

Appreciation of Hardy's poem "Neutral Tones" from the point of view of functional analysis

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Abstract: According to the theory of Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL), language cannot be disassociated from meaning. Function and semantics, as SFL suggests, are considered as the basis of human language and communicative activity. In order to reveal the inseparability of language and semantic, this paper aims to analyze and appreciate Hardy's poem "Neutral Tones" as a piece of literary work based on the theory of functional analysis specifically on field, tenor and mode.

Key words: functional analysis; context; cohesion; *Neutral Tone*

1. Introduction

According to Halliday and many other functional linguists, anthropologists, sociologists as well as philosophers of language, language study can not be successfully fulfilled without considering the situation of context, for it is constrained and influenced by the situation of context. These practitioners all stress that the study of words, utterance, even whole chunks of discourse, can not be understood well or appreciated well without the connections of the contexts among them, that is to say, the study of words, utterance, the whole chunks of discourse, is insufficient for full understanding or appreciating of them. They can only be understood in a given context.

As to Halliday, the context of situation obtained "through a systematic relationship between the social environment on the one hand, and the functional organization of language", on the other hand, which can be best understood in terms of "register". Register, a semantic concept, is very important because it is seen as the linguistic consequence of interacting aspects of context, which Halliday calls "field, tenor, and mode". Field refers to the topics and actions which language is used to express; tenor indicates the language users, their relationships to each other, and their purpose; and mode stands for the channel through which communication is carried out. These three contextual features or variables are intended to help us link the linguistic analysis to the relevant contextual factors. From the perspective of these three interacting aspects of context, this paper will analyze the stylistic features of the poem *Neutral Tone* written by Thomas Hardy as a piece of literary work.

Neutral Tones

- (1) We stood by a pond that winter day,
- (2) And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
- (3) And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
- (4) —They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

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- (5) Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove,
(6) Over tedious riddles of years ago;
(7) And some words played between us to and fro,
(8) On which lost the more by our love.

(9) The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing,
(10) Alive enough to have strength to die,
(11) And a grin of bitterness swept thereby,
(12) Like an ominous bird a-wing...

(13) Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,
(14) And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me,
(15) Your face and the God-curst sun, and a tree,
(16) And a pond edged with grayish leaves.

(Thomas Hardy, 1866)

2. Poem as form

Thomas Hardy's *Neutral Tone* (1866) is a poem about a failed love, or exactly to say that it's about the sorrieness of love, the ruin of love, the deception of love, and the conflict and ironies between love and reality. The setting of the poem is "by the pond", where the two once-be lovers meet together for their sorry love. In the course of their appointment, the girl takes the despising attitude towards the boy, while the boy is self-evidence that the fine-sounding words uttered for the girl is nothing, but a trick that gives the boy a bitter hateful impression. To readers, the cause and effect of the love, in fact, is unclear, and the features of the characters in the poem are also vague, but still there is a kind of sackless power in the tones of the hero and the heroine. To the hero, he cannot bear to look back on what happened in the past, because it is unbearable for him to recall the past. To the heroine, she is insensitive to the boy, caring nothing about the feelings of the boy. The scenery intentionally described serves as a foil, which increases the hero's sense of bitterness, sense of sorrow, sense of bewilderment, sense of isolation and sense of disillusionment and failure. Indeed, the world is realistic and cruel, hence the gap between dream and reality is too wide to be filled in.

With a special rhyming scheme, the poem consisting of sixteen lines with four tetrastiches can be divided into two parts: the first three stanzas about a moment in the past, and the fourth about the "lessons", the speaker learns from what happened between the speaker and the woman, which offers a fusion of the images of the lover's face with those of the scenery. And the poem predominantly rhymes abba, cddc, effe and ghhg. The first line and the last line of each stanza are rhymed, so are the second and the third of each stanza. The poem goes as a smoothly flowing stream running from the very beginning of the poem till the end of the poem in good order: aa ("day", "gray"); bb ("God", "sod"); cc("rove", "love"); dd ("ago", "fro"); ee ("thing", "wing"); ff ("die", "thereby"); gg("deceives", "leaves"); hh("me", "tree").

In the poem, there are no instances of typographic foregrounding and no significant departures from the typographic norms of English poetry, except that the last lines of each stanza are significantly shorter and meaningfully in the indented style. The layout of the poem is nothing unusual, and the entire poem is in declarative mood.

Neutral Tones excellently exemplifies Hardy's semi-dark period, which expresses a gloomier tone with assonance used in it.

3. Poem as discourse

3.1 Field, tenor and mode of the poem

For Halliday, the discourse of any kind of materials can be presented by the context of situation, which can best be understood in terms of three features: field, tenor, and mode. The three features are meaningful in constructing an idea about text's reasons and purposes, as well as its structure and adequate use of language in the text. The text's function (of language) is the most important fact; therefore, field, tenor, and mode can provide a straight view upon the language itself and its function and structure.

The field of the poem *Neutral Tones* is expressed as a verbal art. It represents a ruined and failed love story. The scenery described in the poem, the speaker's mood, the relationship between the two persons, the speaker's memory as well as the "lessons" drawn by the speaker all from a sub-field.

