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The Application of Systemic Functional Grammar Discourse Analysis Model in English Reading - Take *Dad* as an Example

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Abstract

This study, using Halliday's systemic functional grammar as the theoretical framework, conducts a multi-dimensional discourse analysis of the reminiscent prose *Dad* and explores its application value in English reading teaching. Through the analysis of the transitivity system, mood and modality system, thematic structure, and cohesive devices, it reveals how the author demonstrates the dynamic changes of the father-son relationship and the emotional connotations through language choices. The study shows that systemic functional grammar provides a scientific analytical tool for English reading teaching. It helps learners deeply understand the semantic functions of the text and the author's intentions, and offers theoretical support for optimizing the reading teaching mode at the same time.

Keywords: systemic functional grammar, discourse analysis, English reading teaching.

1. Introduction

English reading is an important part of English teaching. It is a crucial means to acquire knowledge, improve language ability, and an important channel for language input. In English teaching, reading is of great significance for cultivating students' English proficiency. Discourse analysis is an important part of systemic functional linguistics research. Halliday (1994) stated in his book *Introduction to*

Functional Grammar that his purpose in constructing functional grammar is to provide a theoretical framework for discourse analysis, which can be used to analyze any spoken or written discourse in English reading. Since then, more and more domestic scholars have conducted extensive research on discourse analysis from the systemic functional perspective. Through analyzing discourses with functional grammar theory, Liao (1999) drew a

conclusion that the author's choice of language patterns is restricted by specific contexts and the subject matter the author intends to express. Yang & Yang (2004) proposed that applying the discourse analysis theoretical framework of systemic functional grammar can optimize traditional reading teaching models and cultivate students' ability to actively construct discourse meaning and experience language. Tang (2009) pointed out the enlightenment of systemic functional discourse analysis on contextual analysis and cultural background knowledge teaching in English reading. Chen (2013) used systemic functional grammar for discourse analysis to help readers analyze and discuss the author's language use and structural composition from the author's perspective. Based on systemic functional grammar, this paper selects the reading discourse of high school student - *Dad* as the corpus, attempting to explore how the lexical and grammatical system in this reminiscent prose realizes language functions, that is, to discuss the role of systemic functional grammar in English reading discourse analysis, hoping to provide enlightenment for English reading teaching.

2. Overview of Systemic Functional Grammar

2.1 Ideational Function and Transitivity System

The ideational function includes experiential function and logical function. The experiential function refers to people's use of language to talk about their experiences and perceptions of the world (including the inner world), and to describe events or situations happening around them. The logical function refers to the relational mechanism between clauses, which mainly acts in clause complexes. The selected discourse *Dad* is a reminiscent prose, and due to its particularity, this paper mainly discusses the experiential function. The ideational function is realized through the transitivity system, which distinguishes six different process types based on the nature of activities and events in the real world: material process, mental process, relational process,

verbal process, behavioral process, and existential process. Among them, the first three are more frequently used and are therefore generally regarded as the main processes.

2.2 Interpersonal Function and Mood, Modality Systems

The interpersonal function involves the mood and modality of the speaker and the hearer in communication. Mood consists of two components: the subject and the finite. The subject has a wide range of components. Any element that can function as a noun, whether a word, a phrase, or even a clause, can serve as the subject. The finite is composed of elements that can function as verbs, which can be a verb or a verb phrase. Halliday divides mood into three categories: declarative mood, interrogative mood, and imperative mood, which are used to express the speaker's attitude and intention. The modality system can be expressed through modal verbal operators and modal adjuncts, indicating possibility, usuality, obligation and inclination in a sentence.

2.3 Textual Function and Thematic, Cohesive Systems

In systemic functional grammar, the textual function involves the thematic system, cohesive system, etc. Theme and rheme are defined based on their positions in a sentence - the first element appearing at the beginning of a sentence is called the theme. It is the starting point of the clause, and the central topic of the clause. The thematic structure consists of the theme and the rheme. Once the theme is determined, the remaining part is the rheme, which is the core content of the clause. According to the different components that act as the theme, the theme can be divided into marked and unmarked. What is marked is special, while what is unmarked is general; a functional component and its corresponding form that appear in most cases are unmarked, and vice versa (Liu, 2010). Cohesive relations are a component of the textual function, which uses cohesive devices such as reference, ellipsis,

substitution, conjunction, and lexical cohesion, to connect structurally unrelated but semantically interdependent components into a coherent discourse.

