On how to apply some aspects of systemic grammar to literary analysis: the ideational component in *City Folks* by T. S. Winslow

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Abstract

In the present work we are going to apply some aspects of systemic grammar to the study of the short story *City Folks* by Thyra Samter Winslow, which is currently taught in English Language II, at the Teacher Training Course at the University of La Pampa (UNLPam.), Argentina. The aim of the analysis is to profit from the application of Halliday's grammatical model to the study of a literary text. By considering the processes, the participants, and the circumstances related to the processes, we intend to provide the reader with useful tools to interpret the contrasting attitudes of the main characters in the short story under consideration towards their social life in two different settings: Burton Centre and New York.

Key words: systemic grammar, ideational level, transitivity, processes, literary text.

De cómo aplicar algunos aspectos de la gramática sistémica al análisis literario: el componente ideacional en *City Folks* de T. S. Winslow

Resumen

En este trabajo se aplicarán algunos aspectos de la gramática sistémica al estudio del cuento *City Folks* de Thyra Samter Winslow que forma parte del programa de la asignatura Lengua Inglesa II, del Profesorado en Inglés que se dicta en la Universidad Nacional de La Pampa, (UNLPam.), en Argentina. El objetivo de este análisis es mostrar cómo utilizar un aspecto del modelo gramatical de Halliday para la interpretación de textos literarios. Teniendo en cuenta los procesos, los participantes y las circunstancias relacionadas a esos procesos, se intentará dotar al lector de herramientas válidas para interpretar las actitudes disímiles de los personajes principales en el cuento respecto de su vida social en dos escenarios diferentes: Burton Center y Nueva York.

Palabras clave: gramática sistémica, nivel ideacional, transitividad, procesos, texto literario.

De como aplicar alguns aspectos da gramática sistêmica à análise literária: o componente ideacional em *City Folks* de T. S. Winslow

Resumo

Neste trabalho se aplicaram alguns aspectos da gramática sistêmica ao estudo do conto
City Folks de Thyra Samter Winslow, que forma parte do programa da disciplina Língua Inglesa II, da Licenciatura em Inglês que é ministrado na Universidade Nacional de La Pampa, (UNLPam.), Argentina. O objetivo desta análise é mostrar como utilizar um aspecto do modelo gramatical de Halliday para a interpretação de textos literários. Tendo em conta os processos, os participantes e as circunstâncias relacionadas a esses processos, se tentará dotar o leitor de ferramentas válidas para interpretar as atitudes dissimílres dos personagens principais no conto, levando em conta a sua vida social nos dois cenários diferentes: Burton Center y Nueva York.

Palavras chave: gramática sistémica, nível ideacional, transitividade, processos, texto.
In the present work we are going to apply some aspects of systemic grammar to the study of the short story *City Folks* by Thyra Samter Winslow, which is currently taught in English Language II, at the Teacher Training Course at the University of La Pampa (UNLPam.), Argentina.

In *City Folks* T. S. Winslow writes about a young couple that has moved from a small town called Burton Centre to busy New York: Joe and Mattie were born, grew up, studied and got married in Burton Centre –their hometown– where they really belonged, and where they led a simple though active life, until one day, a strong desire to become city folks made them move to the big city. The main events in the story unfold during breakfast and dinner. At breakfast time a letter from Joe’s mother sets them at a crossroads: whether to go back to Burton Centre or stay in New York. She writes this letter to urge her son to go back home to run the family’s business, and both Joe and Mattie feel enthusiastic about it, since they have become aware of the fact that they are misplaced in New York. After their daily routines, when they meet again at dinner-time, their attitude has totally changed. They now refuse to move back as they feel they will be buried alive in their little town of origin. As the story draws to a close, Joe and Mattie receive a phone call from some friends inviting them for a ride. This helps them to make up their minds and remain in New York, of course not a ‘perfect’ place, but still attractive enough to make them believe they are, in fact, ‘city folks’.

