

An Ecological Discourse Analysis of Emily Dickinson's Nature Poetry From a Systemic Functional Linguistics Perspective—"I Have a Bird in Spring" as an Example

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With the development of the society, ecology has become the core issues. As the inter-discipline between ecology and linguistics, ecolinguistics focus on the relationship between human and the nature, how language has effect on the nature. Emily Dickinson, a great American poet, has written about 1,700 poems that mainly focus on the joy of life, nature, life, and so on, some of which have been explored by different perspective. However, it is few to analyze them from the metafunction of systematical and functional linguistics with ecological perspective. According to M. A. K. Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistics, this paper chooses a nature poem of Emily Dickinson—"I Have a Bird in Spring" to conduct an ecological analysis to show how poets express their attitude towards nature by language and illustrate a study way of ecological analysis.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, Systemic Functional Linguistics, ecolinguistic analysis, nature poetry

Introduction

Ecolinguistics, combining ecology with linguistics, is connecting natural science and humanities. In the humanities, there are emerging disciplines, such as eco-aesthetics, eco-literature, eco-linguistics, and eco-translatology (Xin & Huang, 2013). Matthiessen (2009) thought ecolinguistics deals not only with the social environment of language, but also with the ecological environment of society. Thus, an increasing number of writers show their feelings and attitudes towards society by describing everything in nature. Ecological linguistics studies ecological texts through ecological discourse analysis, which pays more attention to ecological awareness in discourse. For ecological analysts, discourse is a good place for people to express themselves and other creatures (Xin & Huang, 2013). Ecological discourse analysis is an ecology-oriented analysis of discourse based on an ecosophy in terms of linguistics (He & Wei, 2018). From systematic functional linguistic theories, it is designed to expose the effects of language use on the environment, such as eco-beneficial, eco-destructive, and ecoambivalent texts (Cheng, 2022). Dividing from ecological linguistics, these discourses are used to enhance people's ecological awareness, and remind people to get close to nature.

This paper analyzes a natural poem by the poet Emily Dickinson (from 1830 to 1886)—"I Have a Bird in Spring". Emily Dickinson, an American legendary poet, whose poems are mainly about life, nature, faith,

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friendship, love and death. She wrote more than 1,800 poems, 500 poems of which are about nature. In terms of the ecolinguistics, these poems can be regarded as the natural poems and can be analyzed by ecological discourse analysis.

There does not exist any analysis from the ecological discourse analysis within Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. Therefore, this paper attempts to re-explore Emily Dickinson's nature works from the framework of systemic-functional linguistics, which is to explore how poetry expresses to her attitude and ideas towards nature with poems and to explore a research path of ecolinguistic analysis. It can also demonstrate the operability of systemic-functional linguistics as a tool for analyzing natural texts.

Theoretical Foundation

Halliday and Matthiessen' systemic functional linguists (2014) provide a practical theoretical framework for ecological discourse analysis. At present, there are four types of ecological discourse paradigms in the field of ecology: critical discourse analysis, positive discourse analysis, multi-modal discourse analysis, and ecological discourse analysis (Xin & Huang, 2013). As a kind of eco-beneficial discourse, nature poetry is a great value to the study of ecolinguistics. Huang and Chen (2017) conducted Emily Dickinson's nature poem by an ecological discourse analysis; Huang (2018) analyzed Emily Dickinson's nature poem—"Nature" is what we see by metafunctions and grammatical metaphors. The English translation of the poem "Chun Xiao" has been analyzed from a functional discourse by Tan and Huang (2019); Liu and Wang (2019) took Thomas Nashe's "Spring" as an example for ecological discourse analysis; Cheng (2022) expanded the three metafunctions within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics and constructed the theoretical system of ecolinguistic system. We can analyze a text from the three meta-functions including the transitivity system, mood system, theme system, cohesion and coherence system, and logical system, which also provides a more comprehensive analytical framework for ecological discourse analysis, and highlights the philosophical principle of ecological discourse analysis, "Diversity and Harmony, Interaction, and Co-existence". All in all, this thesis is an attempt to analyze a nature poem from the ecological discourse analysis within the systemic-functional grammar.

