

A Transitivity Analysis of the Ecological Attributes of Educational Discourse: A Case Study of the College English Text “Man in the Realm of Nature”

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This paper, based on the ecological philosophy of “Diversity and Harmony, Interaction and Co-existence” and guided by Halliday’s Transitivity Theory, conducts an ecological discourse analysis of the college English text “Man in the Realm of Nature.” The analysis reveals that while ecologically beneficial processes, ecologically destructive processes and ecologically ambivalent processes can all be found in the text, ecologically beneficial and destructive processes outnumber ecologically ambivalent ones, conveying clear ecological attributes and values. The pedagogical implication is that when teaching ecological discourses, teachers can guide students to identify different ecological attributes reflected by different processes. Further, teachers can help them to promote ecologically beneficial discourses, improve ecologically ambivalent ones, and avoid ecologically destructive ones in their own language use, so that they can enhance their ecological awareness and better fulfill their ecological responsibility as college students.

Keywords: Transitivity Theory, ecologically beneficial process, ecologically ambivalent process, ecologically destructive process

Introduction

In the modern world, ecological problems, such as environmental pollution and climate warming have become increasingly prominent. How to enhance the public’s ecological awareness, solve ecological problems, and achieve harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature constitutes a major challenge for our nation. College students are a vital force in the construction of ecological civilization, and it is urgent to integrate ecological civilization education into the curriculum and practice of university education. College English courses, characterized by their wide audience and their dual nature of being both humanistic and instrumental, are appropriate for ecological civilization education. College English teaching should not only focus on the cultivation of students’ knowledge competence and thinking ability, but also attach importance to the formation of their worldviews and values—specifically ecological values in this context. As the carrier of teaching content, college English textbooks play a crucial role in shaping students’ ecological awareness and are therefore worth studying.

Grounded in the ecological philosophy of “Diversity and Harmony, Interaction and Co-existence,” and guided by the Transitivity Theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), this paper focuses on “Man in the Realm of Nature,” the first text of the New Century College English Series Integrated Course 4 and conducts an

ecological attribute analysis of its typical discourses, exploring the ecological philosophy and value orientations reflected, so as to provide implications for ecological civilization education.

Transitivity Theory

Transitivity Theory is the core embodiment of the Ideational Function in SFL. SFL was founded by the British linguist M.A.K. Halliday in the 1960s and 1970s, with its fundamental proposition that language is a system of meaning potentials, and that grammar is the encoding mechanism of meanings. In Halliday's (1990) later studies, Transitivity Theory is primarily used to understand the relations among processes, participants, and circumstances in grammar. A transitivity structure consists of three basic semantic components. The first and also the core component of the transitivity system is the process which is realized by a verb/verb phrase. It determines the nature of the entire clause—whether we are describing an “action,” a “mental state,” an “existential state,” or a “verbal act.” The type of process determines the configuration of other components. Transitivity Theory divides human experiential world into six basic process types, each with its own participant configuration. The second component is the participant who is the entity involved in the process—who initiates an action, who undergoes an action, who perceives, who speaks, etc. Participants are realized by nominal groups. The third component is the circumstance, which provides background information for the process, such as time, place, manner, cause, degree, and accompaniment. Circumstances are realized by prepositional groups or adverbial groups. Circumstances do not participate in the core configuration of the process, but they provide the “situational framework” in which the process takes place. The process determines the type and number of participants, while circumstances serve to “embellish” and “locate” the process.

Transitivity Theory is not limited to the analysis of grammatical structures. It pays more attention to the role of language in constructing reality and expressing meanings. Applied to ecological discourse analysis, Transitivity Theory can effectively reveal how a discourse conveys ecological concepts. As the core of Transitivity Theory, transitivity processes reflect the underlying ecological values, attitudes, and ecological meanings behind them. As mentioned above, there are six processes in the transitivity system, which are material process, mental process, relational process, behavioural process, verbal process, and existential process. He and Wei (2017) further subdivided the six processes into three ecological meaning types: ecologically beneficial processes, ecologically destructive processes, and ecologically ambivalent processes, which respectively characterize ecological experiential processes that comply with ecological philosophy, violate ecological philosophy, or exhibit ambiguous ecological orientations. A process is identified as ecologically beneficial if it conforms to the ecological philosophy of “Diversity and Harmony, Interaction and Co-existence” and enables human beings to reflect on their behaviors, cultivate their awareness of respecting nature and protecting nature and take actions correspondingly. A process is ecologically destructive if actions, thoughts, psychological activities, etc. of both human and natural participants produce negative impacts on the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. A process is ecologically ambivalent if the language, thoughts, behaviours, etc. of human and natural participants do not impact ecological balance or have no clear ecological orientations. These three ecological meaning types endow a discourse with different ecological attributes and values.

