When Language Reveals Meaning: A Functional Analysis of Wilde’s *The Selfish Giant*

Baidaa A. G. Al-Zubaidy *

University of Baghdad / College of Education/Ibn Rushd

Abstract:

Stylistic studies act like a bridge between linguistics and literature. They offer an opportunity for researchers to reveal the hidden aspects of spoken language to utilize the specific features of the author’s style to various fields, a particular aspect of a time era, or a practical characteristic of language use. This study is a stylistic functional analysis of Wilde’s *The Selfish Giant*. The analysis was conducted in three scopes: genre, register, and language. The genre analysis referred to the structure of *The Selfish Giant*, in the light of the framework of Halliday’s Systematic Functional Linguistic framework. The register analysis revealed that the ‘Finite’ form of the clauses is in the past tense. Finally, the language analysis showed that the lexical density in *The Selfish Giant* was moderate. The study helps English instructors, and English learners, in understanding the way of looking at literary works, how to analyze them, and the way we use such analysis in interpreting literature and choosing texts to be presented in English learning classrooms.

*Keywords*: functional analysis, genre, register, lexical density.
Introduction

Harris (1952) suggested the idea of analyzing linguistic elements and their distribution in written texts. His suggestion led to the spread of stylistic and discourse analysis studies. After that movement, many scholars worked on various theories of discourse analysis, one of which was Halliday, who came up with his systematic functional linguistics. Huang (2001) suggested that following Halliday’s steps in analyzing texts functionally can be carried out in three phases: genre (the cultural context), register (the situational context), and language. The purpose of this study is to analyze Wilde’s fairy tale The Selfish Giant from the three phases of Halliday’s functional analysis: genre, register, and language.

Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854 at a time when Britain was embracing literature. He wrote many short stories, plays and poems. He graduated from Oxford University and lectured as a poet and a leading proponent of aestheticism. His only novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, was published in 1891. It was considered as immoral by Victorian critics, but is now regarded as one of his most notable works. Wilde’s plays, including his satirical comedies Lady Windermere's Fan (1892), A Woman of No Importance (1893), An Ideal Husband (1895) and The Importance of Being Earnest (1895), has prominent position in English literature including. He was accused of “gross indecency” in 1895 and was imprisoned for two years. He died in poverty three years after his release at the age of 46.

The Selfish Giant

The Selfish Giant is one of five stories contained in Wilde’s The Happy Prince and Other. The story is about a selfish giant who had a beautiful garden. The village children enjoyed playing in that garden when the giant went in his visits to some friends. But when he returned, he sent the children away and kept the garden closed up. Because of that cruel action, all the seasons refused to visit the small garden except winter which covered it by its white mantle. One day, the giant heard a bird singing. He discovered that spring had returned because the children had been sneaking inside. However, one of the boys could not climb up into a tall tree. The giant helped him allowing spring to prevail everywhere. After that, this child never showed up again. The giant grew old in the presence of the rejoiced village children sharing his garden. One day, the small child appeared again. The giant saw that the boy had nail wounds on his hands and feet. He was concerned, but the boy told him that those were wounds of love. Moreover, the boy had come to take the giant to his Paradise: Heaven. So, the happy giant died, and his body was discovered under the tree, covered in blossoms.
Text Analysis

Genre Analysis of The Selfish Giant

Genre is the goal oriented social process (Martin & Rose, 2003). It is the enactment of various social contexts. Saying that, written genres would be novels, poems, plays, fairy tales,…etc. Each one of these genres can be divided into sub-genres, such as plays that can be divided into comedies, tragedies, historical plays, … etc. Chang (2005) stated that a genre is realized by the schematic structure of the text. As far as fairy tales are concerned, Hasan (1984) found that six elements comprises those kinds of tales. Those elements are: placement, initiating event, sequent event, finale, and moral. Initiating, sequent, and finale events are obligatory elements, unlike the other elements which are optional. Obligatory elements are the ones that determine the genre of the text. On the other hand, optional elements give variety to the structural resources within a genre. Placement is what The Selfish Giant starts with:

“Every afternoon, as they were coming from school, the children used to go and play in the Giant’s garden.”