The Poem and Its Structure

Emily Dickinson, the great and excellent poet, has isolated with others, and just spent time in observing the nature and expressed her love of nature by observing the nature carefully. Song and Zhou (2007) showed that the nature, simple, and mysterious, is the source of Emily Dickinson's poetry. She regards the creatures in the nature as the acquaintance in life and devotes herself to nature. Emily Dickinson's affirmation of the value of "nature" accords with Thoreau's thought of nature, which expresses her awe of nature. Zhao (2010) analyzed Dickinson's four poems showing his attitude towards the awe of nature, and the equal consciousness of creatures and human, and called on people to reconstruct the harmonious relationship between human and nature.

This paper selects from the *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*: "I Have a Bird in Spring". The poem consists of five sections, each with six lines. To be analyzed easily, we number each line. We can see the Appendix. From the grammar structure, the title of the poetry is a simple clause. (1) to (2) is a complex clause, (3) is a simple clause. (4) to (6) is a complex clause. (7) to (12) is a complex clause. (13) to (15) is a complex clause. (16) to (17) is complex clause. (18) is a simple clause. (19) to (24) is a complex clause. (25) to (30) is a complex clause.

This poem focused on the theme of “nature” to describe creatures and praised its great creatures in spring like birds and roses. At the beginning of the spring time, the robin belongs to the poet, and in the end of the spring, the spring time is past and the birds have flown away. But the poet has the confidence that the birds will come back. From poet's a doubtful and uneasy heart to a sudden comprehension of natural law, the poet's small doubts that birds may not come back are cleared. The whole poetry shows the poet expresses her love and awe to nature, conveying the idea that all things in the world are equal, and human should follow the laws of nature to respect and adore the nature.

Ecological Discourse Analysis

In 1968, Halliday firstly put forward the functions of systematic grammar. Experiential function, logical function, discourse function, and interpersonal function were included in his concept of systematic grammar. Until in 1970, he modified these function into ideational function, textual function, and interpersonal function, which can be regarded as the meta-function. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) thought that every clause has the three meta-functions in grammar. Systematic Functional Linguistics pays more attention to the meaning rather than the form. Thus, we will analyze the poem from the perspective of three meta-functions.

Ideational Function

Ideational function, used to use a language, has the function of transmitting new information and cannot being heard by the listener. Ideational function only includes the experiential function, and years later, Halliday combined the experiential function and logical function into the one. The experiential function means using language to describe the experience of the inner and real world and the entities involved around there (Thompson, 2008). And the logical function means the relationship between discourse, such as juxtaposition, twist, cause and effect, and condition (Zuo, 2019). The function is achieved that of transitivity and voice. Transitivity is the grammar or the clause which is composed of six different processes that will listed in following texts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Material process refers to “do something in a narrow sense”. In fact, indeed, the process contains a mandatory actor for the process and an optional target. Mental process, which is a process of acting one's mental state, conveys psychological activities, such as feeling, thinking, and seeing something. Behavioral process means “someone doing something in physical and mental activities”, such as coughing, breathing, smiling, and crying, etc., in which the participants are human behaviors. Relational process refers to “the association between different experience”. There are three main types for the process and each process can divide two types: attributive (a is an attribute of x) and identify (a is the identify of x). Verbal process, which means “the process of saying verb, includes the sayer and the content that the speakers want to express”. Existential process is a representation of something in existence and happening, especially the sentence: there be. And the extent serves as the only participant.

