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An Analysis of The Selfish Giant from the Perspective of Systematic-Functional Grammar

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Abstract:

Systemic-Functional Grammar has become an influential linguistic theory worldwide, which regards language as a system with meaning potential, the literary language being no exception. A literature text can be analyzed from the three aspects: ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function, which makes a more comprehensive interpretation for the characteristics of literary texts. The Selfish Giant is a fairy tale written by the famous English writer Oscar Wilde in the late 19th century. Fairy tale is a kind of children's literature which is full of fantasies and loved by all people, especially children. The present thesis is to analyze English fairy tales, using the theoretical model of Systemic-Functional Grammar, trying to find out how the lexicon-grammatical elements realize the functions of language in these tales. Itcan be found that the story have the following characteristics: material process is the most frequently used process in transitivity system. The context and field of discourse have their influences. In mood analysis, most clauses are of declarative mood since fairy tales always tell the information of the stories directly to readers. In theme system, the story are closer to spoken language than to written language.

Keywords **—SFG Transitivity System, Mood System, Theme System, Fairy tale**   -

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Research Background

Systemic-Functional Grammar (SFG) has become very influential worldwide in the studies of the theories of linguistics and has been used in various fields. SFG can be used in discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, to help to decide what language to teach, to undertake a sustained investigation of the language of education itself (Thompson, 2000). The aim of constructing SFG is to provide a theoretical framework for discourse analysis (Halliday, 1994). So far, SFG has been used more and more as a theoretical basis for discourse analysis, because of its "strong operability and practicality" (Huang G. W. 2002).

The Selfish Giant is a fairy tale written by the famous English writer Oscar Wilde in the late 19th century. " There is no fairy tale as clever and imaginative as Wilde's in the English world, and it contains subtle philosophical thinking," said Sherard, the author of *the Biography of Oscar Wilde.* Fairy tales are a kind of fantastic stories which are created with peculiar plots being in keeping with children's imagination and based on real life (Wan J. Z. 2007). They are closely connected with children. Children begin to read or listen to fairy tales when they are still very young and fairy tales begin to exert an imperceptible influence on them and this influence can last as long as they still live.

B. Research Objectives

This thesis is to analyze the English fairy tale: *The Selfish Giant,* using the theoretical model of

Systemic-Functional Grammar, trying to find out how lexicon-grammatical elements realize the functions of language in it. The author will further analyze this fairy tale through the material system, mood system and theme system contained in Systemic-Functional Grammar, so as to have a deeper and more thorough understanding of this story.

C. Research Significance

The thesis is composed of five parts. Chapter 1 introduces briefly the general ideas of Systemic-Functional Grammar and fairy tales, the direction of the research, and also the layout of the whole thesis. Chapter 2 is literature review, reviewing the related theories of SFG and the general accountof The Selfish Giant. Chapter 3 is methodology, which introduces research design, including research objectives, research instruments, collection of research corpus. Chapter 4 is about the detailed analysis and results of the text in terms of transitivity system, mood system and theme system respectively. Chapter 5 summarizes the whole thesis briefly and points out the limitations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A.Ideational Function and Transitivity System

Ideational function refers to the phenomenon that language is used to reflect people's perceptions of the world and their own consciousness (Halliday, 2000). It represents the meaning potential of the speaker as an observer. Ideational function can be further classified into two sub-functions: experiential function and logical function. Both experiential function and logical function are based on the experience of the internal and external world of the speaker. So the ideational function is an interpretation of the clause in its functions as representation.

The clause is a mode of reflection, of imposing order on the endless variation and flow of events. The grammatical system by which this is achieved is Transitivity. The transitivity system construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types. It provides a network of inter-connected options for representing different kinds

of human experiences, including physical experiences as well as internal experiences like thoughts and feelings. So, it serves to realize the ideational meaning of language.

