

Functionalist Stylistics and Literary Interpretation (H. H. Munro's 'The Open Window' as a case study)

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ABSTRACT

It is ascertained that theories of linguistics have always been helpful to literary readers to gain optimal understanding of literary works. They can answer many queries raised by readers concerning literature and the aspects relevant to it. Hence, literary criticism has considerably benefited from frameworks and models employed as analytical tools all devised within the linguistic enterprise. Part and parcel of these insightful linguistic models is Halliday's functional approach to language known as systemic functional grammar (SFG henceforth), which encompasses transitivity as well. The paper in question investigates H. H. Munro's 'The Open Window' using transitivity, thereby highlighting the interpretive role of this linguistic functional approach.

In fact, the study explores the analytical utility of this model to aid readers in better understanding literary texts and what interpretations could be arrived at based on the textual makeup available.

To handle this point, the paper has taken the following format: Section one involves a brief idea about the topic and the writer's life. *Monism*, *dualism*, and *pluralism* are exhibited in section two as different viewpoints regarding language functions. Section three, is concerned with Halliday's view of 'clause' as a syntactic unit. Section four exhibits an overview of Transitivity Theory and the functional mode it follows in dealing with the way linguistic forms express meaning. Section five constitutes the core of the paper in which the role of transitivity in literary

interpretation is discussed, particularly with reference to H. H. Munro's 'The Open Window'. Section six, eventually, presents the findings and the statistical results of the analysis conducted. The paper is rounded off by the conclusions and the list of the references.

Key words: functionalist, style, transitivity, interpretation

الاسلوبية الوظيفية والتفسير الادبي

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الملخص

لاشك ان نظريات علم اللغة تستطيع ان تضيف الكثير الى مفاهيمنا للاعمال الادبية. حيث انها تستطيع الاجابة عن الكثير من الامور المتعلقة بالادب ولاعمال الادبية مثل: مالمقصود بالعمل الادبي وكيف تعمل ولماذا توجد الادب اصلاً، وغيرها من الاسئلة. ان تحليل الاعمال الادبية في اغلب الاحيان تتطلب من الباحث ان يلجأ الى النظريات اللغوية التي تلعب دوراً مهماً من خلال الافكار والاستراتيجيات التي تساهم في مجالات النقد الادبي. احدى النظريات اللغوية الشائعة في ها المجال هي قواعد النظم الوظيفي للغوي البريطاني (هاليداي) في سبعينات القرن الماضي. لبيان دور هذه النظرية في التحليلات الادبية، تحاول هذه الدراسة تطبيق مبادئها في عملية تفسير العمل الادبي "الباب المفتوح" (The Open Window) للقاص (H.H.Munro).

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى معرفة دور هذه النظرية في اظهار الحقائق والاجندات المخفية للكاتب في هذا العمل الادبي وبالتالي مساعدة القارئ للوصول الى المعاني المتشعبة التي تكاد تكون مبهمة في هذا العمل الادبي. الاجراء المتبع هو تقسيم البحث الى ستة محاور بدأً بالمقدمة ومروراً بالمحاور الرئيسية الاخرى وانتهاءً بالنتائج التي توصلت اليها الدراسة وتتضمن قسم منها: ان الافعال والتراكيب التواصلية هي السائدة والاكثر استخداماً في النص، والتراكيب الفعلية الحركية تشكل ٤٠% من مجمل التراكيب المستخدمة ولها دلالاتها الادبية الخاصة، كما ان التحليل الاحصائي للتراكيب الفعلية اظهر ان النص خالية من التراكيب التي تعبر عن الحالة السلوكية لشخصية Framton الذي يلعب الدور الرئيسي والفعال في العمل الادبي قيد الدراسة.

1. Introduction

The present work is an attempt to explain and discuss to what extent the process of literary interpretation can benefit from linguistics theories. The approach in this paper follows the theoretical framework developed by Halliday (1985). The multifaceted nature of transitivity is outlined first, followed by applying the model to 'The Open Window' by Munro (1870–1916).