There are five processes in the first stanza of this poem:

Relation progress: I have (relational process)/Are (relational process) mine—/They're thine. (relational process)

Behavioral progress: doth sing (behavioral process)—/The spring decoys. (behavioral process)/Learneth (behavioral process) beyond the sea

Material process: the summer nears. (material process)—/the rose appears, (material process)/Robin is gone. (material process)/Though flown (material process)—/Melody new for me/And will return. (material process)/Fast (material process) in a safer hand/Held (material process) in a truer Land/And though they now depart, (material process)/Removed. (material process)/Though flown (material process)/Shall in a distant tree/Bright melody for me/Return. (material process)/

Mental process: Then will I not repine, (mental process)/I see (mental process)/Yet do I not repine (mental process)/Knowing (mental process) that bird of mine/

Verbal process: Tell (verbal process) I my doubting heart/

From the analysis, the material process is a big proponent of all processes. It shows that the poet describes the bird meticulously, and we can also see that the poetry's emotional changes. The poetry shows that human should respect the nature's law, which can construct a goodwill and relations.

According to Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, there are two categories in terms of interdependency: parataxis and hypotaxis, while from the logical-semantic relations, enlargement can be classified as elaboration, extension, and enhancement, and projection can be further classified as locution and concept (Halliday, 1994). Halliday (1994) argued that the function of the clause is not a direct expression to the experience but can use proper language to reinterpret the experience. In this poem, in terms of inter-dependency, there are four hypotaxis and four parataxis, and from the logical-semantic relationship, there are three projection clauses and six extended clauses in the poem.

In addition, the poet employs a great deal of personification to the birds and the creatures of spring, which shows as if there are some equal conversations between human and nature to further emphasize the ecological significance. There are several metaphors in the poem, such as the birds singing songs, the spring colors as a beautiful woman attracting creatures, and a bright light as a more golden light, lamenting the flight of time in spring and the changeable emotion for the poet who wants to stay with the beautiful spring. The poetry also shows the regret to the flying time and expresses poet's awe and adoration to nature.

Interpersonal Function

Interpersonal function refers between participants and their living environment. Human beings interact with others using language and keep the relationship. Through language, people can have influence on others and show ideas to the world. We can use mood and modality to explain this function (Halliday, 1994). Mood, which indicates what role the speaker will play in a situation and what role he will assign to the recipient, consists of the subject and the finite. A subject may refer to "an element of the norm and then the finite can be referred to a vector element" (Egins, 2004). Modality refers to "whether the speakers make the judgment and evaluation of the transferred content" (Huang & Chen, 2017). There four main speech functions in mood, such as offer, command, statement, and question, which can be conveyed by different mood (Halliday, 1994). According to the interpersonal function, all the clauses in the poem are declarative sentences, which are used to express the poet's point of view and ideas. From the poet, she spent almost half her life living in a small town with her best friends and family. Thus, observing nature was the source of her spirit in the poems. However, it is time for her to the Midwest in American and she must part with friends. Despite all the reluctance in his heart, she also showed a frankness. Dating back from her whole life, even if she stayed at home and closed the door without any social activities, but her vision is not confined here at all; even facing of sad parting with best friends, she also can be treated calmly. With the returning birds, the poetry shows the author's feelings for the parting. When we and our

friends meet in spring, we will part in the end of the spring. In terms of the poet, we do not need to feel sad for bird's departure, because they will eventually become better and come back. From this, we can know that Emily Dickinson's poems reflect her own living environment and attitude towards life and nature (Huang & Chen, 2017). There are only two modal verbs in the poem, namely, "shall" and "will". Among them, "will" means "being willing to do something", if we use it in the first person to indicate the speaker's will or decision, or if we use it in the second or third person to indicate the future plan. And the modality word "shall" denotes the speaker's intention and decision. In this poem, "will" appeared twice, the first of which appeared in the second stanza: the poet feels a little depressed and sad because of the birds' departure and the short spring, so the poet has hopeful attitude towards the birds flying back. The second appeared in the last stanza. After thinking for a while, the poet is with a broad mind to hug the changes from nature, and eventually convinces the birds will fly back. When the "will" is a kind of affirmation, it is a positive expectation for birds flying back again and the spring coming back. The "shall" in the last section also shows the poet's affirmative intention, and expresses the poet's change of mood from the short spring when the birds fly away to the time when the spring comes and birds come back with a bright melody. The poet describes the mysterious and great natural force, which also reflects the poet's positive view of ecological protection.