There are six types of process in English: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral and existential processes. And each process is made up of three elements: (i) the process itself, represented by the verbal group; (ii) participants in the process, typically represented by the nominal group; (iii) circumstances related, usually represented by adverbial group or prepositional phrases. Material process is a process of doing and happening. It expresses the notion that some entity 'does' something, which may be done to some other entity. Mental process is one of feeling, thinking and perceiving. Unlike the material process that describes things going on in the external world, mental process expresses what goes on in the internal world of the mind. Relational process is the process of being. There are three main types under the general category of relational process: intensive, circumstance and possessive. Verbal process is a process of saying, which covers any kind of symbolic exchange of meaning. Behavioral process is a " process of (typically) physiological and psychological behavior, like breathing, coughing, smiling, dreaming and staring " (Halliday, 1994). Existential process represents that something exists or happens. The typical representation of this process type is the there be clause, in which the word there has no representational function but is needed as a subject.

B. Interpersonal Function and Mood System

One of the main purposes of communication is to interact with other people, that is to say, to establish and maintain appropriate and social links with them, which is defined as interpersonal meaning in functional grammar.Interpersonal function represents the meaning potential of the speaker as an intruder. It expresses the role relationships associated with the situation of communication. In the interpersonal function, the clause is organized as an interactive event involving speaker, or writer, and the audience (Halliday, 2000).At lexicon-

grammatical level, interpersonal function is realized by mood system. In mood system, every clause is composed of two parts: Mood and Residue. Mood is made up of two parts: the Subject, which is a nominal group, and the Finite operator, which is part of a verbal group. The Subject, when it first appears, may be any nominal group. It expresses the entity that the speaker wants to make responsible for the validity of the proposition being advanced in the clause(Thompson, 2000). The Finite is the first functional element of the verbal group. It makes it possible to negotiate about the validity of the proposition. The remainder of the clause is Residue. There are three kinds of functional elements in the Residue: Predicator, Complement, and Adjuncts. The Predicator is expressed by the rest of the verbal group apart from the Finite. The Complement is an element within the Residue that has the potential of being Subject but is not. And the Adjunct is an element that has not got the potential of being Subject. It is typically realized by an adverbial group or a prepositional phrase.

The general principle behind the expression of mood in the clause is as follows. The grammatical category that is characteristically used to exchange information is the indicative; within the category of indicative, the characteristic expression of a statement is the declarative, that of a question is the interrogative; and within the category of interrogative, there is a further distinction between yes/no interrogative, for polar questions, and WH-interrogative, for content questions. These features are typically expressed as follows (Halliday, 2000:74).

C. Textual Function and Theme System

Thompson (2000:117) demonstrates the definition of textual function as follows: "When we look at language from the point of view of the textual function, we are trying to see how speakers construct their messages in a way which makes them fit smoothly into the unfolding language event (which may be a conversation, or a newspaper article, for example). As well as interacting with their listeners and saying something to them about the world, speakers constantly signal to them how the present part of their message fits in with other parts." In textual function, language is used to relate what is said or written to the real world or other linguistic events. Textual function relates language to context and expresses the relations between language and context, including verbal context and situational context.

The textual function is realized by theme system at the lexicon-grammatical level. In the theme system, every clause is composed of two parts: the Theme and the Rheme. The Theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned (Halliday, 2000:37). The remainder of the message, the part in which the Theme is developed, is called the Rheme. Thematic structure relates to the structuring of the clause itself, the order in which elements appear in the clause.

Themes can be of different types, and simply divided into three: simple Themes, multiple Themes and clausal Themes. This division is done according to the syntactic structure of the initial constituents of a sentence. The simple Theme of a clause consists of just one structural element, embodying just one of the three metafunctions, such as the ideational, the interpersonal or the textual function, whether the element is one word or more than one word, which is usually a nominal group, an adverbial group or a prepositional phrase. When a dependent clause in a clause complex precedes the clause on which it depends, there appear to be good practical reasons for analyzing the dependent clause as the Theme for the whole clause complex (Thompson, 2000:131). This is known as clausal theme. Here is an example: If the duke gives anything to my aunt (Theme), it'll be that teapot (Rheme).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Research Questions

This thesis aims to analyze the text by using the theoretical model of transitivity system, mood system and theme system, so as to facilitate readers to better interpret the literary connotation of the work from different angles, which also has certain

enlightenment for the translation and teaching of fairy tale works.

