

THE RELEVANCE OF LINGUISTIC THEORIES
IN THE ANALYSIS OF LITERARY TEXTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

To what extent can the application of procedures derived from linguistic theory be of relevance in the analysis of literary texts? This is a controversial question - one that is the focus of much scrutiny and debate among literary critics and stylisticians.

Michael Halliday's (1971) inquiry into the language of William Golding's novel The inheritors exemplifies the potential that linguistic theories have for elucidating the meaning of literary texts. His inquiry has, however, evoked conflicting responses which can be regarded as a manifestation of the diverging trends in linguistics and stylistics concerning not only the nature and location of linguistic meaning, but also the manner in which a literary text is interpreted.

The term 'stylistics' denotes 'any analytical study of literature which uses the concepts and techniques of modern linguistics' (Fowler, 1973:238). The general aim of a stylistic analysis is to establish the extent to which 'our experience of a work is in part derived from its verbal structure' (Traugott and Pratt, 1980:20), or to gain insight into how and why a text means what it does.

2. WHICH LINGUISTIC THEORIES ARE OF RELEVANCE IN THE ANALYSIS OF THE LANGUAGE OF LITERARY TEXTS?

Among the linguistic theories that are of relevance in the analysis of the language of literary texts are those that aim to account for the manner in which meaning is conveyed through syntactic structures. The interdependence of form and meaning, or the relation between syntax

and semantics in the grammar, is still a current and problematic issue in linguistic theory. Much attention has been given to this question and various theories have been posited to explain the role and status of the semantic component in the grammar.

How is meaning conveyed through syntactic structures such as sentences and clauses? Sentence meaning is more than just the sum of the meanings of the lexical items contained within the unit (Traugott and Pratt, 1980:187). The core of sentence meaning is the proposition which 'refers to entities in the world' acting or existing in a specific relation to one another (Fowler, 1986:69). The semantic nucleus of the proposition is the predicate which signifies a state or an action. The noun phrases associated with the predicate in the sentence function in various participant roles such as Actor, Agent, Goal, Instrument etc. In each case, the participant role is realized by the semantic function the noun phrase performs with regard to the nature of the process expressed in the clause.

Theories which postulate an explanation for the way in which the propositional content of a sentence relates to entities, states, processes and actions in the world, constitute a class known as role theories or theories of thematic relations¹). Various linguists (e.g. Fillmore 1968; Gruber 1976; Jackendoff 1972; Halliday 1967, 1971, 1985) with differing theoretical perspectives and stances, have posited theories of thematic relations, aiming to account for the relationship between syntactic structure and semantic representation.

According to Traugott and Pratt (1980:191), analysing the relations that obtain between the participant roles and the predicates in sentences can provide 'exciting ways of accounting for aspects of world-view created in literary works'. In a role structure analysis, the sentence can be considered to be a 'kind of miniature drama expressing in language the drama that we perceive in the interaction of things around us with each other and with ourselves' (ibid. 190).

3. HALLIDAY'S TRANSITIVITY SYSTEM

Halliday's version of role theory or thematic relations is his system of transitivity which forms a component of his functional theory of language. His functional theory is based on the notion that language has evolved to communicate human needs. Accordingly, the functional motivation for language is 'likely to be reflected somewhere in the internal organization of language itself' and 'should show up in some way in an investigation of linguistic structure' (Halliday, 1971:332).

In terms of Halliday's functional grammar, the clause is the smallest unit in which a speaker or a writer's choice from various semantic options²⁾ can be observed. Transitivity represents that function of the clause that expresses the 'reflective experiential aspect of meaning' (Halliday, 1985:101). This system specifies 'the different types of processes that are recognized in the language, and the structures by which they are expressed'. The concepts of process, participant and circumstance³⁾ are 'semantic categories which explain, in the most general way, how the phenomena of the real world are represented in linguistic structure' (ibid. 102).

The processes constitute a set of semantic options each associated with a different participant role or set of participant roles, eg

PROCESS TYPE	ASSOCIATED PARTICIPANT ROLES
MATERIAL (doing) directed —————→ non-directed —————→	Agent, Goal Actor
MENTAL (sensing, perceiving) directed —————→ non-directed —————→	Actor (senser), Phenomenon Actor (senser)
ASCRIPTIVE (attributing) —————→	Carrier (attribuant) Attribute

(Adapted from Halliday, 1985)

3.1 Halliday's inquiry into the transitivity system of Golding's novel The inheritors

Halliday applies the principles of his transitivity system in his analysis of the language of Golding's novel The inheritors with the aim of validating his functional theory of language. In pursuing his analysis, he (1971:339) hopes 'to demonstrate the connection between the syntactic observations we make about a text and the nature of the impact which that text has upon us'.