Textual Function

The textual function can make disorders language into a logical and semantic coherent discourse or make random concepts of the language in a logical way to correspond to other information by some types. The theme and rheme consist of the critical analysis perspective, as the cohesive means that can make disorders sentences logically and semantically cohesive. The theme is the known information, and the rheme is the emerging message that the speakers wish to convey to hearers. From the perspective of ecolinguistics, the choice of theme reflects the writer's orientation (Liu & Wang, 2019). The theme can be differentiated by the function of the itself. When the theme is served as the subject of the sentence and it can be the performer of the action, it is necessary to call unmarked theme. If the theme is used as the adverbial or preposition phrases instead of the subject, it is natural to introduce the marked theme. For example, Sally stands under the tree. In this sentence, "Sally" is the unmarked theme. But in the sentence "Under the tree stands Sally", "Under the tree" is the marked theme. Through analyzing the poem, we can see that there are five themes in the first stanza, one of which is represented by "I", and the other four are "spring", "the summer", "the rose", and "robin". In the second stanza, there are two themes, one of which is "I", and the other is "bird". In the third stanza, there are two complex clauses and one clause and there are four themes: the first theme is a compound theme, the second theme is "they", the third theme is "I", and the last theme is "they". In the fourth stanza, there is a complex clause, with the theme "I" and the second theme being a compound theme. In the last stanza, there are two themes, one of which is "I" and the other is "bird". In addition, sentences need to be logically related to realize the passages. There are the most common cohesive devices, such as four "and" in the poem and one "yet" and "then", which can be called conjunction; Ellipsis is also used in this poem. For example, "Though () flown; and () will return; () Fast in safer; () held in a tuner land; though () flown; () shall". References are also common in this poem. For example, in "And now they depart" and "They're thine", "they" represents birds. Repetition is used in lexical cohesion, for example: "And as the summer nears and as the rose appears", "In a serener bright", and "In a more golden light", "Each little doubt and fear, and Each little discord here", which are formed to the cohesive devices of the poem, expressing poetry's feeling to the brief spring and the leaving birds.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes and discusses Emily Dickinson's nature poetry from the three main meta-functions of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics within the framework of ecological discourse analysis. Though appreciating the poetry, we can know the main idea of the poetry and poet's attitudes towards her nature and life. It is more important to show meaning through language forms. In the poetry, Emily Dickinson's attitudes towards nature can be showed that we should respect the rules of the nature. Creatures in the nature are equal. Since people are part of nature, they should treat every life equally. The poet whose reverence for nature and whose respect to nature has been conveyed in the poetry, to reconstruct the harmony between human and nature (Zhao, 2010). Through the analysis and discussion, this paper also shows the operability and applicability by Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics in the process of analyzing such literary works as nature poetry.

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Appendix*I Have a Bird in Spring*

Emily Dickinson

- (1) I have a bird in spring
- (2) Which for myself doth sing—
- (3) The spring decoys.
- (4) And as the summer nears—
- (5) And as the rose appears,
- (6) Robin is gone.

- (7) Yet do I not repine
- (8) Knowing that bird of mine
- (9) Though flown—
- (10) Learneth beyond the sea
- (11) Melody new for me
- (12) And will return.

- (13) Fast in a safer hand
- (14) Held in a truer Land
- (15) Are mine—
- (16) And though they now depart,
- (17) Tell I my doubting heart
- (18) They're thine.

- (19) In a serener bright,
- (20) In a more golden light
- (21) I see
- (22) Each little doubt and fear,
- (23) Each little discord here
- (24) Removed.

- (25) Then will I not repine,
- (26) Knowing that bird of mine
- (27) Though flown
- (28) Shall in a distant tree
- (29) Bright melody for me
- (30) Return.