



PERLOCUTIONARY ACT OF VISUAL POETRY: A CASE STUDY OF E.E.CUMMINGS'S POEM *IN JUST-*

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Abstract

E.E.Cummings is one of the most brilliant American poets in twentieth century, famous for his unique visual poems characterized by innovative typography, lexica, syntax and so forth. As one aspect of human communication, the interactivity of visual poems can be interpreted by Austin's speech act theory. This article constructs foregrounding pattern diagram under the perspective of perlocutionary act on the basis of Liu's classification of perlocutionary act and Yu's foregrounding effect implementation pattern diagram. Besides, it applies this pattern diagram to the analysis of Cummings's poem in *Just-*, thus revealing the interactivity of poetic discourse, which, to some extent, perfects some deficiencies of Austin's speech act theory. Meanwhile, this article also enriches the theme connotation and research perspective of visual poetry, bringing some enlightenment to poetry learning and teaching.

Key Words: foregrounding pattern ; in *Just-*; interactivity; perlocutionary act

1. Introduction

E. E. Cummings (1894~1962) is one of the most distinguished representatives of American experimentalist poets. Meanwhile, he is also an outstanding painter, critic and writer. Hence, his poems embody the skills of modern painting so that bizarre and unusual as his poems seem to be, the artistic enjoyment does emerged. The poem *in just* is a lyric poem in Cummings' anthology *Tulip and Chimney* published in 1920. In China, the focus of studies has been mainly fixed on its visual effect (Yu & Zhang, 2007; Wang & Zhu, 2012; Liu, 2014) as well as its theme (Lv, 2013; Wang, 2013; Wang, 2014) from the perspective of foregrounding of stylistics. Whereas, in other countries, the focus of studies has centered on its visual effect (Kidder, 1979; Kennedy, 1994; Landle, 2001) and theme

(Roston, 2000; Terblanche, 2015) from the view of literature criticism. In a word, no matter from which perspective, the analysis of this poem has paid more attention on the process how the author generates artistic effect by mingling poems with drawings and conveys creative intention through organizing language where readers are only passive information receivers. In fact, literary discourse is dynamic and is the product of the interaction among the author, context and readers. Therefore, the real meaning of poetic discourse lies on the pragmatic analysis where poetry is regarded as speech act (Zhao & Liu, 2011). While, as one of the most important concepts in stylistics, foregrounding theory systematically reveals how language produces literary effects. Based on Liu's classification of perlocutionary act and Yu's foregrounding effect implementation pattern

diagram, this article constructs the foregrounding pattern from the perspective of perlocutionary act, and then applies it to the interpretation of Cummings' poem in Just- , aimed at uncovering the interactivity of textual discourse, thus enriching the connotation and significance of visual poetry and broadening its research scope.

2. Perlocutionary Act

Austin, the founder of speech act theory, abstractly draws three acts from a complete speech act, namely, "locutionary act", "illocutionary act" and "perlocutionary act". For him, literature is parasitic and non-serious thus we cannot analyze it by speech act theory. Undoubtedly, what he thought is partial considering the fact that literary discourse has the illocutionary force. Meanwhile, it is of significance to apply the speech act theory into it for filling in gaps produced by formalism analysis. Essentially, it is of interactivity as spoken discourse, saying, the author conveys his own ideas to the readers through his creation of works while readers receive and enrich the connotation of the works through the reading, their psychology and emotion supposed to be affected. Given this, though illocutionary act has been a hot spot in academics, perlocutionary act is bound to attract more attention because it has the responsibility to connect the discourse to the real world. Additionally, on no account can we separate the content, force and effect of speech act (Zhao&Liu, 2011).

Perlocutionary act refers to the phenomenon that saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other person (Austin, 1980: 101). However, perlocutionary act is not a single act but the result of the cooperation between the speaker and the listener and the product of the interaction of three abstract levels of speech act, saying, "locutionary act", "illocutionary act" and "perlocutionary act", which means the purpose of poetic discourse is to achieve specific pragmatic perlocutionary function functions (Zhao&Liu,2011).