The inheritors concerns the encounter between two different groups of prehistoric people and the conflict that ensues. Lok and his small group of Neanderthal 'people' are too helpless to withstand the more evolved and competent 'tribe'. Eventually the 'people' are overcome and destroyed by the 'tribe'. Halliday (1971:350) interprets one of the themes of the novel as being 'the inherent limitations of understanding, whether cultural or biological, of Lok and his people, and their consequent inability to survive when confronted with beings at a higher stage of development'.

On the basis of his analysis of the transitivity system of the clauses of the novel, Halliday finds that the distribution of the various process types and their associated participant roles is such that they fall into two groups. Consequently, he distinguishes two different narrative styles in the novel which he terms Language A (pp 1-215), that characterizing the world of the 'people', and Language C (pp 223-233), that characterizing the world of the 'tribe'.

Halliday selects three passages from the novel to illustrate and exemplify his role structure findings:

- * Passage A (pp 106-107) he regards as being representative of Language A (the narrative of the 'people').

FREQUENCIES OF TRANSITIVITY CLAUSE TYPES									
Process:	ACTION				location/ possession	mental process	attribution	other (equa- tion, event)	
	<u>intran-</u> <u>sitive</u>		<u>transi-</u> <u>tive</u>						
	movement	other	movement	other					
Passage A human {people tribe part of body inanimate	9		1	1	1	12			24
	2		1			1			4
	2				1	3	2		8
	4		1		12		3		20
	17		3	1	14	16	5		56
Passage B(i) human {people tribe part of body inanimate	4		1	3*	2	1			11
	5		1	1	2				9
	13	1	2		5			2	23
	22	1	4	4	9	1		2	43
	13	2	1		2	4			22
Passage B(ii) human {people tribe part of body inanimate	3				1		2		6
	3	1	1	2	4		6	2	19
	19	3	2	2	7	4	8	2	47
	13	2	1		2	4			22
Passage C human {people tribe part of body inanimate	1		1	2		4			8
	3	2	5	11	3	11	3	2	40
	2	1					5		8
	2	1			3		4	1	11
	8	4	6	13	6	15	12	3	67

*including two passives, which are also negative and in which the actor is not explicit: The tree would not be cajoled or persuaded.

(Halliday 1971)

- * Passage B (pp 215-217) consists of two paragraphs. It marks the transition between the two narratives and conveys the shift in world-view from that of the 'people' to that of the 'tribe'.
- * Passage C (pp 228-229) represents Language C and exemplifies the narrative of the 'tribe'.

In his selection of these three passages, Halliday is guided by his observation of a prominence, or foregrounding, of patterns of intransitivity in Language A. This, he claims, conveys the defamiliarized world-view of the 'people' and correlates with the thematic structure of the novel. Halliday associates this prominence of intransitivity in the language of the narrative of the 'people' with the Prague School notion of foregrounding (Leech and Short, 1981: 48), namely that patterns of prominence, whether of deviance or regularity, are artistically motivated. They intrude upon the reader's awareness and invite interpretation.

3.1.1 The transitivity structure of Passage A

Passage A deals with the first encounter between Lok, one of the 'people', and a member of the 'tribe'.

Halliday identifies 56 clauses in this passage, of which only 4 are transitive, i e contain processes of directed action. Of these 4 transitive clauses, there is only 1 in which an animate being functions in the role of Agent affecting an external object, e g

...	the man	was holding	the stick	...
	(animate) Agent	Process: directed action	Goal	

It is significant that in Passage A, which represents the narrative of the 'people', the only human Agent should be a member of

the 'tribe'. Halliday regards this as evidence for his assertion that the role structures in this passage convey the limited ability of Lok and his 'people' to understand and manipulate their environment, in contrast to the superior competence of the 'tribe'.

