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THE EQUIVALENCE IN ROBERT FROST'S "STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING" FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STRUCTURALISM

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Abstract

Based on Jakobson's theory of equivalence, the paper analyzes "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by the famous American poet Robert Frost from the metric and rhythmic, phonemic and syntactic perspectives to illustrate that the poem has realized the ideal combination of form and meaning.

Key Words: "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", equivalence, form and meaning, structuralism

Introduction

Among the many structuralist stylists, Roman Jakobson, a professor at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is the most representative both in theory and practice. In the spring of 1958, he was invited to give a concluding speech at the Stylistics Conference held by the American Social Science Committee in Indiana, in which he discussed the relationship between linguistics and poetics from a linguistic perspective and systematically expounded his views on structuralist stylistics.

Jakobson combined linguistics with poetics and provided a scientific methodology for the stylistic analysis of poetry through the combinative relationship between the structuralism and functionalism. In "Linguistics and Poetics", he put forward the famous projection theory and equivalence principle. According to Jakobson, poetic language should seek all the similar elements in the syntactic elements of the speech chain or linear

combination relations that represent the cohesive relations among semantics, vocabulary, syntax and phonetics, which should be found in the axis of selection or combination. Thus, Jakobson argued,

The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence. In poetry one syllable is equalized with any other syllable of the same sequence; word stress is assumed to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress; prosodic long is matched with long, and short with short; word boundary equals word boundary, no boundary equals no boundary; syntactic pause equals syntactic pause, no pause equals no pause. (Jakobson 71)

Jakobson attempted to determine the connection between form and semantics. His structuralist analysis method—equivalence principle enabled readers to view the relationship between the deep internal language structure of poetry and

the meaning to be expressed more scientifically. Based on Jacobson's principle of equivalence, the paper analyzes Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", and shows the perfect combination of form and semantics.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Robert Frost

I

1. Whose woods these are I think I know.
2. His house is in the village though;
3. He will not see me stopping here
4. To watch his woods fill up with snow.

II

5. My little horse must think it queer
6. To stop without a farmhouse near
7. Between the woods and frozen lake
8. The darkest evening of the year.

III

9. He gives his harness bells a shake
10. To ask if there is some mistake.
11. The only other sound's the sweep
12. Of easy wind and downy flake.

IV

13. The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
14. But I have promises to keep,
15. And miles to go before I sleep,
16. And miles to go before I sleep.

1. The Equivalence of Meter and Rhythm in Poetry

As for the meter and rhythm, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" adopts "a strict iambic tetrameter meter" (Steele 141). The tetrameter lines are more symmetrical than the traditional iambic pentameter. Each line is composed of eight syllables, with two syllables forming a foot, being reduced and stressed in turn, which makes the lines show the perfect symmetry inside, and the intense effect of meter.

In addition, the rhyme of "Stop by the Woods on a Snowy Night" is "aaba, bbcb, ccdc, dddd". Starting with the first stanza, the first, second, and fourth lines of each stanza are written in the same rhyme, and the end rhyme of the third line becomes the end rhyme of the first, second, and fourth lines of the next stanza, and so forth. Significantly, the

first three stanzas are strictly in this metrical format, showing the form of a serial march and constituting the main part of the poem. Whereas it is only in the last stanza that the end rhymes of all four lines converge, which contrasts the first three stanzas of the poem with the last.

In a word, the main artistic conception in the title "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Night" is fully displayed in these three stanzas. In the last stanza, the poet makes a general comment on the woods on a snowy night: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep". This stanza interrupts the interlocking rhyme format and uses a unified rhyme to bring the whole poem to an end. The poet no longer considers whether to stop by the woods, but decides to go on in which his behavior of "stopping by woods on a snowy evening" has ended.

2. The Equivalence of Phonetics in Poetry

Phonetically, the equivalence is evident in the poem. The three key words in the title of the poem are "stopping", "woods" and "snowy", which become the dominant phonemes for the four stanzas respectively.

In line 1, the /w/, /u:/ and /z/ phonemes in "whose"—"woods"—"these" are all concentrated, revealing the dominant phoneme in this stanza—/wu:dz/. Thereafter, the /z/ in "his"—"is" in line 2 and the /w/ in "will" in line 3 emphasize the opening and closing sounds of the dominant phoneme. In line 4, those three phonemes appear simultaneously: "watch"—"his"—"woods"—"with". Furthermore, there is also a clear correspondence between phoneme and meaning. The stanza tells the story of the poet coming to the edge of the woods, stopping to look at it, and thinking of the owner, which revolves around the central image of the "woods".

The dominant phoneme in the second stanza is /st/, which runs through the whole four lines. In line 5, "horse"—"must"—"it" have the phonemes /s/, /st/ and /t/, and in line 6, "to"—"stop"—"farmhouse" still present these three phonemes. The phoneme /t/ of "between" in line 7 and /st/ of "darkest" in line 8 show that the most prominent

phoneme in the whole stanza is /st/, the initial consonant of “stop”. As for the meaning, the whole stanza depicts the poet of stopping by the woods and the frozen lake on a dark winter night, and thinking about the behavior through the perspective of a horse.