The tenor is expressed through interpersonal function. In the poem, the relationship between the speaker and the woman is expressed through the pronouns "we", "you" and "me". What has happened between the speaker and the woman? What tones (attitudes) does the woman take towards the speaker? How does the speaker think of the woman? Why does he talk about the past experience when probably the lover ("you") is no longer present? All represent the interpersonal relation, and the tenor of the poem is realized through all these "wh" questions.

The mode is expressed through the textual function. It is a lyrical poem. It has several images: the image of color, the image of winter and the image of death. It also has a metric pattern of stanza-line-foot-syllable, in which the rough-hewn rhythms are combined.

3.2 Analysis of the poem

In the first stanza, there is a very clear feature of declarative mood used in the following four clauses: "We stood by a pond that winter day", "the sun was white", "a few leaves lay on the starving sod", and "They had fallen from an ash". Here the interpersonal function of language is applied wonderfully, which exhibits the attitude, and the mood of "the speaker". To the speaker, what happened in the past has gone, the sun was as pale as the person's face as if scolded; on the starving meadow there were a few gray leaves falling from an ash, only "he"—the speaker could memorize "we" once stood by a pond that winter day. In a heavy, gloomier tone the speaker related and recalled the past, which reveals how sad the speaker was for "us".

The denotation of the title "neutral tone" to be understood superficially is "gray color", but its connotation is that everything is neutral: the day is neutral, the sky is neutral, the scenery is neutral; and what is more important, the speaker's mood is neutral, which implies his emotion and feeling is in cold, sad bluish and grayish "color". So at the beginning of the poem, just like the title itself, a "neutral tone" to the whole poem is defined. In the first stanza, there are many lexical cohesive items related to *neutral tone*: "a pond" (line 1) in the wilderness, "the sun is white" (line 2), "the starving sod" (line 3), and "the leaves were gray" (line 4). The lexical cohesion items "the leaves" (theme) and "gray" (rheme) in line 4 purposely convey the thematic meaning delicately and ambiguously. "The pond" in the wilderness, "the white sun", "the starving sod", "the gray leaves", the persons ("we"), the scenery, all achieve the same effect of "neutral tone", and all make the ideational meaning conveyed by "gray". In fact, all these lexical cohesive items in all lines of the first stanza expressed in a heavy, gloomy and declarative tone achieve and convey an ideational meaning of "neutral tone" indicated in the title of the poem beforehand.

In order to increase the atmosphere of "neutral tone", processes are applied in the first stanza. By using the material processes, sad scenery is painted vividly, just like using a camera to take a picture that enhances a sense

of vision. And the past tense is used in this stanza purposely, indicating the speaker's reminiscences for the past. Actually what the story happened between "us" did occur in the past. Through the use of the past tense, a picture of nostalgia and soreness for the past is portrayed by the material processes vividly and sadly.

By using the material processes, a sense of hearing is enhanced, too. The participant "day" in the end of the first line is rhymed with the participant "gray" in the last line of this stanza; the participant "God" in the second line is rhymed with the participant "sod" in the third line, which produce a prominent effect of hearing. Besides a metaphor is made to convey an ideational meaning: the day is gray. Then the use of adjectival groups "white", "chidden", "starving" and "gray" also gives a concrete picturesque ideational meaning to the topic of "neutral tone", as well as gives a metaphor to the following stanzas.

In the second stanza, the shift in the field is from the description of standing by a pond that winter day to the description of the eyes on "me" and words "played between us" which dig out the quality of the "neutral tones". The first turning point along with the shift in the declarative mood of relating is from the setting that brings a past scene to the eyes of the speaker and presents a picture of "neutral tones" in front of the eyes to the specifics once happened between "us", which gives an emphasis on the facts taking place long ago.

Again the interpersonal function of language is applied in the second stanza, presenting that the attitudes both the man and the woman towards each other were indifferent at the moment when meeting. To the man, the eyes were dim with no light, and the words played between them were nothing, and made the love lose its value and glory. To the woman, the man like the tedious riddles lingering and hanging in her mind was "impossible" for her to solve.

Like the first stanza, there are many lexical cohesion items related to the "neutral tones" in the second stanza. The mutual cohesive lexical items in this stanza can not be fail to describe the "neutral tones" by using the phrases of "rove over", "tedious riddles", "words played between us to and fro" and "lost the more". The eyes roving over the speaker were dull with no excitement and light, and seemed to be guessing at the "riddles" unsolved for many years which made love lose its value and its interest. In the course of their meeting, some words like jeu de mots were passed or uttered between "us" as if "we" were bantering each other. All these lexical items contribute to the ideational meaning of 'neutral tones', resulting in making "our love" much bleaker, much more dismal to fill up "neutral tones".

In this poem, "riddles" is a metaphor, representing the man (the speaker) allegorically. Here a rich ideational meaning is expressed through this lexical item. The woman in the poem always regarded the man as a "riddle" and guessed at him all the time. Whether did he love her truly or not? Could he achieve the same social status as hers? Was the man a good match with her? All the questions like riddles were wandering in her mind and no answers had been found. Therefore, the quality of the tone that colors the gray deeper and deeper.

