of Process in Each Stage

Process	Verbal	Relational	Mental	Existential	Behavioral	Material
Beginning	1	11	1			5
Stage 1	139	35	24		12	100
Stage 2	122	164	562	4	46	573
Stage 3	37	51	163	7	14	171
Ending	49	10	25	2	15	60

Stage 1 is about the relationship between Santiago, the old man and Manolin, the boy and the language is characterized by verbal process. The close relationship between Santiago and the boy is shown through their conversations. It's a question-and-answer type of exchange of information. On the whole, the old man is the source of information while the boy is the receiver of it. We can say that the old man actually acts as a teacher or mentor to the boy, teaching the boy the craft of fishing and giving him life wisdom. The second important process in this part is material one, which takes up nearly 30% because in this stage, the old man is making preparations for his fishing trip.

In Stage 2, the focus of attention shifts with the change of the micro-context from the sea to the battle between the fish and the old man. It's actually not just about the battle with the fish or the sharks. It's the old man's battle against his physical and mental weakness as well. Material and mental processes are therefore deliberately foregrounded. The motivated prominence best serves the purpose of accentuating the old man's will power and courage in face of whatever danger or tough battles that may lie ahead. What is worth mentioning is that the two types of process are close in number. Hemingway pays equal attention to mental activity and real action in portraying the protagonist. The two factors help the readers visualize the fierce overt war between the old man and the fish or the elements, and covert one between himself and his weakness or his aging.

In this part, special attention needs to be given to the less predominant but still frequently used verbal process, the process of saying. It's very unusual given the fact that this part is about old man's battle with fish, alone at sea and a closer look at it may reveal a lot. E.g.,

> 1. "Fish." He said, "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends." (p. 45)
> 2. "Take a good rest, small bird," he said. "Then go in and take your chance like any man or bird or fish." (p. 46)
> 3. "How do you feel, hand?" he asked the cramped hand that was almost as still as rigor mortis. "I will eat some for you." (p. 49)
> 4. "Clear up, head." He said in a voice he could hardly hear. "Clear up." (p. 82)
> 5. "Get to work, old man." He said. (p. 85)

We can see from the five quotes that they are not typical types of verbal process because although they have the same Sayer, the old man, these speeches are directed to different Receivers: the fish, the small bird, his hand, his head, and the old man himself. The receivers of the direct speeches are not human beings, which makes the interactions one-way activities. These verbal processes in this part are actually mental processes in disguise. In other words, the verbal processes are the clever complement to mental processes. And the image of the old man, his appearance, his thinking, his relation to the sea and the fish and the sharks, his attitude toward the circumstances he is in are brought out in a vivid and lively way. So they add to animation to the otherwise probably tedious text. Hemingway moves the story along at a brisk pace just through the use of these crisp and direct "dialogue". The heavy use of verbal process also reflects Hemingway's writing style, i.e., devotion to factual details. He writes objectively like a reporter, leaving the job of interpretation to the readers and avoiding his own judgment or explanation. From the numerous verbal processes, the readers can see for themselves what Santiago is like, what he is thinking, or how he feels.

In Stage 3, with the entrance of sharks, conflicts are pushed to a new height. The man's strength, both physical and mental, is put to a test that can never be more cruel and challenging. Material process and mental process are again foregrounded to depict the protagonist as well as to serve the subject matter of the whole work.

From the analysis above, we can see how effectively transitivity can facilitate narration. Students should be aware of the connection between transitivity and the writer's real intention of writing.

Interpersonal Metafunction Analysis

Next, let's look at the text of *The Old Man and the Sea* and sort out the relationships between the characters by means of interpersonal metafunction analysis.

Santiago and Manolin

Generally speaking, power distance may be commonly created by the differences in people's age, sex, political power, and social status. In this novella, however, the old man and the boy are equal. An investigation into the 11 rounds of exchanges between the two (pp. 14-16) can clearly prove this. In this part, they are almost equally engaged in the conversation although Santiago talks relatively more than Manolin does. They both use declarative sentences most of the time, but Manolin's words are not giving new information; they are actually starting new questions.

The topic change in the dialogue: John J. McGraw (the baseball player)—great manager—best fisherman—strong—alarm clock. Each topic ends with Santiago's comments, which are actually the last lessons he teaches the boy before they part. Despite the hierarchy of their mentor-student relationship, Santiago treats the boy as an equal.

