The Ecological Thoughts in "Mending Wall" on the Perspective of SFG

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Abstract:

Halliday proposed that language has three major metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. While the ideational function of language can be realized through the transitivity process, the interpersonal function is reflected in the tone and mood of the speaker. This paper takes the famous poem "Mending Wall" by American Romantic poet Robert Frost as a discourse material, then analyzes the transitivity process and the expression of modality in the poem to show Frost's advanced ecological thinking about the coexistence of human and nature and human interaction

Keywords **—transitivity,modality,ecology,nature,human being**

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I. INTRODUCTION

The study of ecolinguistics emerged in the 1970s as an newborn discipline based on the intersection of ecology and linguistics. The concept of ecology was first introduced by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 to study the relationship between humans, humans and other organisms, humans and their environment. One of the leading scholars to study language-related issues from the ecological perspective was the Norwegian linguist Haugen, who introduced the concept of "language ecology"in 1970, which focuses on the interaction between language and its environment. Prior to Haugen, ecological linguists had considered the cognitive dynamics of language more from a biological perspective, tending to place natural factors outside of the language system. In contrast to such studies, Haugen's ecological model of language focuses on the influence of the social environment in which a language is embedded on the language itself, such as issues of language endangerment and extinction, language variation, and dialect homogenization. This research path is known as the Haugenian approach to ecolinguistics,

and this analogy to biodiversity is also considered metaphorical ecolinguistic research.

In addition to the Haugenian approach, there is another research path commonly adopted by ecolinguists, namely the Hallidayan approach. Halliday criticizes the growthist ideology constructed by language and, on this basis, he exploreshow the meaningful way of language-constructing acts on the question of human beings exerting influence on the environment. Halliday distinguishes between institutional ecolinguistics, which focuses on the relationship between a particular language and the communities that speak it, and systemic ecolinguistics, which focuses on the impact of language on human ecological or non-ecological behavior. Hallidayan approach represents a non-metaphorical approach to ecolinguistic research. In contrast to the metaphorical approach represented by the Haugenian approach, Halliday's non-metaphorical approach emphasizes two points: firstly, that humans are the most important organisms in the ecological environment, and that language is the essential feature that distinguishes humans from other organisms; secondly,Halliday's non-

metaphorical approachfocuses on the relationship between the structural features of language and the social meanings and behaviors it constructs. Actually, Haugenian approach and the Hallidayan approach are not mutually exclusive or antagonistic; on the contrary, they are complementary. Moreover, when discussing issues related to linguistic diversity, both models share the same view: since biological diversity is necessary for the preservation of ecological environments, linguistic diversity is essential for the development of human cultures and ecological societies.

The Hallidayan approach to ecological linguistics is an ecological linguistic research path based on the theory of systemic functional linguistics. In exploring the relationship between language and ecology, Halliday cites four general linguistic phenomena.

(a) natural resources are embodied in language as uncountable nouns (e.g., oil , energy , water , air , etc.), which implies that natural resources are inexhaustible.

(b) In the oppositional categories of language (e.g. big / small), the words that represent growth are unmarked neuter words: how fast is the car (instead of how slow), how high is the building (instead of how low), how big is her income (instead of how small).

(c) Language does not accept non-human species as the agent of the process. For example, most people may say " What are you doing?" or "What is she doing?" but not "What's that forest doing?".

(d) The special status of humans is reflected in the pronoun system (he/she for human, it for non-human) and the exclusivity of lexical collocations (Words like think, know, believe, amiable, sympathetic and so on cannot collocate with animals or plants.)

It is from these linguistic facts that Halliday explicates the link between language and ecology.

When the language is observed from the ecological perspective, Steffense and Fill had raised one question: Do the language patterns could influence even change the existence and health of human and other species on this planet? And definitely they do. Stibbe has divided the ecological discourse into three types according to the consistency of the ideology hidden in the discourse and the ecosophy (a philosophical view of ecological harmony, including philosophical principles, values, standards, laws, assumptions, etc. related to ecology. It is always rooted in people's inherent ideology and influences their daily behavior.) borne by the analysts. These three types of ecological discourse are shown below:

(i) Destructive discourse, discourse that brings damage to ecology and environment.