The initiating events take place when the children return from school and go to the giant’s garden to play. The sequent event proceeds when the giant returns from his seven years visit to his friend and dismiss the children from his place. The final event in this tale is the meeting of the giant with his favorite lost child and his happy death. The ‘finale’ of the story refers to the salvation of souls by the love of Christ.

Register Analysis

Register is the functional variety of language (Halliday, 1964). In other means, it is the use of specific configurations of language resources in a specific context (Thompson, 2004). According to the systematic functional linguistic model, language in social context recognizes three social functions of language use:

1- Presenting experience (ideational meta-function).
2- Enacting social relationships (interpersonal meta-function).
3- Organizing representations as meaningful text (textual meta-function) (Bing-yen, 2011).

Register analysis is basically the analysis of those three meta-functions. However, the analysis of each one of them can be done from several perspectives; which is why the researcher of the current study chose one perspective for each to conduct the analysis in question due to the limitation of the study.
Ideational meta-function in terms of transitivity analysis

The transitivity system divides the world of experience into a group of process types. There are six process types: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential. Each one of those process types provides its own model of constructing a particular kind of experience. In English, each experience forms a specific semantic configuration which consists of a process, participants, and circumstantial elements (optional) (Halliday, 2004). Results of the transitivity of The Selfish Giant are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Transitivity Analysis of The Selfish Giant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Mental</th>
<th>Relational</th>
<th>Behavioral</th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Existential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>P (%)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>P (%)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>P (%)</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>259</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that the behavioral process accounts for (44%) of the total processes in The Selfish Giant. Behavioral clauses are those clauses that explain physiological and psychological behavior. In The Selfish Giant, Wilde used the behavioral process to describe various states of the characters, such as the following

“they were coming from school...”
“the children used to go and play...”

The analysis shows that mental processes in this fairy tale comes second (17%). Mental clauses are those concerned with the experience of the world of consciousness. Those clauses are related to sensing. They capture any change in the flow of events that takes place in the consciousness (Halliday, 2004). Most of the mental clauses in The Selfish Giant are cognitive, for example:

“He determined to return to his own castle.”

The percentage of the material process in this fairy tale is only (3%). This is because Wilde did not aim for The Selfish Giant to be a tale of doing and happening. This fact is reflected in the lack of material clauses which are used basically to indicate changes in the flow of events as taking place through some course of energy (Halliday, 2004).

The analysis reveals also that the percentage of the relational processes is (15%). Relational clauses characterize and identify entities. The following is an example of relational processes in The Selfish Giant:

“How happy we are...”

Existential processes constitute (1%) of this fairy tale; whereas verbal processes constitute (10%). An examples of verbal processes is:
“They said to each other.”

**Interpersonal meta-function analysis in terms of mood and modality**

The main concern of interpersonal function is discourse as an exchange. And the main purpose of this exchange is demanding a commodity of information. Which is why there are four speech functions: statement, question, offer, and command. Mood and modality reflect the ways participants interact in this discourse. In this interaction, the subject and the ‘Finite’ constitute the mood of the clause. On the other hand, modality is part of the ‘Finite’. It acts as the tool that assists the speaker in sharing his/her attitude about the subject of the interaction. In other means, it is realized by the following:

1- A finite modal operator, e.g., must, may.
2- A modal adjunct, e.g., probably, usually.
3- An expanded predicator, e.g., be supposed to, be anxious to, be determined to (Ding, 2000; Thompston, 2004).

Table 2 explains the results of mood and modality analysis in *The Selfish Giant*.