In the third stanza, the dominant phonemes are /s/, /n/ and /i/, the constituent phonemes of the word “snowy”. In line 9, the gravity of phonemes is reflected in /h/ and /s/. In “he”—“his”—“harness”—“shake”, the use of the two phonemes /h/ and /s/ creates a static and dynamic atmosphere for the stanza. The recurring sounds in line 10 are the /s/ in “ask”—“some”—“mistake” and the nasal consonant /m/, a variation of /n/. In line 11, /n/, /l/ and /s/ are prominent in “only”—“sound”—“sweep”, which are very similar to the sound of the breeze gently sweeping the snow in the line.

The original version of the line 12 was “Of easy wind and fall of flake” (Cooper 604-07), which Frost later changed to “Of easy wind and downy flake”. The substitution of “downy” accentuates the /i/ and /n/ in the lines, showing the lightness of snowflakes being lifted by the wind and then falling. Therefore, it can be said that the whole stanza is spread out around the snow. Through the repeated reproduction of /s/, /n/, /i/ and other phonemes, the silence of the snowy night and the image of the gentle wind blowing the dancing snow are vividly and subtly expressed.

The dominant phoneme in the last stanza is /p/. The four lines all end with the phoneme /p/ expressing the different meaning. The highlight of “dark” and “deep” in line 13 is /d/, when the poet feels the darkness and depth of the snowy night. Line 14 is the only line in the whole stanza in which the /p/ appears twice in “promise”—“keep”, reflecting the central meaning of the poet’s message—to keep a promise. Although the repetition of “sleep” occurs in the last two lines, it is not the semantic focus of the stanza. In Frost’s poetry, “sleep” always alludes to death. But the distribution of /p/ throughout the stanza shows that the promise of life is more important to death. Thus, the poet does not stop there, but moves on.

From the phonetic analysis, it is clear that the perfect combination of sound and meaning in the poem has achieved excellent results.

3. The Equivalence of Syntax in Poetry

From the syntactic level, there is an obvious equivalence between form and semantics. Jakobson argues that the four strophic units exhibit three kinds of binary correspondences:

1) alternation (a b a b), which ties together the two odd strophes (I, III) and opposes them to the even strophes which are tied in turn to each other (II, IV); 2) framing (a b b a), which brings together the enclosing outer strophes (I, IV) and opposes them to the two enclosed, mutually related inner strophes (II, III); 3) neighborhood (a a b b), which builds pairs of anterior (I, II) and posterior (III, IV) strophes opposed to one another. (Jakobson 199)

In view of the three forms of symmetrical relations in the poem, the outer strophes and the inner strophes show a strong symmetric relationship. The application of the equivalence principle in the poem is illustrated by the example of the pair of outer strophes and inner strophes.

The number of nouns in the inner strophes is (6+8), while the number of nouns in the outer strophes is (5+4). Finite verbs appear more frequently in the outer strophes with the number of (5+4), while those in the inner strophes are (1+3). The article appears once in stanza 1 and 4, and three times in stanza 2 and 3, which indicates that the outer strophes are dynamic, while the inner strophes are relatively static. Semantically, there is indeed a contrast between the outer and inner strophes.

Stanza 1 describes the poet riding his horse by woods on a snowy night, intending to stay for a while. Stanza 2 changes from the dynamic condition to the static condition in which the poet stops by the woods on a dark snowy night. Stanza 3 creates a scene of silence in which except the ringing of a saddle bell, there is only the sound of the breeze and falling snow on a silent snowy night. Stanza 4 moves from the static condition to the dynamic condition again. In front of the lovely, dark and deep woods, the poet wishes to rest here forever. But there are

many promises to be fulfilled in life, then he restarts his journey.

In addition, the first-person pronouns only appear in the outer strophes with the number of (2+3). This distribution also separates the inner and outer strophes. The central figure of the outer strophes is the poet himself, and the content of the stanza is also the poet's own inner activity. In stanza 1, the poet comes to the edge of the woods thinking to himself that the owner of the woods must live in the village who will not see his stopping by the woods.

However, the central figure in stanza 2 and 3 is transformed into the poet's horse. The action of the poet stopping by the woods in Stanza 2 is described from the perspective of the horse. It wonders at the poet's presence at the edge of the woods on such a dark, cold and snowy night. Stanza 3 goes on to depict the horse's conversion from incomprehension to action—ringing the bell and asking what the problem is.

It returns to the poet's own inner monologue in stanza 4. The poet intends to sleep there because of the lovely woods. Nevertheless, the poet finally decides to move on and fulfill the promise of life after a moment of inner struggle. In the whole poem, the inner strophes represent the objective power of the third person, which forms a strong contrast with the poet's subjective power of the first person, which enhances the tension inside the poem.

In a nutshell, the syntactic analysis of "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Night" shows the combination of form and semantics in the poem.

Conclusion

Jacobson points out "a linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unacquainted with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms" (Jakobson 94). His structuralist analysis method, combining the linguistic analysis with the poetic analysis, can scientifically explore the relationship between the deep internal language structure of poetry and the meaning to be expressed. By applying the principle of equivalence,

the paper gives an interpretation on "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Night" from the metric and rhythmic, phonemic and syntactic perspectives, so as to illustrate that it has realized the ideal combination of form and meaning.

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