(ii) Ambivalent discourse, a neutral discourse that is ambiguous between destructive discourse and beneficial discourse.

(iii) Beneficial discourse, discourses that encourage people to protect ecology.

Ecological discourse analysis can reveal the ideologies behind different types of discourse and raise people's environmental and ecological awareness, so as to effectively resist destructive discourse, improve ambiguous discourse, and promote beneficial discourse.

Depending on the purpose and research questions of ecological discourse analysis, we can choose appropriate analytical frameworks within the theory of systemic functional linguistics. These analytical frameworks include but are not limited to transitivity analysis, ergativity-analysis, agency analysis, causality analysis, grammatical metaphor analysis, appraisal analysis, etc.

This paper tries to take American poet Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" as the discourse material. "Mending Wall", a short poem from Frost's 1914 collection *North of Boston*, is about a discussion between "me" and my neighbor about the necessity of a wall in the spring. Mending the wall could not be more mundane. However, the poet's description of the natural environment around the wall, the argument between the two neighbors about the necessity of the wall, and the neighbor's response about his father's motto "A good fence makes a good neighbor" have a common purpose with today's ecological concern, and this poem is also a brilliant metaphor for the relationship between man and nature even among human themselves.

Frost is an American poet who is deeply influenced by Transcendentalism. His poems are always filled with the rugged quietness of nature

and the richness of rural life, and in this respect they seem to be quite similar to the traditional Romantic poetry represented by Wordsworth. The leading figures of modernist literature in the first half of the 20th century, such as Pound and T.S. Eliot, however, advocated the reform of the English poetic tradition. In the contradiction between tradition and modernity, Frost did not follow the old ways and did not follow modernity blindly, but abandoned the tradition and developed his own poetic style with a certain modern consciousness and modernist tendency. Although, like the traditional Romantic poets, Frost also left the hustle and bustle of the city and hid himself in the countryside, and his poems are mostly about the natural scenery, idyllic life and customs of the agricultural areas of New England, the traditional Romantic poets, out of their disgust for the hustle and bustle and monotonous city life, passively hid themselves in the countryside, trying to find there the romantic colors that disappeared with the industrial revolution and the true value of human beings. Secondly, they think that their imagination is getting poorer and poorer in the industrial cities, and is nearly exhausted, because modern science and technology have taken away the original splendor of life. So they longed to return to the secluded countryside, far away from modern civilization, in order to find the true source of poetry. The Romantic poets tried their best to express in their poems the unity of human beings and things, believing that there is spirituality in everything in heaven and earth, and that the natural scenery also overflows with emotional values.

Frost, on the other hand, is deeply aware of the great social changes brought about by modern technology and is concerned with the human condition. Thus, in his poems, Frost mostly begins with a tranquil, quiet natural landscape or idyllic scenery, then touches the scenery and blends it with emotions, and finally uses clever symbolism to put profound philosophies of life into the scenes, fully reflecting the unique charm of Frost's poetry, which "begins with pleasure and ends with wisdom". At the same time, through his description of his native New England, the poet shows his humanistic concern for the whole of America and humanity. For Frost, New England is a symbol of the whole world, and the New England countryside is a part of his life and his attachment to reality. In this land, Frost could observe society and the world with ease, and use his keen insight and rich imagination to contemplate the true meaning of life and convey profound philosophies in his poems. This is a world away from the sentimental countryside scenes written by the traditional Romantic poets.