Munro was born in Burma in 1870. Two years after his birth, his mother died and, hence, he and his siblings were sent to England to live with their grandmother and two aunts. He lived an adventurous life. At the age of 25, he returned to Burma and pursued a career as a police officer, but unfortunately he contracted Malaria and had to return to England. When World War the First broke out, he joined the British army. He died in 1916 after being shot by a German sniper during the battle of Ancre. In 'The Open Window', one can see the reflection of some aspects of his life in the character of Mr. Nuttel, who suffers from a disease, as well as in the involvement of certain scenes that are related to military and war conditions. study.com (Editors:2023).

2. Monism, Dualism, Pluralism

Monism, dualism, and pluralism are different viewpoints regarding the concept of form and content in literary works. Monism, as a strong academic and literary tradition, assumes that form and content constitute a single entity (Leech and Short 1981: 15). They are, to linguists, indivisible concepts. In this respect, Halliday (1971: 353) establishes that poetry constitutes the most solid foundation for stylistic monism, where poetic devices allow meaning to become multivalent, diminishing the primacy of straightforward sense.

There is, nonetheless, a dissimilar common belief that defines style as choices of manner, eschewing the concept of style to be referring to a matter of expression or content, which, in turn, renders style to a mere mode of writing. This approach falls under ‘dualism’ as it highlights the interdependent relation between form and content, i.e. meaning. Put simply, dualism concerns with prose, whilst monism best functions in poetry (For further elaboration see Leech and Short 1981: 15, 27).

The aforementioned concepts, namely monism and dualism, are incorporated into a third view which is more practical and considers any stretch of language to have the potential to function in a multi-layered fashion. This view is therefore termed pluralism. That is, meaning(s) in language is the outcome of the choices any language producer subliminally tackles, in the sense that even one straightforward utterance can bear more than one meaning. Based on this pluralist view, Halliday’s functionalist approach to language has come to the fore. In this respect, Halliday ascertains that there are three functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual, of which transitivity lies within the ideational function. The author of this paper will adopt the latter as his tool of analysis.

3. Halliday’s view of ‘clause’:

Since the present work is concerned with the analysis of a literary text, and literary texts are made of clauses and sentences, it is advantageous to show in advance Halliday’s view of ‘clause’. Halliday (1985:19) maintains that grammatical analysis treats linguistic items not as expressions but as forms, i.e. it explores language not as sound or as writing but as wording, taking into account the words and structures used in a construction. The term ‘lexico-grammar’ is often used by grammarians as it involves both structure and vocabulary. The unit of analysis, especially in SFG, is the ‘clause’. This is because the mode of

interpretation adopted is functional. That is to say, the grammatical structure is being explained by reference to the meaning. Hence, according to SFG, if we want to explore how semantic features are represented in the grammar of language, we have to look primarily at the structure of '*clause*'. Halliday looks at the notion of 'clause' from different angles:

3.1 Clause as a Message:

To Halliday (1985:37), one of the meanings embodied in the component of the clause is the 'message'. This kind of message is expressed by means of certain configurations of functions. Generally, one of the concepts that is basic to a grammatical analysis is that of 'subject'. Every single clause involves an element called 'the subject'. However, to Halliday the label 'subject' subsumes different functions depending on the clause. In 'the clause as a message', the subject would be *that which is the concern of the message*. Another name used later for this kind of subject, was 'psychological subject'. It was dubbed 'psychological' as it referred to what existed in the mind of the speaker to start the conversation with. Halliday replaced this earlier label by the term 'theme' as it relates more specifically to the function concerned. In the following example, the subject is given the name 'theme':

1. *This notebook* the librarian gave to my colleague.

3.2 Clause as an Exchange:

In the 'clause as exchange', the subject would be *the element on which something is assumed*, i.e. the element on which the argument truth settles. The substitute to this, by the end of the century, was 'grammatical subject'. It was named 'grammatical' because the structure subject – predicate was regarded as a grammatical relationship only. The element was taken to show grammatical characteristics such as the case of the element functioning as subject, and its agreement

with the verb in person and number. This means that this element was not thought to express any specific meaning. In SFG, it kept its name ‘subject’ but not as a superordinate subsuming all the other functions related to this grammatical category.