There are several questions to answer and there are three objectives altogether. Firstly, How do this fairy tale narrate the storyline and reflect the character characteristics of different transitive processes? Secondly, how do this fairy tale realize interpersonal function through the use of mood system? And thirdly, how do this English fairy tales organize itself through theme system and why?

B. Research Methodology

In this thesis, Systemic-Functional Grammar is employed as the theoretical basis. And in the analysis of English fairy tales, the lexicon-grammatical systems, which contain transitivity system, mood system and theme system, are used as the instruments.

Fairy tale is a form of children's literature characterized by rich use of fantasy, exaggeration and personification (Xue Y. T. 2008). Oscar Wilde is one of the greatest British writers, dramatists and artists in the 19th century. He is highly gifted in literature and produces excellent works in many fields. Lots of his fairy tales are widely celebrated in the world because of their vivid images, philosophical and educational significance.

The Selfish Giant is a fairy tale written by Oscar Wilde. The theme is that: selfishness is the root of misfortune and people should be good to others. The story tells that Giant has a very beautiful garden, every afternoon the children would like to play in the giant's garden, which was their paradise. But on day, Giant was back after visiting his friend for seven years. He saw the children playing in his garden and drove them away.Then the he built a high wall all round the garden and put up a notice board. From then on, there was not a change in the weather in Giant's garden. It was winter all time and the garden became more and more desolate. Until one special boy melted the giant's heart, made him realize the importance of love and kindness. So he knocked down the wall and allowed the children to play in his garden. Finally the garden was full ofblossoms and laughter. It's a beautiful and classic story.

IV. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A.Transitivity system analysis of the The Selfish Giant

As one system to realize ideational meaning, transitivity system specifies different types of processes that are recognized in language (Li J. Z. 2008). Through the analysis of data in terms of transitivity system, it can be found out what the speaker tells in a text and how it expresses the nature of the social event. On the other hand, in those wonderful and interesting fairy tales, stories are written according to the real world and the characteristics of children who are the main readers to show the wisdom and virtues of human beings. The writer used a lot of transitive processes throughout the story. The giants' action and thought, the children behavior, and the plants and animals in the garden are all shaped by transitivity systems.

At the beginning of the story, the text narrates as follows:

> (1) It was a large lovely garden, with soft green grass. (2) Here and there over the grass stood beautiful flowers like stars, (3) and there were twelve peach-trees that in the spring-time broke out into delicate blossoms of pink and pearl, (4) and in the autumn bore rich fruit. (5) The birds sat on the trees and sang so sweetly that the children used to stop their games in order to listen to them. (6) "How happy we are here!" they cried to each other.
>
> (The Selfish Giant, 2009)

This paragraph gives the readers a cheerful and lovely picture of Giant's garden. The readers can imagine the beautiful scene: the flowers, the pink and pearl peach blossom blooming in spring and the singing birds in the tree. The readers especially children may want to play in Giant's garden at this moment. It is easy to see that the writer use three material processes realized by "stood", "bore", "sat on and sang" in clauses (2), (4) and (5) to depict the vivid picture of Giant's garden. The relational process of the clause (1) tells the reader where the story takes place and describes a full view of Giant's Garden. In clause (3), the existential process as represented by "there" describes the beautiful scenes in Giant's garden. And last, the verbal process of "How happy we are here!" in clause (6) reflects the children's happiness playing

in Giant's garden, which contrasts with the following content. There is no mental process or behavioral process in the descriptive language of this paragraph.

Then the plot of this story changes with the arrival of the Giant. For example:

> (7)"My own garden is my own garden," said the Giant; (8)"any one can understand that, (9)and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself." (10)So he built a high wall all round it, (11)and put up a notice-board.
>
> (The Selfish Giant, 2009)

Clause (7), (8), (9) are the verbal process in the above example, from theverbiage, the readers will feel the selfishness of Giant. He wouldn't like to share his garden with everyone. Clause (10) and (11) are two of the most important material processes in the text. In the two material processes of "built" and "put", both of Actor are Giant, the Goals are the "high wall" and "a notice board", which are associated with Giant's garden. Because of Giant's selfish behavior, the garden makes a great change.