3. Context of the Discourse *Dad*

According to Halliday (1978), a discourse is a semantic unit and the realization of meaning potential. A discourse must be produced in a certain context and function within that context. Context consists of field, tenor, and mode.

Field refers to the involved topics and social activities, and corresponds to the ideational function in systemic functional grammar, mainly realized by the transitivity system. The field of *Dad* is a reminiscent prose. Through recalling the changes of the relationship between the author and his father, it shows the emotional changes between them "from childhood to adulthood and then to the father's death".

Tenor refers to the relationship between participants, including the relationship between the author and readers, and the relationships between various characters in the prose. It corresponds to the interpersonal function, mainly realized by mood and modality systems. In the discourse *Dad*, the author tells the story of his father and him to the readers from a first-person perspective and shares his personal experiences and emotions, making the tenor very intimate and personal. Meanwhile, in depicting the relationship between "me" and "my father", although there has been a shift from relying on and admiring his father in

childhood to questioning him in adulthood and finally understanding him, the relationship between father and son always remains close and profound.

Mode refers to the style of language, that is, whether it is written or spoken. It corresponds to the textual function, mainly realized by the thematic structure and cohesive devices of the discourse. *Dad* is a written text, with most of the discourse being narrative descriptions, including the author's narrative monologues and dialogues between the author and his father. In addition, there are some evaluative paragraphs.

4. Systemic Functional Grammar Analysis of *Dad*

4.1 Transitivity System Analysis

Transitivity system is an important semantic system in the ideational function, focusing on the analysis of verbs. It generally includes three variables: participants, processes, and circumstances, based on which Halliday proposed six process types - material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process and existential process. Using functional grammar to analyze the transitivity system of a discourse helps learners better understand English grammatical features, thereby mastering the discourse content and thematic meaning (Huang & Ying, 2024).

The discourse involves a total of 91 processes, with the proportions of each process shown in the table 1:

Table 1: Distribution of the 91 Processes in the Discourse

Process	Material	Mental	Relational	Behavioral	Verbal	Existential
Number	46	15	12	3	11	4
Percentage	50.55%	16.48%	13.19%	3.30%	12.09%	4.40%

Material Processes

Material processes account for the largest proportion, indicating that the narrator intends to objectively reflect and reproduce the events between father and son, which is consistent with the requirements of a reminiscent prose. There are 46 material processes in the discourse, among which 6 processes take "I" as the "Actor".

- (1) I learned the alphabet that way in those pre-television days.
- (2) I never threw these up at him.
- (3) I stopped asking his advice;
- (4) "I had the best teacher," I said.

Five of these material processes have a "Goal". It indicates that when the author wrote these sentences, he had a clear purpose, which is to express the changes in his attitude towards his father. There are 23 material processes with the father as the "Actor", among which only 5 have no "Goal".

- (5) He hadn't to me, and, anyway, he ...
- (6) But, I said, he kept eating poorly, hiding in his room and ...
- (7) He went to sleep, naturally.
- (8) And he did not wake up.

The material processes with the father as the "Actor" account for half of all material processes, which is consistent with the author's purpose of taking the father as the writing subject. The author attempts to present the father's image to readers through objective and detailed descriptions of the father's interactions with him. In the 5 material processes without a "Goal", the father loses direct interaction with the external world, appearing aimless. From examples (5) and (6), it can be seen that as the author begins to question and alienate his father in adulthood, the father's image in his mind becomes silent and negative. Examples (7) and (8) depict the father's death. Since the father is

no longer in any contact with the world, these two processes have no "Goals" either.

There are 3 material processes with "we" as the "Actor":

- (9) And we'd practice it each night on his return from work.
- (10) And ... we had each taken our own, perfectly normal paths.
- (11) And we shook hands, firmly, for the last time.