A Transitivity Analysis of the Text “Man in the Realm of Nature”

This text mainly discusses the man-nature relationship and the challenges man is now facing. The participants involved in the discourse are mainly man, modern technology, nature which includes air, water, food,

plants, animals, forests, etc. Circumstances are various, mostly related to nature.

Here is an analysis of the ecological attributes of some typical examples from the text based on He and Wei's subdivision of the three meaning types of processes.

Ecologically Beneficial Processes

Sentence (1): Human beings live in the realm of nature.

Sentence (2): We are connected with nature by blood ties and we cannot live outside nature.

Sentence (1) is a behavioral process indicating man's physiological activity of living, with the verb "live" describing a continuous state of existence. The participants—"Human beings"—are behavers and "in the realm of nature" serves as circumstance. Nature is constructed as a place for human beings to inhabit. This process is an ecologically beneficial one, implying the continuity and unity of man and nature.

Sentence (2) is composed of two parts. The first part "We are connected with nature by blood ties" is a relational process describing the state that man is closely connected with nature. The participant "We" is carrier and "connected with nature by blood ties" is attribute. Using "are connected with" and elevating nature to be man's relative, this part constructs a consciousness of the community of life, thus being ecologically beneficial. The second part "We cannot live without nature" is a behavioral process, with "we" as behavers and "outside nature" as circumstance. The negation "cannot" confirms the inseparability between man and nature. Therefore, Sentence (2) is also ecologically beneficial.

Ecologically Destructive Processes

Sentence (3): Humanity converts nature's wealth into the means of cultural, historical life of society.

Sentence (4): Man has subdued and disciplined electricity and compelled it to serve the interests of society.

Sentence (3) is a material process describing humanity's action of "converting" natural wealth into the means of social life. The human participant "Humanity" is actor, the natural participant "nature's wealth" is goal and "into the means of cultural, historical life of society" serves as circumstance, indicating the converting direction. This sentence encodes humanity as possessing subjective initiative, while nature's wealth is constructed to be the resources for man to consume and take advantage of. So, this sentence is ecologically destructive, suggesting the influence of anthropocentrism.

Sentence (4) is also a material process. The use of the verbs "subdue," "discipline," "compel," and "serve" tell the process of man's subduing electricity. The participant "Man" is actor, while the participant "electricity" is goal (object of being subdued and compelled). Electricity is encoded as the goal of the material process twice. So, this sentence is ecologically destructive, exhibiting extreme anthropocentrism.

Ecologically Ambivalent Processes

Sentence (5): Very often they were unable to obtain the merest daily necessities.

Sentence (5) is a material process of man's not being able to obtain daily necessities. The participant "they" is actor, while the participants "the merest daily necessities" are goals. Adopting the negative structure, this sentence describes the difficulty man faces instead of man's exploitation of nature. It does not involve a clear ecological orientation and thus is ecologically ambivalent.

Throughout the whole text, more examples of all the three ecological meaning types can be found, and ecologically beneficial processes and ecologically destructive processes outnumber ecologically ambivalent ones, which suggests that the text conveys clear ecological attributes and orientations.

Conclusion

By employing the Transitivity Theory, this paper analyzes “Man in the Realm of Nature,” the first text of the New Century College English Series Integrated Course 4, and reveals the distribution pattern of the three ecological meaning types and the corresponding ecological attributes in the text. Of course, due to the subjectivity of personal understanding, there can be some inappropriate classifications and interpretations.

Such an analysis has certain pedagogical implications. When teaching ecological discourses, teachers can try to guide students to distinguish between ecologically beneficial processes, ecologically destructive processes and ecologically ambivalent processes, so that they can learn the different ecological orientations and values conveyed by these processes. Only when students are able to deconstruct the ways in which ecological meanings are constructed in discourse can they consciously promote ecologically beneficial discourses, improve ecologically ambivalent discourses, and avoid ecologically destructive discourses in their language use, thereby better fulfilling their ecological responsibility as college students. In this way, the goal of ecological cultivation education can be realized.

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