This work takes into consideration certain elements of the grammatical system developed by Halliday (1985), and describes how, through the analysis of the text at the ideational level, the writer presents the characters’ contradictory feelings towards their social life in two different settings: Burton Centre and New York.

The aim of this preliminary analysis is to profit from the application of Halliday’s grammatical model to the study of a literary text. Further analysis of the text at the other two levels –textual and interpersonal– could enhance the results of this work.

By considering the processes, participants, and circumstances related to the processes, we intend to provide the reader with useful tools to interpret the attitudes of the main characters.

On considering clause types, Halliday (1985) states that a clause is “the product of three simultaneous semantic processes” (p. 53): a message, an interactive exchange, and a representation of experience. These three aspects of the meaning of a clause, which act together to produce a passage of discourse, are referred to as metafunctions, and are labelled textual, interpersonal and ideational.

The ‘textual’ metafunction of the language is concerned with the organization of information within clauses and, through this, with the organization of the larger text (Martin et al. 1997: 21). The Theme-Rheme structure is the basic form of the organization of the clause as a message. Components from all three functions may contribute to the make-up of the Theme, the remainder of the message constituting the Rheme (Halliday 1985: 53).
Along with its organization as message, the clause is also organized as “an interactive event involving speaker, or writer, and audience” (Halliday 1985: 68). This is referred to as the ‘interpersonal’ metafunction of the language. In a communicative exchange, the speaker adopts a particular type of speech role and assigns to the listener a role he wishes him to adopt (p. 68). Statements, questions, offers and commands, together with accompanying modalities, are exchanged between speaker and listener or reader.

The ‘ideational’ metafunction of the language is concerned with cognitive meaning: the ‘goings-on’ of reality are expressed through the grammar of the clause, or as Eggins (1994) puts it, they are “realized through transitivity patterns of grammar” (p.78). “Transitivity specifies the different types of processes that are recognized in the language and the structures by which they are expressed.” (Halliday 1985: 101) A process consists of the process itself, the participants, and the circumstances related to the process, which provide the frame of reference for interpreting our experience of what goes on. There are semantic categories that explain how phenomena of the real world are represented as linguistic structures. In this work we will only consider the processes which are mostly present in the text under analysis: material, relational and mental.

In ‘material processes’ there is an obligatory entity –the Actor– that “does the deed” (Halliday 1985: 102), there may be a second participant called the Goal, and sometimes there may be a Beneficiary. When the “doing” is confined to the Actor the process is not extended. But when the doing is “directed at” (p. 103) something / somebody else, we refer to Transitivity. Material processes, which refer to outer experiences, reflect the actions that take place.

‘Relational processes’ establish relationships of one form of experience to another; therefore they are processes of ‘being’. There are a number of distinct ways of being, “expressed as different types of relational process in the clause” (Halliday 1985: 112). Such ways are intensive, circumstantial or possessive, and each comes either in the attributive or identifying mode. This gives six types of relational process. In the attributive mode, “an attribute is ascribed to some entity” (Halliday 1985: 113), as a quality (intensive), a circumstance (circumstantial) or a possession (possessive). In the identifying mode, “one entity is used to identify another” (Halliday 1985: 113); the relationship between them can be of token and value (intensive), of phenomenon and circumstance, of time and place, etc. (circumstantial), or of owner and possession (possessive).

‘Mental processes’ are processes of feeling, thinking and perceiving. There is always one human or human-like participant that feels, thinks or perceives – the Senser. The other participant is called Phenomenon, and it is that which is sensed. Within the category of mental process Halliday (1985) distinguishes three sub-types: affection (liking, fearing, etc.), cognition (thinking, understanding, etc.), and perception (seeing, hearing, etc.) (p. 111).
In addition to these main categories, Halliday (1985) recognizes three other minor types: behavioural, verbal and existential. ‘Behavioral processes’ are processes of “physiological and psychological behaviour, like breathing, dreaming, smiling, coughing” (p. 128). There is usually a conscious being—the Behaver. ‘Verbal processes’ are processes of saying, thus they ‘project’. They include not only the different modes of saying, “but also semiotic processes that are not necessarily verbal (showing, indicating)” (Martin et al. 1997: 108). The central participant is the Sayer, who can be a human or human-like speaker, or another symbolic source. The verbalized clause may be either a proposition or a proposal. The two other participants are the Receiver (the addressee of the verbalization), and the Verbiage (a name for the verbalization itself) (Halliday 1985: 130). ‘Existential processes’ are the ones that represent that “something exists or happens” (p. 130). They frequently have the verb ‘be’, or some other verb expressing existence. The participant is called the Existent, and may be any kind of phenomenon, often an event. An existential clause often contains a circumstantial element.