The following paragraph describes the changes in the garden. The author gives a lot of vivid description of the scenery. For example:

> (12)Then the Spring came, (13)and all over the country there were little blossoms and little birds. (14)Only in the garden of the Selfish Giant it was still winter. (15)The birds did not care to sing in it as there were no children, (16)and the trees forgot to blossom. (17)Once a beautiful flower put its head out from the grass, (18)but when it saw the notice-board it was so sorry for the children that it slipped back into the ground again, (19)and went off to sleep. (20)The only people who were pleased were the Snow and the Frost. (21) "Spring has forgotten this garden," they cried, "so we will live here all the year round." (22)The Snow covered up the grass with her great white cloak,(23) and the Frost painted all the trees silver. (24)Then they invited the North Wind to stay with them, (25)and he came. (26)He was wrapped in furs, (27)and he roared all day about the garden and blew the chimney-pots down. (28)"This is a delightful spot," he said, "we must ask the Hail on a visit."
>
> (The Selfish Giant, 2009)

This is the best description of the whole text. The writer uses a series of transitivity processes in the above descriptive language. All these make a sharp contrast to the ones before. It will arouse the readers' attention to consider the cause of these changes. Because the children were gone, the next spring did not appear in the Giant's garden. Clauses(12), (16), (17), (19), (22), (23), (24), (25) and (27) are all material processes. At the beginning of the paragraph, the writer uses a material process of "come"to tell the readers the time: spring, then they will image the beautiful as before in spring. In the material processes of "forget", "put on" and "went off"in clauses (16), (17) and (19), "the trees" and "a flower" are the Actors, which are the symbols of spring. But now they do not revive. Clauses (22), (23), (24), (25) and (27) illustrate the reasons why spring do not enter Giant's garden. His garden is invaded by Snow, Frost, North Wind and Hail, which are all the symbols of winter. The writer uses the material processes to describe the desolate scene in Giant's garden.

Clauses (15) and (18) are the mental process. "The birds" and "a flower" are the Senser. From the two clauses, the readers can realize their psychological activities: they do not like the selfish Giant as well as the present garden, and they want the children to play in the garden. Clauses (14) and (20) are relational processes. Clause (13) is the existential process, in which "all over the country" is the Circumstantial Element, which is used to emphasize the Existent "little flowers and little birds". Clauses (21) and (28) are the verbal processes, from which the readers can feel the excitement of Snow, Frost, North Wind.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the author uses a large number of material processes in this paragraph, but the Actors are not human, they are animals and natural phenomenons. They are made to behave just like human beings through the use of material processes. They can do anything that is suitable for men and that is just what they do. There is another reason. Fairy tales are written mainly for children. Although people at all ages read fairy tales, children are the most important readers of fairy tales. Adults can understand life and the whole universe more deeply through reading fairy tales. But to children, fairy tales are just the existence of some wonderful games. So the writer describes the garden by personification.

Personification is used frequently in fairy tales. Because fairy tales are created mainly for children, they must be consistent with children's way of thinking (Cai Y. P. 2012). In children's eyes, all things in the universe could behave like human beings and they can talk with them and they can understand them perfectly.

B. Mood system analysis of the The Selfish Giant

In this fairy tale, the writes mainly uses three mood types: declarative, imperative and exclamative. The declarative mood accounts for 95% of the text. Declarative mood is to give certain information unknown to readers or hearers. It states the specific information the writer of this text want the readers to know. In telling the stories, the writer just directly speak out the whole plots directly to make the stories develop coherently and smoothly. Declarative mood is a good choice for this.

The imperative mood only holds a small part of all the clauses in this story. Clauses of imperative mood are mainly used to order, command, or request that someone should do something. Such as the Giant's words: "Climb up! little boy", "tell me, that I may take my big sword and slay him." The imperative mood is only in the Giant's words, not in children's and the creatures'.

The exclamative mood occurs only once in the first paragraph (clause 6), when the children are playing in the garden. Exclamative mood is used to express such emotions like happiness, surprise, disgust, worry, etc. In this story it is used to reflect the happiness of children.