These three material processes correspond to three stages of changes in the father-son relationship, each with a "Goal", indicating that the author intends to express different purposes. The handshake between father and son is a clue that runs through the entire prose. In childhood, "we" practiced shaking hands repeatedly, reflecting the deep affection between father and son; when the author was in his adulthood, "we" each took our own paths, indicating differences in the father-son relationship and their gradually fading emotions; when the father was seriously ill, "we" had a heart-to-heart talk and shook hands firmly for the last time, just like in childhood, showing mutual reconciliation, intense reluctance, and fatherly love between them.

Mental Processes

Mental processes express the subject's feelings, cognition, and reactions to the objective world. Among the 15 mental processes in the discourse, there are 9 processes taking the narrator "I" as the direct "Sensor", such as:

- (12) The first memory I have of him—of anything ...
- (13) One day, I realize now, there was a change.
- (14) I wasn't trying to please him so much as I was trying to impress him.
- (15) I began to see, too, his blind spots, his prejudices and his weaknesses.

(16) I ... by his bed and remembered for an instant those terrifying dark holes in another house 35 years before.

(17) I told my father how much I loved him.

The discourse *Dad* is a reminiscent prose written from the author's first-person perspective, using monologue as the narrative technique. Therefore, in the examples where the narrator is the direct "Sensor", the author elaborately describes his thoughts and feelings when recalling the changes in his relationship with his father. The author faces his inner world and analyzes how his attitude towards his father has changed. In the paragraphs describing his questioning and alienation from his father in adulthood, the author uses a large number of mental processes. It indicates that although he had these thoughts, they were hidden in his heart and weren't told to others, let alone be used as weapons to hurt his father. As a son, he respects and understands his father, so he is also unwilling to hurt his father's self-esteem, which reflect his love and care for his father.

There are 2 mental processes with the father as the direct "Sensor":

(18) ... he knew how hard my words had been to say and how proud he was of me.

The father's passive attitude towards treatment puzzled everyone, but at this time, the son took the initiative to encourage him to do what he wanted, so the father expressed his understanding and relief at his son's words. He knew that it must have been difficult for his son to make the decision to support him, so he comforted and encouraged his son. He also boldly expressed his love to his son, which was rare for a father who was always reserved. At this moment, his heart was full of pride and gratitude towards his son, because the son's understanding also showed that his education was successful.

Relational Processes

Relational processes refer to the description and judgment of objective objects, or

the relationship between one subject and another. Since the theme of the discourse is "dad", it is inevitable to describe the father's image. Through these relational processes in the prose, the author also reflects the relationship changes between father and son.

(19) The first memory I have of him—of anything, really—is his strength.

(20) ... a father seemed a god with strange strengths and strange powers.

(21) Impossible that he could be wrong, but there it was in the book.

(22) ... anyway, he seemed to need protection.

The use of relational processes shows the state of things and reflects the relationship between the "Carrier" and the "Attribute". In examples (19) and (20), the father is an omnipotent "god" in the little son's eyes, and the father dominates the father-son relationship. In example (21), the father's attribute changes. he "falls from the altar" and becomes an ordinary person who can make mistakes. In example (22), the father's image described by the author is more vulnerable, and it is obvious that the son has taken the upper hand in the father-son relationship at this time.

Verbal Processes

Verbal processes are processes where people communicate through speaking. The 11 verbal processes in the discourse are mostly concentrated in the latter half of the prose, and most are indirect quotations. The author focuses on the scene of his heart-to-heart talk with his father by the hospital bed, recalling in detail their final conversation, which reflects the touching affection between father and son.

Behavioral Processes

Behavioral processes represent behaviors in real-world experiences, such as physiological activities like exhaling, coughing, and dreaming. There are few behavioral processes in the discourse, with words like "smile" and "look".

4.2 Mood and Modality Systems Analysis

In systemic functional grammar, the interpersonal function includes two important concepts: mood and modality. In English clauses, mood can be divided into declarative mood, interrogative mood, and imperative mood. The discourse *Dad* contains declarative and interrogative moods, but is mainly in declarative mood.

The main tense in the narrative part of the discourse is the simple past tense, and only the evaluative paragraphs use the simple present tense.

- (23) The first memory I have of him—of anything, really—is his strength.
- (24) The relationship between a son and his father changes over time. It may grow and flourish in mutual maturity ... living in single-parent homes today, it may not even exist.