In the example bellow, the italicized element is the *subject* reflecting the aforementioned grammatical characteristics:

2. This teapot *my aunt* was given by the duke.

3.3 Clause as a Representation:

When ‘clause’ is looked upon as a representation of actions or states, the element ‘subject’ is referred to as the *doer of the action*. When there was a renewal of interest in grammatical theory in the second half of the nineteenth century, this grammatical category was given the name ‘logical subject’. It was termed ‘logical’ because it meant that of ‘having to do with relations between things’, in contrast to ‘grammatical’ relations which were related to relations among symbols. In SFG, this type of subject has come to be known as the ‘actor’. In the following example, the participant ‘the duke’ is the logical subject, the actor:

3. My aunt was given this teapot by the duke.

4. An Overview of Transitivity Theory

Transitivity Theory is developed within the general framework of SFG associated with the members of the London School, in particular Halliday, whose intention in text analysis is “to show why and how the text means what it does” (Martin, 1992). SFG is a model for describing language as a source for forming meaning and choices. This framework deals with language beyond its formal structures, and takes into consideration the context of *culture* and *situation* in language use (Martin & Rose, 2003)

Context of situation according to Halliday (1994) can be realized by: (a) field, the expression of world view; (b) tenor, the relationship between the interlocutors; and (c) mode, which is the organization of the message. While field is experiential (ideational), tenor is interpersonal, and mode is textual.

In other words, Halliday views discourse as the culmination of three functions referred to above. Processes which involve actions, events, relations as well as processes of consciousness are subsumed under the ideational meaning of language. The interactional relationship, on the other hand, is the interpersonal dimension which concerns the verbal and non-verbal exchange between individuals, whilst any message coded in the text is attributable to the textual function (Halliday 2003: 19).

It is fair enough to say that our representation of reality can be viewed differently based on the ways and the choices available in language. In other words, one reality can be conceptualized differently based on the language used. In this regard, Halliday opts to breakdown the ideational meaning stored in language using transitivity.

In similar fashion, given the interpretive and explanatory potential of his functionalist view, he reiterates the fact that literary texts, like any other form of text, can be approached and delineated from a functional linguistics perspective.

Halliday (1985: 101) states that a basic feature of language is that it enables human beings to construct a mental image of reality, to give meaning to their experience of life, and that the clause is the grammatical unit that functions as the representation of processes. Claiming that the processes conveyed via language are the result of our thought of the world, he further notes:

Our most powerful conception of reality is that it consists of ‘Goings-on’: of doing, happening, feeling, being. These goings-on are sorted out in the semantic system of the language, and expressed through the grammar of the clause. (Halliday (1985: 101)

Halliday also suggests that ‘the grammatical function expressing the reflective, experiential aspect of meaning is *transitivity*’; and it is transitivity that limits the various types of processes found in language, and the structures expressing them. This is tantamount to saying that language and literature are so closely related to each other that people majored in these two areas should share each other’s knowledge if they want to do their jobs appropriately,

Transitivity, semantically and syntactically, is any linguistic unit that is encoded in the following:

- a. the process, which is realized by the verb,
- b. the participants, discerned by any noun phrase which could be people or objects,
- c. circumstantial functions represented by adjuncts which could be realized by the adverb phrases. (Adapted from Halliday 1994: 107).

In order to disambiguate the confusion that the concept ‘transitivity’ may cause, this study does not adopt pinpointing those verbs which can take direct objects. Rather, the notion is quite expansive and includes the way experiences and meanings are encoded in language which could be embedded in the grammatical constructions in their totality. While Simpson (2004:22) argues that human experiences and actions surpass Halliday’s approach of their classification, this paper, nevertheless, adheres to Halliday’s framework which recognizes six types as follows:

1. *Material processes* are simply processes of doing. This type incorporates two participant roles: The Actor, an obligatory role in the

Sensor Process Phenomenon

4. *Behavioral processes* are those which, to some extent, sit at the interface between material and mental processes; processes which represent both the activities of ‘sensing’ and ‘doing’. They embody physical actions like ‘breathe’ or ‘cough’, and also represent processes of consciousness as forms of behavior such as ‘stare’, ‘dream’, and ‘worry’. In other words, they are psychological and physiological behavior that represent ‘outer manifestations of inner working, the acting out of processes of consciousness and physiological states’. The key and the sole participant in behavioral processes is the Behaver, the conscious entity who is ‘behaving’ (Simpson 2004:23):