In the short story by Winslow, both Joe and Mattie—the protagonists— are the Actors of the material processes which show all the activities they used to do while living in Burton Centre, their town of origin, until the moment they got married and moved to New York. For example,

they had grown up together in Burton Centre, [...], went to Friday night dances, later were graduated into the older crowd, [...], went to the Opera House [...]. Joe and Mattie became engaged [...]. Joe went to work at the Banner Store [...]. Joe had come to New York in search of fortune.

These processes show that in their hometown they led a simple though active social life. This idea of being actors in material processes is reinforced by Joe’s mother’s letter asking them to return to Burton Centre, saying, “You could step right into the store, and take charge of things as soon as you wanted to. [...] / you could play tennis after work. [...] you could get here before long”. However, in New York the material processes are mostly those related to their monotonous routines carried out inside their flat:

Joe [...] had jumped up and turned it [the alarm] off, and had waked Mattie [...]. Mattie [...] had stroked the dog’s uneven coat with a fond hand.” / “[...] - Joe talking while he shaved [...]” / “Now Mattie had completed the simple breakfast [...]”.

The processes above account for their morning routine, which could well be paired with their evening routine. For example:

Joe reached the apartment exactly at six-thirty [...]. / Mattie [...] hurried to greet him. / Joe hurried with his ablutions and reached the dining-room [...]. He divided the paper [...]. Then he helped Mattie to bring in the hot dishes from the kitchen./ Mattie always fried chops or steaks [...]. / They sat down, Joe served the chops [...]. Mattie had put on her bungalow apron [...].

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Relational processes establish relationships of one form of experience to another; therefore they are processes of ‘being’. They are present in the story mostly in the attributive and identifying modes, and serve simply to describe Joe and Mattie’s personalities and physical appearance, as well as the characters’ dwellings both in New York and Burton Centre. The following are examples of description of the characters: “Mattie was not at all a bad-looking breakfast companion [...]. She was a slender, brown-haired woman of about thirty [...]. And Joe [...] was equally pleasing [...].” Winslow words the description of the couple’s flat in this way: “the dining-room was small, lighted vaguely with two court windows”, and of the neighbourhood she says: “One Hundred and Thirty-second Street, Harlem, lacked all outstanding features”. On referring to New York, Winslow writes: “New York is all right for some people [...]. It’s a great city all right [...]. Yes, New York is a wonderful city”. Relational processes of the attributive mode are present in Joe’s mother’s letter, as: “The cottages are all taken but two, [...]. The new country club isn’t far from there.” Relational processes of the possessive mode can be found in Joe’s words when trying to justify why he prefers to live in New York: “Of course we’ve got the crowded subways, here”.

As it has been said before, in a relational process some entity is ascribed an attribute as a quality, a circumstance or a possession. The very last process used by Winslow, being relational, is packed with meaning: “Why, we’re, we’re –city folks!” due to the fact that it indicates class membership, which in this case is unreal since Mattie and Joe do not belong in New York community life.

In the mental processes present in the story the Sensers are human participants, and the processes involved are those of feeling, thinking and perceiving. The Phenomenon in the processes of perception usually involves famous people who Joe and Mattie know and happen to see while walking in downtown New York. The final part of the story is crowded with processes of perception, which appear together with processes of cognition. For instance,

1)”Some one we know?”
   “We don’t know him exactly.”
   “Oh, I can’t guess. Tell me.”
   “I know you can’t –well, it was– William Gibbs McAdoo! [...] just like I’ve seen him in the movies half a dozen times. It sure gives you a thrill, seeing people like that.”