In examples (23) and (24), the author expresses his evaluation of his father and the father-son relationship in the universe. At the beginning of the article, the author describes his father as strong and powerful, which is the most profound background of his father's image in his mind, and it paves the way for the following description of his father's characteristics of "tough yet tender". The second paragraph of the

discourse summarizes three possible changes in the father-son relationship, not only introducing the theme of the whole article—the changes in the father-son relationship—but also laying the groundwork for the subsequent specific descriptions and emotional expressions.

There is only one interrogative sentence in the discourse, and it is a rhetorical question:

- (25) And by God, did the opposing team captain ever get a firm handshake and a gaze he would remember?

The author's question has a "Versailles" tone, and it is obvious that he already has the answer in his heart. It can be seen from examples (25) that shaking hands and attending games are unique ways of his father to express care and love to him. The author is proud of his father and his educational method, showing the high status of his father in his heart, the great role his father played in his growth, and the profound influence of his father on him.

Additionally, in interpersonal communication, we sometimes need to use euphemistic and indirect language to "blur" our attitudes or viewpoints, which is related to modality (Xu, 2014). Halliday divides modality into four categories: probability, frequency, obligation, and volition. There are 15 modal words in this discourse, classified as follows:

Table 2: Distribution of modal verb types in the discourse

Type	Probability	Usuality	Obligation	Inclination
	may (3), would (2), could (3)	never (2)	have to (3)	can (2)
Number	8	2	3	2
Percentage	53.33%	13.33%	20.00%	13.33%

As can be seen from the table, modality words expressing probability are the most in the discourse. For example, in the second paragraph of the prose, three "may" are used to propose

three possible developments of the father-son relationship—becoming better, deteriorating, or ceasing to exist. Since these three situations are the author's personal guesses, he uses low-value

modal verbs to avoid subjectivity. Focusing on the fourth paragraph of the prose, the author uses two modal words expressing probability, “would”, when describing how his father taught him to shake hands in childhood:

(26) “The first thing anyone knows about you is your handshake,” he would say.

(27) And we’d practice it each night on his return from work.

These two sentences show that the father’s words and the practice of shaking hands every night were habitual actions, which were very likely to happen in childhood, so the author remembers these two scenes clearly. It also reflects the deep affection between father and son. On the one hand, the father loves his son deeply and hopes to teach him to be a polite gentleman through words and deeds, thus leaving a perfect first impression on others in social interactions. On the other hand, the son is also full of affection when recalling his father, and his words reveal his nostalgia for the warm scene of “shaking hands”, and reflect his deep gratitude, respect, and miss for his father.

(28) Impossible that he could be wrong, but there it was in the book.

The modal word “could” is a low-value modal word, expressing low possibility and uncertainty. In example (28), the author uses “could” to express his confusion, surprise, and disappointment when he finds that the knowledge taught by his father is inconsistent with the content in the book. For a long time, his father had been an omnipotent image in his mind, and the collapse of his father’s great image made him feel unacceptable. Therefore, he uses a negative word “impossible” and a low-value modal word “could” to express his contradictory mood of being unwilling to believe the fact but having to accept it.

The author uses the high-value modal word “never” when expressing usuality, showing the importance of his father to him – he is unwilling to trouble his father or embarrass

him in any situation. The author shows empathy to his father’s hard work, so he “never” asks his father to watch his football games in the busy schedule. The author understands and respects his father, so although he finds that his father also has shortcomings, he “never” exposes or criticizes them.

There are few modal words expressing obligation and inclination in the prose, and they all appear in the dialogue between father and son. The modal word expressing obligation is “have to”, which appears three times in “You/I can do whatever you have to do.” This sentence was said by father and son on different occasions. “Have to” originally means that a person must do something, emphasizing the necessity of fulfilling an obligation. When the son says it to his seriously ill father, it shows that he understands his father. Despite his deep reluctance, as a son, he has the obligation to respect his father’s choice to give up treatment. The father says the sentence before his death, then he pens his will and arranges his funeral. It shows that as a husband and father, he wants to fulfill his last responsibility, reflecting his sense of responsibility and love for his wife and children.