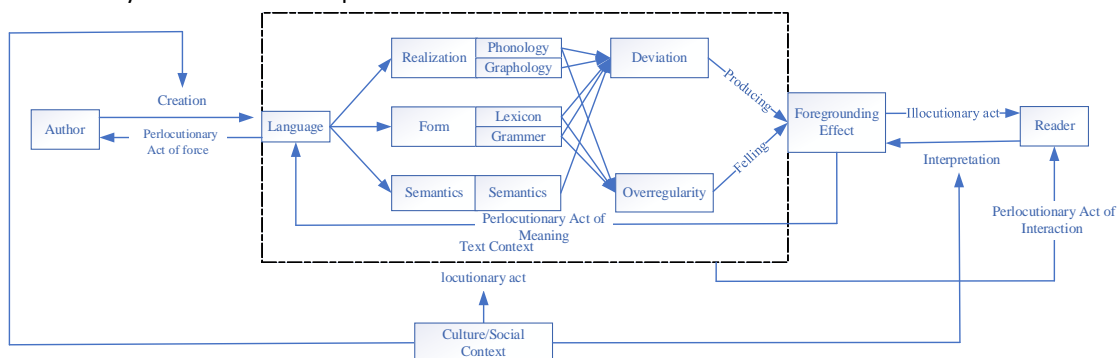
Accompanied with perlocutionary act, morphology-semantic combination effect, communication response effect and social cognition effect emerge, which correspond to three sub-behaviors, namely, the perlocutionary act of meaning, the perlocutionary act of force and the perlocutionary act of interaction. The first one refers to the perfect combination of the language form and meaning by virtue of devices in poetic texts such as cohesion, reference, reference and so forth, where the author's intention behind the work is fully expressed. The second is the effect of eliciting readers' specific understanding and response to the intention of the work and the last one is the effect made by the interaction between ideological, social and cultural connotations of poetic discourse and psychological factors of writers and readers. Besides, they belong to the same perlocutionary act, coordinate, unified and interactive, for the sake of completing communication tasks together.(Liu, 2007) Undoubtedly, this classification shows the interaction between the writer, context and the reader, which not only centers on the works' artistic effect and theme, but also pays more attention to the influence of the reader's subjective initiative on work interpretation. Accordingly, it is a powerful tool to dig out the deep meaning of the poem, bringing a new linguistic method to interpret the poetic texts.

3. Foregrounding Pattern under the Perlocutionary Act

Yule (1996:3) thought that pragmatics has a relationship with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader). The appearance of this perlocutionary act is caused by the interaction between the speaker (or the writer) and the listener (the reader), thus explaining the interactivity of both perlocutionary act and literary texts in essence. However, whether the stylistics or literary criticism mainly studies the text the author creates and meaning hidden behind it, ignoring the interaction among the author, context and readers. Given Liu's classification of perlocutionary act and Yu's Foregrounding effect implementation pattern

diagram, this article constructs the foregrounding pattern diagram from the perspective of perlocutionary act in the attempt to reveal the

dynamic process of text creation and interpretation.



Foregrounding Pattern Diagram Under Perlocutionary Act

This diagram reveals the interaction among the author, the context, and the reader. In this process, the author conveys his intention (illocutionary act) to the reader through the creation of literature (locutionary act) impacted not only by the author, but also by the reader and context while the reader is supposed to firstly recognize the variation and overregularity in different levels of language, perceiving the effect of foregrounding (perlocutionary act of meaning) and it is the author's usage of foregrounding methods that gets the reader involved in the world the author constructs, together with the comprehension of what the author wants to express (perlocutionary act of force). However, in terms of differences in readers themselves as well as social and cultural contexts, their interpretation and comprehension of the work are different and the same work is supposed to evoke different emotional experience and behavioral changes, which is called the perlocutionary act of interaction. Accordingly, this article will apply this pattern diagram to the analysis of E.E.Cummings' visual poem in *Just-*, illustrating its perlocutionary act and revealing the interaction among the author, the context, and the reader.

4. The Perlocutionary Act of Visual Poetry

The poem *in Just-* is a representative work of Cummings' visual poetry, published in *Tulips and Chimneys* in 1920. It consists of 24 lines in simple language and novel typesetting. According to the

interactivity of literary discourse, this article aims at uncovering this poem's perlocutionary act in three levels (the perlocutionary act of meaning, the perlocutionary act of force and the perlocutionary act of interaction), thus embodying its interactivity.

4.1 The Perlocutionary Act of Meaning

The perlocutionary act of meaning points to the effect by the perfect combination of form and meaning through devices such as cohesion, reference, substitution and else for fully expressing the author's thought, which hinges on the presentation of propositional content and form (Liu&Zhang, 2007). As a special literary style, poetry is devoted itself to seeking the technique of expression for the sake of novelty, which almost every successful poet has broken through. In stylistic terms, it is called 'foregrounding'. In this level, neither the choice of language nor the arrangement of form is arbitrary (Luo,2004). In order to produce the foregrounding effect, Cummings uses the graphological deviation seen in his preference in irregular arrangement of lines in accordance with the old man's dynamic course from far to near, which makes readers immersive, feeling the magic of the whistle, together with delightfulness as children do. Throughout the poem, no single punctuation mark is seen so as to create an imaginative and relished joyous atmosphere. In lexical deviation, he makes the run-on and lowercase treatment in children's names such as "eddieandbill", which depicts the picture of two innocent children running to the balloon man

