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Discourse Analysis of Metafunctions in Song Lyrics *My Heart Will Go on*

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Abstract
Discourse analysis plays a critical role in understanding and learning of discourse and systemic functional linguistics has provided good theoretical framework and guiding methods for it. For many years, the systemic functional linguistic theories have been applied to analysis of various texts, such as poetry, fiction, drama, etc., but less involved in the analysis of song lyrics, a unique text. This paper will make a discourse analysis of metafunctions in the lyric My Heart Will Go on under Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar, thus presenting practicality and applicability of the systemic functional linguistics to discourse analysis and on the other hand, bringing readers inspiration towards lyric appreciation.

Keywords
discourse analysis; metafunctions; lyrics; My Heart Will Go on

Linguistics has provided an objective method for literary criticism, especially the systemic functional linguistics. According to Huang Guowen (2002), Halliay's Systemic-Functional Grammar is much more suitable to discourse analysis than any other theories as it has a strict theoretical framework, thus it is more practical and applicable.[1-1] In addition, Halliday (1994) pointed out that the purpose of the establishment of Systemic-Functional Grammar is to provide a theoretical framework for discourse analysis, which has been testified to be applicable to both written and oral discourse. [2-5]

So far many achievements have been made in discourse analysis under the guidance of Systemic-Functional Grammar. The discourses involved are literature, daily conversation, advertisement, news report, speech, law and so on. It is worth noting that more attentions have been paid to long discourses or those that have traditional literature characteristics while other discourses such as lyric, e-mail and so on are ignored.

Appreciated by the listeners in form of songs, lyric is a special type of discourse lying between written discourse and oral discourse. [3-ii] In 2016, the American singer Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize in literature, which arose a great response. This demonstrates that the charm of lyrics gets accepted and can compare favorably with that of other literature forms. Therefore, discourse analysis of lyrics should be drawn attention.

This paper begins with a concise overview of Halliday's metafunctional theory—namely, the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions—which serves as the theoretical foundation for the subsequent discourse analysis of the iconic song lyrics *My Heart Will Go On*. By systematically applying this framework, the study

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demonstrates how systemic functional linguistics (SFL) can effectively decode the layers of meaning, emotional resonance, and structural artistry embedded in lyrical texts. Through this analysis, the paper not only validates the practicality and applicability of SFL in discourse studies but also offers readers a structured, linguistics-based approach to appreciating song lyrics beyond mere subjective interpretation. Ultimately, this research aims to inspire deeper engagement with music as a form of discourse, bridging linguistic theory with artistic expression in a way that enriches both academic and everyday lyric interpretation.

1 A Brief Introduction to Metafunctions

Halliday believes that language is the product of social activities. He holds that language is what it is because it has to serve certain functions, which are metafunctions. Metafuntions have three aspects: ideational, interpersonal and textual function. They will be introduced briefly in the following.

1.1 Ideational Function

The ideational function refers to the function of expressing people's experience in the world, including the external world and internal world.[4-74] It is to convey new information to communicate a content that is unknown to the hearer and mainly consists of transitivity and voice. [5-326]

Transitivity system is to divide people's experiences into several processes: the process of the external word, and the processes of our own consciousness, seeing, liking, thinking and so on. Halliday holds that transitivity consists of six different processes: Material, Mental, Relational, Behavioral, Verbal and Existential. [5-327] Generally a process consists of three constituents: the process itself, participants involved and circumstances.

Voice is divided into two categories: middle and non-middle voice. If the process of a clause is only concerned with one participant, this clause is in middle voice. If there are two or more than two participants involved in a process, the clause is in non-middle voice. Non-middle voice also contains two types: active and passive voice.

1.2 Interpersonal Function

The interpersonal function refers to function of using languages to explain our own attitude, or influence others' behavior, thus expressing social and personal relations. It signifies "meaning potential" of speaker as intruder. [4-115] The speaker can change his speech role at any time. But the speech role has only two basically: giving and demanding. It is realized by Mood and Modality.

Mood shows what role the speaker selects in the speech situation and what role he or she assigns to the addressee. Generally there are indicative mood, declarative mood, interrogative mood, imperative mood, etc. Mood is made up of two parts: the subject and the finite element. [5-334]

Modality explains if the speaker is expressing his judgment or making a prediction. It expresses either probability or frequency or both. Modulation refers to the scale of obligation and inclination in proposals. [5-334,335]

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1.3 Textual Function

The textual function refers to the means to organize any discourse into a coherent and unified text. It is mainly achieved through thematic structure and cohesion.

According to functional grammar, the information first given is called Theme and the remaining is the Rheme. Based on the complexity of clause structure, the theme is classified into three types: simple theme, multiple theme and clausal theme. In addition, if the theme acts as the subject in a clause, it is called unmarked theme; if not, it is called marked theme.