The poem this paper intending to interpret named "Mending Wall", which is about the speakerwho works with his neighbors to mend the wall between them. This is one of the most common outdoor jobs in springtime in the poet's native New England. The experience of mending the wall makes the speaker doubt the necessity of the wall; he thinks that since the wall is often brought down by an unseen force, there must be something in nature that does not like the existence of the wall; moreover, the speaker does not understand why the wall must be used to separate his apple orchard from the neighbor's pine forest, since the two plants will never affect or infringe upon each other. However, the neighbor only quotes the saying "Good fences make good neighbors", and the speakerraises a different meaning to the credibility of this old saying, hoping to change the neighbor's opinion, but in vainly, the neighbor only knows to repeat his forefather's old proverb.

Did the poet just want to tell such a not-so-surprising experience? Obviously, this is only the "surface" and not the "interior content". For this is not the personality of Frost as a poet.

Eberhart devotes two chapters to Frost's personality in his *On Poetry and Poets*, considering him as a national poet, a poet with a modern consciousness and a strong critical sense, a poet who cares about human existence and loves human beings deeply. Although Frost believes that "simplicity and intelligibility are the fundamental qualities of poetry," he also believes that a poem should "begin with joy and end with wisdom." By "joy" he meant an impulse, while "wisdom" was an epiphany about life. This is his fundamental view of poetry creation, that is, any poem should express some kind of epiphany about life, and to inspect the far-viewing ecological concepts that Frost

embodied in his work from the perspective of transitivity process and modality analysis.

II. TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS

The transitivity system is a linguistic representation of real-world experiences, reflecting what happens in the objective and subjective worlds, the people and objects involved, and the environmental factors such as time and place associated with them. It divides what humans do and think into several processes and distinguishes between participant roles and circumstantial roles.

For example, the sentences "I sang happily" and "The birds sang happily" are both material processes, and their semantic composition is "Agent ＋Process". However, the two sentences evoke very different images in the reader's perception, because "I sing" reflects the speaker's (usually human) direct expression of his own behavioral ability, while "the birds sing" reflects the speaker's description of the behavioral ability of an extra-human life form, and the two sentences have different transitive gravity. Regan&Singer have pointed out that "the inclusion of sentient animals in moral considerations and the recognition of their capacity to experience suffering and happiness is an obligation of humans as agents towards animals under ecological ethics." By placing "birds" in the position of agent, the latter gives extra-human life forms the same status as humans, and recognizes their various sensory and behavioral abilities as a positive ecological behavior. Taking this as the standard, the ecological meaning of the sentence "The birds sang happily" is more obvious.

In addition to agent, which needs to be refined, the meaning of the process of small sentences should also be extended ecologically. For example, "the stream flowed" and "the stream jumped" both express the dynamic process of "stream" flowing semantically, but the two verbs have different ecological meanings. The former is an objective and neutral statement, while the latter is a statement with positive evaluation, expressing the love for the flow of the "stream". The two sentences reflect different attitudes toward the physical characteristics of the place and imply different views of ecological place.

From the perspective of ecological function, the original meaning expressed by the transitivity process can be called the surface meaning, and the implied ecological orientation can be called the deep meaning. In the discourse analysis, the description of the process should include two steps: firstly, classify the process type and determine the surface meaning of the clause; secondly, determine the deep meaning of the clause by combining agent and other evaluative components to determine the ecological orientation of the clause.

Transitivity Process	Number	Percent（estimated result）
Material Process	13	48.1%
Mental Process	5	18.5%
Relational Process	4	14.8%
Behavioral Process	3	11.1%
Verbal Process	2	7.4%
Total	27	99.9%

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Material and mental process take the major point of the total number. 5/13 in material process have the non-human subjects as the actor of the process. For example, "My apple trees will never get across/ And eat the cones under his pines". When these two line are read, a kind of absurd but humorous tone can be felt because the actor of this clause is "apple tree" but the predicate is "eat", which is not a tradition lexical collocation. In the beginning of the poem the speaker finds that "Something there is that doesn't love a wall/ That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it/ And spills the upper boulders in the sun/ And makes gaps even two can pass abreast." Although this material process sentence is made by three structurally equal clauses, the actor is easy to note. But the speaker does not reveal that "Something" is a human. Indeed, it is more likely to be a natural power and no one know what "something" is and why "something" hates the wall. From this point, something natural that should be revered by human

beings is existing in the world for the power of nature is so unimaginable and unpredictable that it would not be completely at the mercy of human beings.