9. He smiled when he saw her.

Behaver Process Circumstance

10. She stared at him.

Behaver Process Circumstance

4. Other processes which are akin to a certain extent to mental processes are called processes of verbalization due to their articulating conscious thoughts. These processes, also known as processes of saying, involve a stretch of language verbalized or enunciated and is exchanged between two interlocutors; one is called the sayer (the speech producer) and the other the receiver (the language addressee to whom the speech is directed). The exchanged language per verbatim is often referred to as the verbiage (what is being said). These processes are realized by verbs such as announce, declare or any lexical verb that indicates something that is said as shown in the example below (Simpson 2004:26):

11. The prime minister declared the decision to the audience.

Sayer Process Verbiage Receiver

5. Processes which form internal relationships between two entities in a grammatical construction are known as relational processes Halliday (1973:78). These processes are also called processes of being. Three main types of relational process are generally agreed upon: an intensive relational process represented by a relationship of *equivalence*, (x is y) connection, between two entities, as in:

12. The concert was marvelous.

a *possessive* relational process represented by an (x has y) type of connection, between two entities as in:

13. She has an apartment.

Lastly but not the least, a *circumstantial* relational process is generally configured by x entity to y and their relations are set up via prepositions such as (at, in, on, with, etc) represented by represented by a construction like:

14. He was at the university.

X and Y often represent the participant roles; the first is called the carrier which could be realized by the entity, person or concept, which is being described and the latter the attribute, i.e. the quality that can be assigned to the carrier. Accordingly, the attribute determines what the carrier is, what s/he owns, and their location as well (Halliday 1994:35).

If we analyze the above mentioned examples, we will get the following analysis:

The concert	was	marvelous.	(intensive)
Carrier	Process	Attribute	
She	has	an apartment.	(possessive)
Carrier	Process	Attribute	
She	has	an apartment.	(circumstantial)

Carrier Process Attribute

6. *Existential processes* are processes of ‘existing’ and ‘happening’. Such processes typically have the verb ‘be’ and the word ‘there’ is necessary as a subject although it has no representational function. The object or event that is being said to exist is called ‘existent’. An Existent can be any kind of phenomenon, such as a thing, person, object, institution or abstraction, action, or event (Halliday 1994: 107):

15. There was a little house near the beach.

Process: existential Existent Circumstance: place

4. Analysis of Munro’s ‘The Open Window’ from the Functional Perspective of Halliday’s Transitivity Theory:

In this section, Munro’s ‘The Open Window’ is analyzed in the light of Transitivity Theory’. The analysis aims at exploring Mr. Framton’s personality, as it is expressed in the linguistic body of the text in general. The framework adopted is based on four procedures:

- a. putting apart the processes found in the text;
- b. finding out what processes they are;
- c. putting the identified processes in charts;
- d. showing the participant roles engaged in each process, and illustrating the lexical realization of each.

The charts below summarize the four procedures involved in the analysis:

A. Material Processes

Actor	Material	Goal
You	will bury	Yourself

I	shall give	you ...
She	Gave	me...
Places	gave way	?
Her great tragedy	happened	?
The child's voice	Lost	its self-possessed note
They	will make	a fine mess
You	must try	?
They	all carried	Guns
A hoarse young voice	chanted out	?
A Mr. Nuttle	dashed off	?
He	made	the last statement

B. Mental Processes

Sensor	Process	Phenomenon
He	doubted	whether these formal visits....
I	know	how it will be
Framton	wondered	whether Mrs. Sappleton came
I	know	hardly a soul
You	know	practically nothing
I	only know	her name
He	was wondering	whether Mrs. Sappleton was..
You	may wonder	why we keep that window..

Poor aunt	always thinks	that they will come back
I	hope	Vera has been amusing you
I	hope	you do not mind the open..
The doctors	agree	in ordering me..
One	would think	he had seen a ghost
I	expect	it was the spaniel

C. Relational Processes

Carrier	Process	Identifying
My aunt	will be	down presently
Un undefinable something	seemed	to suggest masculine ...
That	would be	since your sister's time
It	had been	that dreadful wet summer
It	was	un unfortunate coincidence
That	was	the dreadful part of it
It	was	a relief to Framton
It	may be	they have lost the power
They	were	aged eyes
They	are not	so much in agreement
They	were	dimly noted stages

Carrier	Process	Attribute
Tragedies	seemed	out of place

It	is	quite warm
The window	is kept	Open
She	has been	very interesting
He	was	conscious that...