Cohesion is a semantic concept. It refers to semantic relations of languages in the discourse, or we can say it means the relations between elements in which they can interpret each other. In other words, cohesion occurs when the interpretation of one element depends on that of another. According to Halliday, cohesion is divided into grammatical and lexical one. The former has four types: reference, ellipsis, substitution and conjunction. So does the latter. They are repetition, synonymy/antonymy, hyponymy/meronymy and collocation.

Halliday holds that the three metafunctions are equally important and they form an organic whole. Adult languages contain all the three metafunctions which appear simultaneously in a sentence. In fact, it is impossible to analyze discourses from all the branches of the three metafunctions. To make an exhaustive discourse analysis is uneconomic and sometimes meaningless. What are analyzed depend on study purposes and interests of analyst. [6-3] Therefore, this paper will have a discourse analysis based on some aspects of the metafunctioanal theory.

2 About the Song *My Heart Will Go on*

My Heart Will Go on is the main theme song of the film *Titanic* which has touched thousands of audiences worldwide. It was sung by Canadian singer Celine Dion, its music was composed by James Horner and its lyrics were written by Will Jennings who was inspired by a young love story from an old woman in the film. Due to its beautiful melody and utterance of sincere and persistent love, this song has won great popularity all over the world since 1997.

The success of the song contributes partly to its lyrics, so this paper will focus on analysis of them with metafunctional theory. The main lyrics will be marked with Arabic numerals for convenience as follows and some repetitions are omitted:

1.Every night in my dreams I see you(mental process)

2.I feel you(mental process)

3.That is how I know you go on(relational process)

4.Far across the distance and spaces between us, you have come to show you go on(material process)

5.Near far wherever you are(relational process)

6.I believe that the heart does go on(mental process)

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7.Once more you open the door (material process)

8.And you're here in my heart(relational process)

9.And my heart will go on and on (material process)

10.Love can touch us one time (relational process)

11.And last for a lifetime (relational process)

12.And never let go till we're gone (material process)

13.Love was when I loved you (relational process)

14.One true time I hold to (material process)

15.In my life we'll always go on (material process)

16.You're here (relational process)

17.There's nothing I fear (existential process)

18.And I know that my heart will go on (mental process)

19.We'll stay forever this way (material process)

20.You are safe in my heart (relational process)

21.And my heart will go on and on(material process)

(From *https://y.qq.com/portal/player.html*)

3 Metafunctional Analysis of the Song Lyrics *My Heart Will Go on*

As stated previously, it is impossible and unnecessary to utilize all the aspects of the three metafunctions to make a discourse analysis. Hence, analysis in this paper will be undertaken in accordance with specific situations.

3.1 Analysis of Ideational Function in My Heart Will Go on

As ideational function is mainly achieved by transitivity and voice, this paper will start from these two aspects. From the statement above, we know that transitivity system contains six processes. In the opinion of Huang Guowen, the one which signifies description is generally relational, existential or mental process while the one which means narration is material process. In the lyrics *My Heart Will Go on*, most of the clauses are material and relational processes. The detailed distribution is seen as follows:

Table 1 Statistical Table of Process in the Lyrics

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Process	Material Process	Mental Process	Relational Process	Behavioral Process	Verbal Process	Existential Process
Amount	8	4	8	0	0	1
Percentage (%)	38%	19%	38%	0	0	5%

From the table above, we can see that material process and relational process take up 38% separately, mental process takes up 19% and existential process, 5%. This proportion indicates that the lyrics discourse mainly narrates something and presents some relations. Clause 1, starting from a mental process, shows the narrator's feelings and emotions. Besides, it points out the participants "I" and "you" and the circumstantial element "every night in my dreams", showing "I" have a strong and deep emotion towards "you". Clause 1 is followed by a relational process, further enhancing relations between "you" and "I". Clause 3, 6, 8, 11, 13, 14, 18 and 20 are material processes. All the material processes such as "you have come to show you go on" "and my heart will go on and on" "never let go" "we'll always go on" "we'll stay forever" and so on state clearly that no matter where "we" are, in life or death, "our love" will last forever. Through these processes, it seems that the picture of the love story of Jack and Rose in the film is being presented in front of us. The relational processes such as "wherever you are" "you are here in my heart" "love was when I loved you" and so on further strengthen the narrator's emotion: love makes us love each other and love lives in our hearts forever. Clause 16 is the only existential process. "there's nothing I fear" because "I" love "you" and "you" love" "me", and even though "we" are in the juncture of life and death, " I" do not fear. In a word, all the processes in these lyrics express organically sincere and deep love between Jack and Rose.

As far as voice system is concerned, middle and non-middle voice are both involved in the lyrics but the latter is more. In this discourse, all the non-middle voice is active voice, showing the participants "you" and "I" make an active effort for love and are willing to hold fast to love when one leaves the world.