III. MODALITY ANALYSIS

Language not only describes experience, but also establishes and maintains social relationships and expresses the speaker's identity, status, and judgmental evaluation of things. Halliday points out that tone and mood are two important means of reflecting interpersonal functions.

In an ecological linguistic perspective, people are intentionally or unintentionally conveying certain ecological meanings in the process of providing or requesting information, materials, and services. For example, in declarative tone, the level of the modal value is an important parameter for testing ecological tendencies. Thompson notes that the choice of modal value reflects the speaker's commitment to the proposition or proposal to varying degrees: the speaker may express a higher or lower degree of certainty about the validity of the proposition, or exert a higher or lower degree of pressure on others to complete the instruction. Although it is not possible to directly judge the ecological tendency of a clause or discourse based on the high or low value of the modality, in general, declarative descriptions represent the highest approval or disapproval of an event, while transitional modality value orientations from low to high represent that the message of the clause or discourse is negotiable, i.e., there is room for questioning. When a discourse with a high modal value reflects an ecologically protective or anti-ecologically destructive view of place, the modal means used in the discourse is ecologically protective; conversely, a positive high modal depiction of an ecologically destructive or anti-ecologically protective view of place is an ecologically destructive modality.

In the poem "Mending Wall", however, the use of the modal system is actually more focused on the ecological relationship between people. Near the end of the poem, the narrator's inner monologue has a strong modal character, which contrasts with the narrator's previous discourse style. Linguistic modality refers to the speaker's attitude and emotional disposition when he or she speaks a certain word. The cognitive modality of language refers to the speaker's confidence and certainty in the propositional truth of what is being said. Some linguistic devices are used to strengthen this confidence and certainty; others are used to reduce and weaken it, such as I wonder , If I could ... , I could say ... , I could say ... , It seems to, etc.

In "Mending Wall", the speaker lacks confidence and certainty in what he says. In the poem, the speaker is confused, "There where it is we do not need the wall/ He is all pine and I am apple orchard/ My apple trees will never get across/ And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him." There is no need for this wall between the two families, but why does the neighbor insist, "He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.''"? The speaker discovers the problem and he is eager to find out, but it seems to have no result and ends up meditating alone and meaninglessly: "I wonder if I could put a notion in his head: 'Why do they make good neighbors?'", as for the speaker's own repeated allusions to some force that dislikes the boundary wall and brings it down, he finally had to speculate unsurely: "I could say 'Elves' to him", but he obviously felt that But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather/ He said it for himself."Finally, when he saw the neighbor carrying the stone with both hands to build the wall, the speaker said, "He He moves in darkness as it seems to me". The structure"it seems to me"gives the sentence a strong subjective perception, indicating the speaker's inner hesitation and uncertainty. Interestingly, the neighbor's words do not have any modal tendencies, but categorical assertion "He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors'". From the large amount of modal words that the speaker had used, he may intend to build a harmonious and intimate neighborhood with his neighbor, which is also Frost's ideal condition in human society. However, this blueprint had not been a common knowledge accepting by the majority in that time.

IV. CONCLUSION

As a Romantic poet who has been influenced greatly by Transcendentalism, his poems are always filled with the transparent pastoral scenes and the rural life. For his affection to the nature, Frost has a

forward thoughts and concerns about the relationship between man and nature and the spiritual conflicts on human themselves.

When Frost's poems are reread from an ecological perspective, a fact could be drawn that he always likes to use nature as a metaphor to interpret life, human beings, and even the whole world, thus triggering philosophical thoughts on the plight of human beings.

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