Another instance of the prominence of intransitivity in this passage is apparent in the clauses describing the way in which Lok becomes aware of the tribesman drawing his bow and shooting an arrow at him. The shooting of an arrow would normally be perceived (and encoded in language) as a Goal-directed process or action performed by a human Agent. However, in the semantic structure of the narrative of Lok's world, this action is expressed as an intransitive self-caused process performed by an inanimate subject functioning in the role of Actor, e g

The stick	began to grow	shorter	at both ends.	Then
Actor	Process: non-directed action	Manner	Location: spatial (static)	

it	shot out	to full length	again.
Actor	Process: non-directed action	Direction non-terminal	Temporal adjunct

The downplaying of transitivity in this utterance, conveys Lok's defamiliarized world-view. Because he is incapable of functioning in the role of Agent in his environment, he is unable to attribute Agency to other humans. In Lok's world, inanimate objects have as much animacy and volition as do humans. He is also unable to perceive himself as the Goal of this action.

There is further evidence in the clauses of Passage A that the theme of the 'people's frustration of the struggle with their environment' is 'embodied in the syntax' (Halliday, 1971:354).

This can be observed in the intransitive clauses that contain potentially transitive verbs. Instead of being associated with a direct object or a Goal, these processes are followed by prepositional phrases or circumstantial adjuncts, e g

He	...	grabbed	at the branches	...
Actor		Process: non-directed action	Location	

The potentially causative function of the verb 'grab' is downplayed in this utterance because it is not associated with a Goal. This intransitive use of a normally transitive verb 'creates an atmosphere of ineffectual activity' with regard to the actions of the Neanderthal 'people' (Halliday, 1971:350).

In the 56 clauses in Passage A, half of the noun phrases functioning as subjects do not denote people - they denote either inanimate objects or parts of the body, e g

His nose	examined	this stuff	and
Actor	Process: mental	Perceived phenomenon	

(his nose)	did not like	it.
Actor	Process: mental	Perceived phenomenon

Clauses in which the Actor associated with a process of mental perception is a part of the body and not an animate being are further support for the claim that there is a correlation between the role structures and the themes of the novel. Halliday interprets this deviance as a reflection of the limited ability of the 'people' to perceive and understand their world.

The clauses of Passage A can be said to be characterized by a lack of processes of directed action associated with human Agents. 'The entire transitivity structure of Language A can be summed up by saying that there is no cause and effect' (Halliday 1971:353). In the world of the 'people' there is 'no effective relation between persons and objects: people do not bring about events in which anything other than they themselves or parts of their bodies, are implicated' (ibid. 354).

3.1.2 The transitivity structure of Passage B

Of the 43 clauses in the first paragraph of Passage B, only 4 are transitive with human Agents. Lok functions in the role of Agent in only one of these clauses, e g

Lok	...	picked up	Tanakil	...
Agent		Process: directed action	Goal	

Halliday (1971:356) interprets this rare instance of Lok's Agency as being an ironic highlighting of the theme of the helplessness of the 'people' as 'of all the positive actions on his environment that Lok might have taken, the one he does take is the utterly improbable one of the capture of a girl of the tribe'. It is this rare act of Agency in which Lok affects something or someone in his external environment that incites the wrath of the 'tribe' and finally provokes them to destroy him and Fa.

In 2 of the 4 transitive clauses in this paragraph, the noun phrases denoting members of the 'tribe' function in the role of Agent, e g

He (the old man)	threw	something	at Fa.
Agent	Process: directed action	Goal	Direction: terminal motion

Hunters	were holding	the hollow log
Agent	Process: directed action	Goal	

According to Halliday, the role structures of this paragraph underline the theme of the 'people's' weakness in comparison with the 'tribe's' superior adaptation.

In the second paragraph of Passage B, there are 47 clauses. In only one of these does Lok function in the role of Agent, e g

It	put up	a hand	and	scratched	under its chinless mouth.
Agent	Process: directed action	Goal		Process: non- directed action	Location : spatial (static)

This act of Agency is, however, reflexive. Lok does not affect anything or anyone other than himself. The syntax of this utterance implies that 'Lok remains powerless, master of nothing but his own body' (Halliday, 1971:356), unable to affect anything external to himself.