One thing should be pointed out here: two clauses in the second stanza. In the first clause, "your eyes" as the theme and "rove over" as the rheme display the thematic meaning, whereas the lexical items "played" and "lost" as rhemes make the thematic meaning more significant, more emphatic and more conspicuous.

Lexical items in a discourse as a chain can link paragraphs or stanzas closely and tightly. The lexical items really as a chain play a key role in connecting the first stanza and the second stanza of this poem together in a cohesive order with logical ideational meaning, as well as connecting the following stanza skillfully.

In the third stanza, the shift in this stanza is transferred in the field from the description of "the eyes on me"

and "words played between us" to the description of the "smile" hanging on the mouth, which ulteriorly and profoundly reveals the quality of "neutral tones". As a chain, the lexical cohesion items in this stanza relate to the ideational meaning "neutral tones" by presenting the lexical items of "the dearest thing", "to die", "grin of bitterness" and "an ominous bird". How "neutral" and miserable the man was, even the smile swept on the woman's mouth was connecting with the death that was like an ominous bird making the man have enough strength not to live, but to die. The lexical items here serve to hook the ideational meanings of "neutral tones" with the first stanza and the second stanza through cohesion tightly and closely, which exhibit a picture of bleakness between these lexical items. Both the metaphor used in line 1 and the simile used in line 4 contribute to reveal the thematic meaning of the poem again. And the past tenses used through the whole stanza are worth to be mentioned here, for a significant role is played by the presentation of the grammatical coincidence with the first two stanzas, all devoting to the effect of "neutral tones" of the failed love story between the two.

Through cohesion, the lexical items mentioned above all imply that nature itself has become the victim of the disaster. A bunch of pitiful and sad natural things, such as the day, the nature, the pond, the earth all become the carriers of feelings and serve as a foil to the sorrow of the man and woman standing by the pond. The characters and the place are combined together harmoniously. As the background is moving with the lexical cohesion items, a kind of hopeless feeling for their love is revealed which is broken down to the central idea of the poem—love deceives, and keen lessons the speaker must learn.

Though the last stanza is about the "lessons" the speaker learns, and the shift in the field from the description of the "smile" hanging on the mouth to the whole scenery that correlates to the first stanza of the poem, closely connects with the other three stanzas through cohesion.

The cohesion related to the ideational meaning "neutral tones" in the last stanza is presented by the lexical cohesion items "keen", "deceive", "wings with wrong", "God-curst sun" and "grayish leaves". From the lessons of "love deceives" that wrings the heart of the sense of being wronged, makes the mood of the speaker much more "neutral" which is merely like the pond edged with grayish leaves all the winter.

In this stanza, the interpersonal function of language is applied again by the use of a concrete material process that delivers a switch of the tenses from the past to the present and the present perfect. Relationship between the two persons—the man and the woman are expressed through the pronouns "me" and "your" and through a declarative clause, conveying the thematic meaning: love deceives and the bitter lessons have taught "me" what "your" true nature is. To "me", love is nothing, but a deceiver, and "I" will remember the keen lessons to the end of "my" life.

4. Conclusion

To linguists of Systemic Functional Language (SFL), function of language and semantics are the basic of human language and communicative activity. Through the integrative, bottom-up analysis of *Neutral Tones* in the present paper by the means of the analysis of context of SFL, the deep meaning and surface meaning of the poem *Neutral Tone* have been dug out, chiefly by applying those three contextual variables that Halliday calls "field, tenor and mode". Yet, the poem, as a discourse, has one basic and prominent value, which is accumulation of understanding resulting from the description of the scene from the macro scene to the micro one, and then from the micro to the macro, that is from the paranorma to the specific spot, then from the spot returning back to the

paronorma, expressing a comprehensive understanding of the communicative context of the poem in the end.

The lexical items, however, with the various denotations and the rich profound connotations and with the help of the basic grammatical categories and structures hold together to cultivate some isotopies of the poem—the language, the scene and the failed love. Still with the help of grammatical categories and structures, such as the use of tenses from the past to the present and the present perfect tense, the cohesive chains of the poem have been set up harmoniously and smoothly which keep the balance of the poem steadily, interpret a series of ideational meaning correctly and convey the thematic meaning obscurely.

Moreover, there are many aspects exploring the poem as a discourse. In the poem "Neutral Tones", the hero—the speaker seems to be in puzzle, in predicament and in bitterness because of the attitude towards love and towards the man the woman takes. Through the clear presentation about the relationship between the man and the woman, a good interpersonal function of language is applied in the text.

The findings of the analysis of the poem from the point of view of SFL as form and as discourse express the features of poem. The little poem 'Neutral Tones' is revealed and explained that it is true to its own genre and true to its own author, as well as true to the poetic sensibility to where it belongs. And because of its remarkable and exceptional use of imaging that present the scenery, the speaker's mood as well as the relationship between the two, offer a fusion of the images of the lover's face with those of the scenery, it is honest to say the poem is true to the socio-historical conditions where and when it occurred and happened.

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