D. Verbal Processes

Sayer	Process	Verbiage	Receiver
She	has often told	how they went out....	Me
She	said	it got on her nerves...	?
I	said	why do you bound	Bertie
Mr. Nuttle	could only talk	about his illness	?
He	told	he had a horror of dogs	Me

E. Existential Processes

Process	Existent
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F. Behavioral Processes

Behaver	Process	(Circumstance)
Framton	shivered	Slightly
He	turned	towards the niece
Framton	swung	Around
He	looked	in the same direction
Framton	grabbed	wildly at his stick
He	dashed off	without a word of goodbye
Framton	looked	in the same direction

6. Findings

After applying the *transitivity* theory to the analysis of the text under study, and as it has been shown in the tables above, the linguistic structure of the text can be said to have an illustrative potential in accounting for the psychological depth and physical traits of Mr. Framton who is the protagonist in the story. The findings of the analysis can be summarized as follows:

1. The *material* processes constitute 22% of the total number of the processes involved. Such processes subsume actions, activities and events. They arrange processes and participants with the prerequisite of an input of energy. Actor and Goal are the two participants associated with this energy. But what attracts attention in the analysis is that out of *twenty-two* material processes:
 - a. *five* of them are goalless.
 - b. *two* of them include verbs and expressions that are negative, or give a negative kind of meaning to the process.
2. 26% of the processes are *mental*.
3. 7% of the processes are behavioral
4. The relational processes are the most prevailing in the text; they constitute 30% of the processes detected: 20% of them are followed by *attributes* and 10% by *identifying* forms.
5. Verbal processes cover 9% of the processes available.
6. No *existential* processes are detected in the text as a whole.

Conclusion

The transitivity analysis of the text and the statistical investigations of the different types of the processes found in the text can be said to have the following interpretive values:

1. The dominance of the *relational* processes in the text aims at highlighting the different sorts of relations between Mr. Framton and the

surroundings: an intensive relation between him and his sister as siblings suffering from the same mental disease; the relation between him and Vera who possessed his consciousness while telling him lies about Mrs. Sappleton's relatives; the circumstantial relation that linked Mr. Framton to the Rectory and the 'open window'. Besides, the outnumbering of the identifying expressions, following the processes, also denotes the mere existence of the character without any features or merits that can be attributed to him.

2. 40% of the *material* processes are goalless processes; and this gives the impression that Mr. Framton's life has no affection on the environment he is living in, and that he feels hopeless and melancholic, fed up with the chaotic unreliability of life altogether.

3. In respect to the *mental* processes, what is worth observing is that out of *fourteen* processes, *nine* of them are expressed via verbs denoting doubt, suspicion, and uncertainty about life in general, which, in turn, shows Framton's hopeless attempt to find the truth. In relation to the phenomena associated with the processes, out of *fourteen* cases, *eight* of them incorporate interrogatives, or negative expressions. All this implies that this character is skeptical about all what surrounds him in his world

4. As for the *verbal* processes, again what is worth noting is that out of *five* instances, *two* of them have no *receiver* in the verbalization process. Moreover, in none of them is Framton the receiver. This refers to this character's passiveness and his feeling of his lost being.

5. Lack of *behavioral* processes in the entire text must also be of interpretative value. Most likely, it is a reference to the fact that Framton has no psychological conduct. It is a hint at his mental defect that prevents him from consciously interacting with others around him.

Eventually, if we make a link between the writer's biography, and the way he portrays the character of Framton, we can come out with the

assumption that the writer is in fact portraying the dilemma of his own miserable life. Via the above conflation of the linguistic structures, he wants to tell the readers that he led a very unbearable, severe life which made him think of leaving his place and seek cure in other places. Moreover, the writer feeds the story with certain scenes that reflect his experience of military affairs, and the sufferings he underwent after joining the British Army.

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