**Table 2**

|Mood and Modality Analysis of *The Selfish Giant*|
|---|---|---|---|---|
|Total number of processes|Finite|Modal Operators|
| |Past|Present|Future|
| |N|P (%)|N|P (%)|N|P (%)|
|238|191|80%|21|8%|7|2%|19|7%|

Table 2 shows that the Finite in the clauses of *The Selfish Giant* is in the past tense (80%) and the present tense is (8%). Using the past tense indicates that the information is valid for things that happened in the past, which surely confirms the nature of Wilde’s piece as a fairy tale because fairy tales are describing things that happen in the past. Modal operators are used as a Finite in this fairy tale as well. They are mostly the modal verb ‘could’, which indicates the ability of doing things:

“and then he ran round and round the garden as fast as he **could** go”

“In every tree that he **could** see there was a little child.”

“He was so small that he **could** not reach up to the branches”

‘Would’ is used twice in *The Selfish Giant* to express meanings associated with temporality:

“I know why the Spring **would** not come here."

“How I **would** like to see him!”
Language Analysis of *The Selfish Giant*

In this study, the researcher is mainly concerned with the lexical density of the text. By lexical density she means the ration of lexical words in relation to the total number of words. This density reflects the amount of information contained in the text, and thus refer to its difficulty. Lexical words include nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and numerals. In Table 4, this lexical density is explained as follows:

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of words</th>
<th>Number of lexical words</th>
<th>Lexical density (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1658</td>
<td>1094</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results indicate that the lexical density of *The Selfish Giant* is high. The proportion of lexical words is higher than that of function words. This high use of lexical words is a touch of Wilde’s writing. He tends to make his writings a little bit complex because it is directed to adults and more advanced readers.

**Conclusion**

In this study, the researcher followed a functional approach in analyzing Wilde’s *The Selfish Giant*. This analysis was carried out in three phases: genre, register, and language. The following conclusions were drawn out of the results:

1- As far as genre is concerned, *The Selfish Giant* develops in the following way: Placement → Initiating event → Sequent event → Finale → Moral. It matches the schematic structure of Hasan (1984).

2- Concerning register, transitivity and modality analysis were carried out. The transitivity analysis showed that the behavioral processes were the most dominant ones among all other six processes in *The Selfish Giant*. On the other hand, the modality analysis showed that the past tense is the Finite in the clauses of this fairy tale.

3- Language analysis of the text revealed that the its lexical density is high. This study gives English instructors the opportunity to understand all sides of the style of Wilde as one of the basic fairy tales’ writers in literature. It helps them write lesson plans about how to teach this piece of writing, and other literary texts as well. The study represents also a resource for English learners because it explains to them the texture of combining sentences in a way that reveals the intended meaning in a well-organized way.
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ملخص
عندما تفصح اللغة عن المعنى: تحليل وظيفي لقصة وَاِلْد "العملاق الأناني"

يبدأ الزبدي

تُعَمَّل الدراسات الأسلوبية على الجسر الذي يربط بين علم اللغة والأدب؛ فهي توفر الفرصة للباحثين للكشف عن الخصائص الخفية للغة الكلام وذلك لاستغلال ميزات أساليب الكتاب في حقول معرفية متنوعة أو للأفصاح عن حقنة زمنية معينة أو عن خصائص عملية في استخدام اللغة. هذه الدراسة هي تحليل وظيفي أسلوبي لقصة وَاِلْد "العملاق الأناني".

أجري التحليل من ثلاث مجالات: اللون الأدبي وشكل التدوين واللغة. أشار تحليل اللون الأدبي إلى تركيب قصة "العملاق الأناني" في ضوء إطار تأريخي لغوي وظيفي بحري. أما تحليل شكل التدوين فقد بين بأن شكل الأفعال هو الزمن الماضي. وأخيراً، أظهر التحليل اللغوي بأن الكثافة المعجمية في هذه القصة معتدلة. تساعد هذه الدراسة أساتذة اللغة الأنكليزية ومتعلميها على فهم طريقة النظر إلى الأعمال الأدبية وعِبْر التصوِّرات التي يمكن عرضها في صنف تدريس اللغة الأنكليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحليل الوظيفي، اللون الأدبي، التدوين، الكثافة المعجمية

Bibliography