Santiago and the Sharks

Santiago's one-way conversations with sharks assume imperative mood. E.g.,

1. "Ay," the old man said. "Galanos. Come on Galanos."
2 "Go on, Galano. Slide down a mile deep. Go see your friend, or maybe it's your mother."
3. "Come on, Galano." The old man said, "Come on again."
4. He spat into the ocean and said, "Eat that, Galanos. And make a dream that you've killed a man."

All of the four quotes, along with many others not listed here, assume the imperative mood and with the speech function of challenge. Obviously the old man sees the sharks as the real enemy of his life and exhibits an overwhelming willpower to fight them. Santiago's masculinity, his will power to battle the sharks, to survive and his instinct to conquer is evoked by the enemy to the greatest extent and he seems to restore his vitality again!

Santiago and the Fish

As can be seen from his conversations with the marlin (the fish), he looks at the fish as both his opponent and friend. The way he addresses the fish either fulfills the speech function of command or a one-way communication with it on equal terms. We can also see the respect the old man has for his worthy opponent, the giant fish. E.g.,

1. "Fish," he said, "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends." (p. 145)
2. "You're feeling it now, fish." He said. "And so, God knows, Am I." (p. 46)
3. "I shouldn't have gone out so far, fish." He said. "Neither for you nor for me. I'm sorry, fish." (p. 99)

Textual Metafunction Analysis

On the level of Lexico-grammar, weight will be placed on lexical cohesion, and to be more specific, on repetition. Halliday believes "The most direct form of lexical cohesion is the repetition of a lexical item" (Halliday, 1994, p. 330). Although repetition is undoubtedly an effective cohesive device, usually people will try to avoid using the same word again and again in English writing. Repeated use of the same word becomes a taboo and "elegance variation" is what a good writer pursues. Hemingway, however, seems to be challenging the practice in his *The Old Man and the Sea*. An amazingly large amount of lexical repetitions can be found in the text. Among them, the repeated use of the words "strange", "dream", "old", "tired", and "strong" is predominant. E.g.,

1. At one time, when he was feeling so badly toward the end, he had thought perhaps it was a **dream**. (p. 88)

2. He took one look at the great fish as he watched the shark close in. It might as well have been a **dream**, he thought. (p. 90)

3. It was too good to last, he thought. I wish it had been a **dream** now and that I had never hooked the fish and was alone in bed on the newspapers. (p. 92)

4. I wish it had really been a **dream**, he thought. But who knows? It might have turned out well. (p. 100)

5. "I'm **tireder** than I have ever been, he thought, and now the trade wind is rising. (p. 78)

6. "Keep my head clear," he said against the wood of the bow. "I am a **tired** old man. But I have killed this fish which is my brother and now I must do the slave work." (p. 84)

7. "You are **tired**, old man," he said, "You are **tired** inside." (p. 101)

8. I have all those prayers I promised if I caught the fish, he thought, but I am too **tired** to say them now. (p. 105)

As can be seen from the examples cited above, complete repetition (with some exceptions of derived forms of the repeated words) characterizes the whole text. The meaning relation in the text can be most easily shown through repetition of the same word. This cohesive device, when used appropriately, can not only serve as the semantic tie but also highlight the theme and accentuate what the writer intends to say. These repetitions in the text of *The Old Man and the Sea* also resonate with monotonous and solitary state the old man is in. The frequent use of some key words (dream, strong, tired, and old, etc.) adds to semantic power and evokes strong emotions in the readers. A careful reader will not fail to detect the linguistic clues. As an illustration, in Sentences 1-4, the repetition of the word "dream" is Santiago's continuous lament over his lost youth. To Santiago, dream symbolizes the beautiful things in life that are "too good to last", things he desires and wishes to have, most probably his lost youth and vitality. It is something he holds on to tightly. Each repetition is a reminder of his lost youth. It's like the undercurrent of sadness, disappointment, and melancholy. The repetitions of words "tired" and "old" emphasize the current state he is in, no longer young, no longer strong.

Conclusion

As we can see from the study above, Systemic Functional Linguistics is an effective tool the literature teachers can implement to guide the students to read between the lines, under the water, for what the writer really intends to say. Although the theory itself is difficult and very complicated, once the students have a grasp of the key concepts, their literary text reading ability will be greatly enhanced. Once it becomes a habit to interpret literary works based on SFL theoretical framework, their literature reading will become a more rewarding experience.

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