3.1.3 The transitivity structure of Passage C

In Passage C, which characterizes the narrative of the 'tribe', there is a more even distribution of transitive and intransitive clauses. The syntax of this narrative reflects a world that 'is organized as ours is; or at least in a way that we can recog-

nize' (Halliday, 1971:356). In the 19 transitive clauses of this passage, the noun phrases functioning in the role of Agent all denote animate beings, e g

Twal	...	kissed	her	...
Agent		Process: directed action	Goal	

... if	she	had saved	her baby	...
	Agent	Process: directed action	Goal	

You and he	gave	my child	to the devils
Agent	Process: directed action	Goal	

The role structures of this passage are such that they convey a world-view in which humans are able to understand and affect their environment. The processes no longer denote non-directed ineffectual movements but actions that affect other people or external objects.

In the syntax of the narrative of the 'tribe', parts of the body no longer function in the role of Actor associated with a mental process. Instead, parts of the body function in the role of Attribuant with Attributes ascribed to them, e g

...	his teeth	were	wolf's teeth	...
	subject Attribuant	Process: ascription	Attribute	

According to Halliday, this is an indication that the 'tribe' are able to form an awareness of the whole man, to relate and compare his features to those of other entities in their world. There is no longer (as is the case in the world-view of the 'people') a 'reluctance to envisage the "whole man" (as distinct from a part of his body) participating in a process in which other entities are involved' (Halliday, 1971:352).

The world-view of the 'tribe' is one in which human Agency and the relation between cause and effect is understood. In the narrative of the 'tribe' therefore, experience is encoded in transitive structures with human Agents. Although the 'tribe' are superior to the 'people', they are nevertheless able to credit the 'people' with the potential for Agency, e g

...	they	have given	me	back	a changed Tuami;	...
	Agent	Process: directed action	Recipient	Process	Goal	

They	cannot follow	us	...
Agent	Process: directed action	Goal	

These examples illustrate that 'the tribe's demand for explanations of things, born of their own more advanced state, leads them, while still fearfully insisting on the people's weakness in action, to ascribe to them supernatural powers' (Halliday, 1971:357).

3.2 Halliday's role structure claims

In The inheritors, Language A, the narrative of the 'people', constitutes the major part of the novel, namely 215 pages. Language C, conveying the narrative of the 'tribe' comprises only the last

10 pages of the novel (pp 223-233). The majority of the events in the novel are therefore presented through the deviant transitivity patterns characteristic of Language A.

Halliday (1971:359) claims accordingly that the functional motivation for linguistic structure is exemplified in the language of The inheritors:

'The theme of the entire novel, in a sense, is transitivity: man's interpretation of his experience of the world, his understanding of its processes and his own participation in them. This is the motivation for Golding's syntactic originality; it is because of this that the syntax is effective as a mode of meaning.'

4. CONFLICTING RESPONSES TO HALLIDAY'S INQUIRY

The conflicting responses evoked by Halliday's inquiry are a reflection of the current controversy within the discipline of stylistics, namely the dispute between the 'objective' and the 'affective' stylisticians (Taylor and Toolan, 1984:58).

Fowler (1986:150-151) refers to Halliday's inquiry as a 'pioneering article'. He (1985:70) maintains that in recent years Halliday's transitivity system has become of increasing interest to students of literary stylistics as 'different choices of transitivity structures in clauses will add up to different world-views, perceptibly different presentations of the world of fiction'. Traugott and Pratt (1980:219) describe Halliday's inquiry as 'one of the most interesting studies of literature from the point of view of role structure analysis'. Leech and Short (1981:32) find the analysis 'revealing in the way that it relates precise linguistic observation to literary effect'.

These positive appraisals are based on the assumption that meaning is inherent in the language of the text and that it can be retrieved through an objective study of the linguistic features of that text.

Stanley Fish (1973), on the other hand, comments on Halliday's inquiry in mostly negative terms. The two major points of criticism he makes of Halliday's inquiry are: firstly, that the reasoning on which his transitivity system is based is circular, and secondly, that the claims and inferences he derives on the basis of his application of this system are arbitrary. Fish (1973:125) states that 'when a text is run through Halliday's machine, its parts are first disassembled, then labelled, and finally recombined into their original form'. In his view, this is a circular procedure requiring a great many operations yet in the end achieving no gain in understanding. With regard to arbitrariness, he (1973:350) claims that Halliday is 'determined to confer a value on the formal distinctions his machine reads out'.

Fish (1973:129) concedes that Halliday's inquiry is not entirely without meaning, but insists that 'the explanation for that meaning is not the capacity for a syntax to express it, but the ability of a reader to confer it'. It is in this statement that the crux of Fish's rebuttal, not only of Halliday's inquiry, but also of the methods of stylisticians in general, can be observed.