2)”I don’t know what’s the matter with me. [...] I was looking at gloves –and I looked up– [...] and there, [...] stood Billie Burke. [...] I know it was her. [...] –and I saw her in ‘The Runaway’ years ago, [...].”

3)”I know,” [...] “I’d just die if I couldn’t [...] see what people wore. [...] I just saw us on the train going out there, [...] and seeing Billie Burke just.”

4)”We saw ‘The Tattle-tale’ last Saturday.”
   “[...] I saw Billie Burke to-day? I did.”
The mental processes that denote affection involve the protagonists’ feelings regarding New York and Burton Centre. These feelings change dramatically over the day. At breakfast time both Joe and Mattie feel homesick and misplaced in New York, with a strong desire to go back to their hometown, where they would be “somebody, as good as any one”. Mattie gives evidence of her feelings when she affirms:

“I certainly did envy people living in little houses—I get so tired of New York sometimes—. But I never wanted to say anything, knowing how much you liked it here. [...] Here I never see a soul I know in weeks, [...].”

Joe supports his wife’s views when he complains about “being squeezed into subways night and morning” or having “no place to go Sundays or evenings but a movie or a show or to see people who live miles away and don’t care anything about you”.

Nonetheless, at dinner time, after Mattie’s exhilarating afternoon stroll along the Fifth Avenue, they make up their minds to remain in New York as they deem that living in Burton Centre is like “being buried alive”: “I don’t know what came over us for a minute this morning. [...] You can’t expect a place to be perfect. But -New Yorkers like us couldn’t stand that dead Burton Center stuff for five minutes”.

As it has been stated above, the message conveyed in a text is the result of the combination of the interpersonal, ideational and textual levels. Although this work is not concerned with the analysis of the interpersonal or textual levels, there is an aspect of the interpersonal level that is worth considering, and which will support the previous findings. This is nominalization, one choice of grammatical metaphor In Halliday’s (1985) words, “the complexity of written language is closely associated with metaphorical processes in the grammar” (p. 331). Nominalization is characteristic of formal written register and the effect is grammatical simplicity and high lexical density of the language. This lexical density results in heavily loaded nominal groups (Halliday 1985), as in: “Silence, then, save for the sound of knife against plate, a curious silence, a silence of avoidance. Then, meaningless sentences, bits about anything, a struggle to appear happy, indifferent” (p. 331).

As a general rule, the use of nominalizations is a means to hide the participants of material processes, as well as to reinforce the idea of lack of involvement and lack of action, in such a way that the participants in the short story under consideration –Joe and Mattie– become mere sensers of reality in New York.

Eight years, then, of New York, of subway rides, of the weekly theatre, the weekly restaurant dinner, of apartment hunting about every second October, of infrequent clothes buying, of occasional calls on stray acquaintances, of little quarrels and little peace-makings, weekly letters from home –little lives going on.

In contrast, Joe and Mattie’s lives in Burton Centre showed them as participants of material processes, fully engaged in the town’s social life, as in the following example:
They had grown up together in Burton Centre, one of the jolly crowd who attended the High School, went to Friday night dances, later were graduated into the older crowd, which meant a few more dances, went to the Opera House when a show came to town, had happy love affairs.

What the analysis of the text at the ideational level has revealed is that certain patterns can be isolated from a text, which will provide a linguistic basis for interpreting a work. The examples drawn from Winslow’s story aim at contrasting the way in which the two characters act and think in and towards two different locations. In New York they are passive observers of the reality around them, since they can never become part of the city’s social life, whereas in Burton Centre they belong to the place by being active participants in all the activities in the town. However, they decide not to return to their hometown because they pretend to be what they have never been: city folks.

Works cited

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