4.3 Thematic and Cohesive Systems Analysis

According to Halliday (1985), the textual function is realized by thematic structure, information structure, and cohesive devices. For this discourse, only the marked form of thematic structure and lexical cohesive devices are discussed.

People generally use marked themes for a purpose, such as emphasizing or connecting the context. In the discourse, the author uses 12 marked themes and 37 unmarked themes. Among the marked themes, 5 are adverbials indicating time, such as “But to a little boy right after World War II”, “One day”, “But for all the big games”, “But then, in more recent years”, “Several days later”, etc. Since the discourse is organized in chronological order, the author usually uses marked themes to inform readers

when moving to a new stage of life. Grasping these changes in time is important for understanding the ideas that the author intends to express. "But to a little boy right after World War II" shows the great image and importance of the father in the son's mind under a special social background. Many fathers lost their lives in World War II, so it was particularly precious for the author to have his father's company. Other marked themes such as "The first memory I have of him—of anything, really", "First", "Impossible", and "After much thought and practice 'You can do whatever you have to do.'" are used for emphasis. "The first memory I have of him—of anything, really" emphasizes the image characteristics of the father in the author's mind; "First" emphasizes that shaking hands was the first rule the son learned from his father and the starting point of emotional communication between father and son; "Impossible" emphasizes the author's disbelief when he finds that his father is not omniscient; "After much thought and practice 'You can do whatever you have to do.'" emphasizes the difficulty of the author's final decision to support his father's choice—even though he was unwilling to let his father give up treatment, he still respected his father's idea, showing his love for his father.

In the discourse *Dad*, the author uses various cohesive devices, especially lexical cohesion and conjunctions. From the perspective of lexical cohesion, the words expressing changes in time include "age 33", "a little boy", "pre-television days", "the serious toddler", "a school fact", "in more recent years", "one night last winter", etc. The discourse is organized in the order of time, and the author unfolds his memories in chronological order from childhood to adulthood and then to his father's final days. Readers can imagine that the author is sighing at the passage of time. In midnight dreams, the author would miss the time when he practiced shaking hands with his father in childhood. At that time, his parents were not yet old, and he was still young. The

words describing the father's "strong and powerful" image include "his strength", "his powerful hands", "wrapped all the way around my tiny arms", "easily swung me up", "strange strengths and strange powers", "the giant father", etc. The author mentions the father's strong and powerful image many times, which is the son's sincere evaluation of his father and the typical personalities of his father. The words describing the father-son relationship include "seem a god", "to do and know things that no mortal could do or know", "his blind spots, his prejudices and his weaknesses", "need protection", "stop asking his advice", "the best teacher", etc. The changes in the father-son relationship run through the full text. From these words, it can be seen that the author's attitude towards his father changes from dependence to questioning and finally to understanding, showing a deep father-son bond. From the perspective of conjunctions, the full text mostly uses "and" to connect coordinate sentences, "but" to construct contrast or adversative relationship. Words like "first" and "then" are used to indicate time or logical order. These conjunctions enhance the coherence of the discourse by connecting sentences or phrases, making the discourse more fluent and logically clear. In addition, they are able to express the author's intentions and emotions.

5. Conclusion

Guided by Halliday's systemic functional grammar, this article conducts a reading analysis of the discourse *Dad*. As a reminiscent prose, *Dad* is set against the author's personal life experiences, presenting the changing relationship and profound affection between father and son through delicate descriptions and heartfelt narratives. The appropriate selection of transitivity system, mood and modality systems, thematic structures, and the successful use of cohesive devices enable the discourse to convey the author's intended thematic ideas. Moreover, through a specific analysis from the perspective of systemic functional grammar, we can gain a

more comprehensive understanding of the text's meaning and functions, thereby better grasping the author's intentions and the readers' perceptions. However, since the focus of discourse analysis depends on the analyst's research purposes and interests, a thorough functional analysis of a discourse, though theoretically feasible, is often impractical in reality, and sometimes even meaningless or impossible (Huang, 2001). Therefore, it is impossible to cover every aspect in the analysis of *Dad*. Nevertheless, in general, applying functional grammar to discourse analysis in English reading can help English learners improve their language proficiency and sensitivity to the English language, and assist English teachers in enhancing the efficiency of reading courses. Thus, this method can be applied to teaching practice.

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