Fish's rejection of stylistics must be seen against the background of his notion of the nature of linguistic meaning and the role of linguistic structure in semantic interpretation. In his view, meaning exists solely as an act of interpretation. Meaning is not located within the structures of a text but in the experience of the reader. He (1970: 123-124) regards meaning as being an 'event', something that 'happens' through the activities of a reader. It is the reader who has the sole authority in constructing a meaning for a text. In these terms, the foregrounded structures Halliday observes in the language of The inheritors do not 'possess' meaning, they 'acquire' meaning through the reader's activities (Fish, 1973:143).

Fish (1973:144) calls for a new stylistics, what he terms an affective stylistics, in which the 'focus of attention is shifted from the spatial context of a page and its observable regularities to the temporal context of a mind and its experiences'.

Is Fish's negative appraisal of Halliday's inquiry fair? To what extent is Fish's notion of linguistic meaning compatible with that of standard linguistic theories subscribed to by stylisticians? Seeking answers to these questions illustrates the relevance of invoking concepts derived from linguistic theory.

In linguistic theory, the difference between meaning and interpretation is characterized as the distinction between sentence and utterance meaning (Lyons, 1981:140). A sentence is a theoretical construct of linguistics. Its meaning is dependent on the meaning of its constituent lexemes as well as on its grammatical structure. The meaning of an utterance, however, is dependent, not only on the meaning of its lexical units and its syntactic structure, but also on additional information derived from its context and the hearer or reader's world of experience. It is the extralinguistic information that enables a hearer or a reader to interpret an utterance or to construct a meaning for it. Whereas a sentence has a theoretical meaning, an utterance has a pragmatic or communicative function.

Fish, in rejecting the notion that grammatical constructions convey meaning, and in acknowledging only the pragmatic effect of such constructions, is operating with a narrow, or limited, notion of what constitutes linguistic meaning. His criticism of Halliday's inquiry is therefore neither fair nor valid.

It is, however, theoretical disputes such as this between objective and affective stylisticians that mark new and important issues in the discipline that require further investigation. There is a need for stylistics to provide a systematic account of the reciprocal relationship between the verbal structure of a text and a reader's response to it, or the manner in which syntactic structures not only encode meaning but also prompt interpretive activities in a reader.

5. CONCLUSION

Is the application of linguistic theory in the analysis of a literary text merely a futile dismantling of a text, or is it a fruitful exercise promoting a deeper insight into the meaning of the text?

Compiling an inventory of instances of linguistic prominence in a text is, on its own, not an automatic discovery procedure from which a meaning can be read off. The instances of prominence need to be motivated, according to the principles of foregrounding, as being of relevance to other aspects that contribute to the artistic whole, such as the thematic meaning or the structuring of experience presented in the text.

The meaning of a text is a multi-dimensional affair - many aspects contribute to its effect. Its verbal structure is but one of many perspectives that need to be considered when assessing its total meaning. So, too, does the reader's competence and experience constitute only a part of the total meaning of the text.

However, because linguistic theory is systematic and comprehensive, it is able to provide a descriptive apparatus which extends to many levels and aspects of language structure and function, such as the syntactic, the semantic, the phonological and the pragmatic. Lately, it has expanded its scope to provide ways of investigating the cohesive resources of language that operate at a level beyond that of the sentence, namely the structure and organization of discourse.

As Halliday's inquiry shows, recourse to an appropriate linguistic model can be of value in clarifying or supporting an initial intuitive assessment of a text, as well as in promoting insight into the way in which linguistic form and artistic function are related.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1) The term 'thematic relations' is derived from the centrality of the Theme in Gruber's (1976:38) system of semantic relations in a sentence. The Theme is the entity affected by the verb in the sentence; it is the entity that undergoes the change of movement or state in the sentence.
- 2) Halliday (1985:158) describes the clause as being 'a composite affair, a combination of three different structures, deriving from distinct functional components'. The three structures which he posits as combining to form the clause are transitivity, theme and mood. Theme structures are those that express 'the organization of the message'. Mood structures are those that express 'interactional meaning'.
- 3) Halliday (1985:102) refers to the circumstantial elements as being 'optionally' a part of the clause. The main function of these elements is to convey the spatial or temporal location, as well as the manner or cause, of the process.

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