3.2 Analysis of Interpersonal Function in *My Heart Will Go on*

Interpersonal function shows the speaker's speech role. In the lyrics, most of the clauses are showed with statement, which expresses acceptance of the speaker. In other worlds, all the clauses convey the information that it is the truth that "we" love each other and "we" will face bravely any difficulties in front of "us", and even the death cannot separate "us".

Declarative mood is mainly used in the lyrics. The use of declarative mood not only demonstrates the fact that "we" love each other but also communicates the message that love keeps "me" calm down and teach "me" to be brave when "you" leave the world. The subjects "I" "you" "we" appear alternately. For the audience, it is as if "we" were still together, and "I" was talking to "you" and "you" were listening to "me", face to face. There is only one clause with imperative mood: "never let go till we're gone." This clause strongly shows "our" determination to protect "our" love and make it last forever. In addition, the modal verbal and adverbial operators "will" and "always" further indicate the narrator's willing and determination to keep holding on to love.

3.3 Analysis of Textual Function in *My Heart Will Go on*

Thematic structure plays an important role in textual function. The theme is the starting point in the discourse. This paper will give a detailed analysis of the theme in the lyrics:

1.Every night in my dreams I

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2.I

3.That

4.Far across the distance and spaces between us you

5.Near far wherever you

6.I

7.Once more you

8.And you

9.And my heart

10.Love

11.And(love)

12.And(love)

13.Love

14.One true time I

15.In my life we

16.You

17.There's

18.And I

19.We

20.You

21.And my heart

From the themes given above, we can divide the 21 clauses into four parts. The first part is from clause 1 to clause 3, telling about how “I” know “you”. The second part is from clause 4 to clause 9, telling about how “you” do for “our” love. The third part is from clause 10 to clause 13, describing what is love. The final part is from clause 14 to clause 21, manifesting “we” will be together forever with love. From the four parts, we can clearly see the narrator’s train of thinking as well as the development of the well-organized thematic structure in this discourse, and meanwhile we seemingly can see the touching scene in which they love. This discourse tells us that love is something about two people because the four parts have pointed out successively what “I” experience, how “you” do and where “we” will be. Besides, in these lyrics, the narrator explains what love is for them, making audiences further know and understand what love is between the young couple and what this song’s topic is about.

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In this discourse the main cohesive devices are repetition and ellipsis. “my heart will go on” and “you go on” are repeated many times, which leave the audiences a deep impression that they will keep their love forever and enhance this song’s topic. Ellipsis is to avoid repetition and stress the new information to be given. In Clause 11 and 12, the word “love” is omitted, emphasizing the time span of love. The use of repetition and ellipsis make these song lyrics a compact and coherent discourse.

The discourse analysis above examines *My Heart Will Go On* through Halliday’s three metafunctions, separately for clarity. However, it is crucial to emphasize that these metafunctions are inherently interconnected and mutually reinforcing in actual language use. While analyzing them individually helps clarify their roles, a holistic understanding of the lyrics requires recognizing how these functions interact dynamically. Ignoring any one aspect would result in an incomplete interpretation. Therefore, a balanced approach—one that considers all three metafunctions simultaneously—is essential for a comprehensive appreciation of the song’s linguistic and artistic depth. Only by integrating these perspectives can we fully grasp how the lyrics convey meaning, evoke emotions, and achieve their poetic and musical impact.

Conclusion

This paper provides a comprehensive exploration of Halliday’s three metafunctions—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—and applies them to a detailed discourse analysis of the song lyrics *My Heart Will Go On*. By doing so, the study not only highlights the practicality and applicability of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) in discourse analysis but also demonstrates how linguistic theory can enrich our understanding of artistic expressions such as song lyrics.

Through this analysis, the paper underscores the versatility of SFL as a tool for dissecting various forms of discourse, including literary and musical texts. The study serves as a valuable example of how linguistic frameworks can be employed to deepen our appreciation of songs, moving beyond mere subjective interpretation to a more systematic and theoretically grounded analysis. By adopting this approach, readers can gain insights into the intricate ways in which language operates in songwriting, enhancing their ability to critically engage with music. Furthermore, this research opens up possibilities for future studies to apply SFL to other genres of music, thereby broadening the scope of linguistic discourse analysis in the arts. Ultimately, the paper contributes to the interdisciplinary dialogue between linguistics and musicology, offering a methodological framework for analyzing song lyrics that balances theoretical rigor with aesthetic appreciation.

In addition, this study emphasizes the pedagogical implications of using SFL in language and music education. By teaching students to analyze song lyrics through the lens of metafunctions, educators can foster a deeper understanding of both linguistic structures and artistic expression. This approach not only enhances analytical skills but also cultivates a greater appreciation for the artistry behind songwriting. Yet it needs further research into the intersection of linguistics and music, so that such explorations can yield valuable insights into the cognitive and emotional dimensions of language use in creative contexts. Thus, this thesis not only validates the applicability of SFL in discourse analysis but also sets a precedent for future interdisciplinary studies in the humanities.

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