C. Theme system analysis of the The Selfish Giant

Text must be organized in a coherent and cohesive way. The textual function of language is realized by theme system at the lexicon-grammatical level. This part mainly analyzes the first paragraph and the last paragraph of the story, aiming to analyze how the discourse structure of the story is realized through theme system.

> (1) It (T) was a large lovely garden, with soft green grass(R). (2) Here and there over the grass(T) stood beautiful flowers like stars (R), (3) and there (T) were twelve peach-trees that in the spring-time broke out into delicate blossoms of pink and pearl,

(4) and in the autumn bore rich fruit(R). (5) The birds (T) sat on the trees (R) and sang so sweetly (R) that the children (T) used to stop their games in order to listen to them (R). (6) "How happy (T) we are here (R)!" they (T) cried to each other (R). ......
(29) And when the children (T)ran in that afternoon (R), (30)they (T) found the Giant (T)lying dead under the tree (R), all (T) covered with white blossoms (R).

(The Selfish Giant, 2009)

There are seven thematic structures in the firstparagraph. In clause (2), the Theme is a prepositional phrase. In this clause, the writer puts "Here and there over the grass" at the beginning of the sentence to emphasize the beauty of the garden, which is full of flowers. The reader has already created the "here and there" image in his or her mind before the rest of the information has been acquired. If the clause becomes "There stood beautiful flowers like stars here and there over the grass", the whole sentence is not in a position to be emphasized, so that it cannot achieve as strong a prominent effect as the above clause.

By analyzing thematic structure, the writer's thinking can be obtained as follows: It-Here and there over the grass-there-The birds-the children-How happy-they. This idea reflects the role of Theme in the thematic structure. Starting from the garden, the author first describes the beauty of the garden and then begins to describe the situation of the children, that is, the children enjoy playing in the garden, so the coherence of the discourse is well achieved.

The last part of the story tells that after many years, the Giant grew old and could not play with the children anymore. At the end of his life, he saw the boy who was Jesus incarnate and finally he went to heaven. Clause (29) and (30) have the same Theme: the children. Through the eyes of the children, the writer provides the reader with additional information that the Giant is dead. The white flowers around the Giant represent kindness and selflessness. The Giant is no longer selfish, so these flowers show the children's love and respect for the Giant.

Therefore, a clear discourse structure can be obtained through thematic analysis of the wholetext: "It-Here and there over the grass-there-The birds-the children-How happy-they-the Giant-The poor children-the winter-the garden-the Snow and the Frost-the Giant-a little boy-the Spring-the garden- the flowers-the green grass- the Giant's heart-They-the little child-the Giant-the children." Through the above thematic structure, combined with the additional content of Rhyme, the whole story can be connected all together.

V. CONCLUSIONS

As it can be seen from the analysis above, this thesis is an analysis of *The selfish Giant* from the perspective of Systemic-Functional Grammar. Specifically, this analysis has studied the fairy talein terms of lexicon-grammatical systems, including transitivity system, mood system and theme system, which realize the three metafunctions of language: ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function and the three metafunctions are conditioned by field, tenor and mood, the three variables of register respectively. The analysis can be summarized as follows:

First, in the transitivity system, material process is the process most frequently used in this story. Fairy tales are simple but vivid stories for children. They are mainly written or told to narrate what happens and what the characters do. What's more, not only can people be the Actors, but also can animals and natural phenomena be the Actors. This is where fairy tales differ from other texts.

Second, in the mood system, it is found that declarative mood is the most frequently used mood type. This means that the speech function intended to achieve is statement and the common focus shared by the texts is the giving of information. The relationship between the writer and the readers is one of equal power, frequent contact and high affective involvement.

Third, in the theme system, it is found that clarifying the thematic structure of a sentence helps us understand the structure of the paragraph, and then the textual structure of the whole story. And most of the marked themes in the story are used for the sake of emphasis of some circumstantial elements like time or place.

This thesis has its limitations. First, the author only analyzes the classical paragraph or sentences, not the whole fairy tale. Second, the analysis is too simple and not detailed. The author focuses on the transitivity system, but the mood system and the thematic system are not comprehensive. The author only analyzes the story through systemic-functional grammar and records some of his own findings, but does not put forward some suggestions about fairy tale writing, which need to be improved.

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