hand in hand, meanwhile enhancing the feeling of their hurry in running (Zhang, 2009); he also uses 'nonce-formation' such as "mud-luscious", "puddle-wonderful", which superpose the olfactory image and visual image, which give readers more vivid sensory stimulation (Zhou, 2014). In this poem, Cummings also uses phonological overregularity so as to realize the foregrounding effect, like the use of assonance embodied in [ʌ] of both "Just" and "mud-luscious" and [ɪ] of "in", "spring", "little" and "whistle". The repetition of these short vowels also produces a light rhythm, thus creating a relaxing and cheerful atmosphere for the whole poem on account of their beginning position. The use of consonance can also be seen, considering the sound of [n] in "in", "when" and "balloonman" and the sound of [m] in "come" and "from", which depicts a pleasant atmosphere among balloon man and children. What's more, Cummings also applies lexical over regularity to this poem: the words "spring" and "balloonman" appear three times, which can serve to stress the theme and the word "and" repeat eight times, together with "the" repeating five times, embodying the simplicity of children's language. The use of syntactical over regularity can be seen in the phrase "whistles far and wee", which appears totally three times in the scene before, when and after the balloon man arrives with different space arrangement, thus vividly depicting the path of balloon man.

In a word, the reader is likely to feel the effect in blending poetry and painting that the author intends to make by identifying the language deviation and over regularity of the work. Undoubtedly, it is readers' immersion that makes the effect by the author's intention come into being.

4.2 The Perlocutionary Act of Force

The perlocutionary act of force refers to the effect by literary discourse on the readers' specific comprehension and response, hinging on the force which serves to exert effects on the reader, thus leading to readers' reasonable reaction in author's expectations, which we can conclude as the realization of discourse force (Liu & Zhang, 2007). Besides, three elements are indispensable in this

process: the basic knowledge of the writer, the basic ability of language (understanding the surface meaning and noticing the devices in use) and some relative life experience. People who have few knowledge about Cummings are sure to be astonished at his weird line arrangement, irregular capitalization and decapitalization and arbitrary word coinage and so forth, thus setting the barrier in reading and making the interpretation prone to be superficial or fruitless. Whereas, readers who have the understanding of Cummings that during the early days in France, he learnt the modern painting in which Dadaism and Cubism had a profound impact, thus thinking the poetry and visual art owned the same basis (Zhang, 2018) are inclined to pay attention to his eccentric usage, endeavoring to dig out the connotation. In order to let readers take the expectant response, firstly, the reader should have basic language ability, by which they can understand the superficial meaning and feel the effect of foregrounding. Considering the fact that people are prone to be attracted by 'foregrounding' rather than 'background', readers pay attention to these two character "balloon man" and "children". Meanwhile, given their knowledge and experience, they analyze the "goat-footed man" by virtue of its myth contained: Pan is the god of forest and field in Greek mythology and looks wired with human face and goat feet, administrating lives and breeds, for which he is called the god of spring (Wang, 2013). Therefore, it is possible for readers to build its relationship with children: the latter is the initial state of life, while Pan symbolizes the spring, which is the beginning of the four seasons, perceiving the writers' reminiscence of glorious youth. And, the coinage of "hope-scotch" and "jump-rope" presents the poet's deep memory of his childhood, contrasted to the transitory trait in their corresponding verb forms.

To conclude, in regard to the perlocutionary act of force, the textual meaning of the poetry is the product directed by the author to the reader (Zhao & Liu, 2011). Only when the reader has some special ability, can their understanding and response get closer to what the author expects.

4.3 The Perlocutionary Act of Interaction

The perlocutionary act of interaction is the effect produced by the interaction among the ideological, social and cultural connotations in the poetic discourse and psychological factors of the author and the reader, emphasizing the dynamic interaction under these elements effecting the work interpretation (Liu&Zhang, 2007). In this poem, Cummings creates the foregrounding effect by resorting to language deviation and language over regularity. While, different readers have different views upon the same work, given their difference in psychology, cognition and cultural and social context they live in. In terms of *in Just-*, readers who are young and with shallow social experience, are inclined to be intoxicated with artistic enjoyment and emotional pleasure by identifying the vivid picture the poet depicts. To those with rich experience, they tend to notice the poet's foregrounding methods and make the combination with their own experience so that they can dig out the connotations behind the 'prominence', feeling the poet's yearning for lost his childhood and evoking their childhood memory in the deep recesses. When finishing the reading, they also get melancholy due to the pressure from the real world. As for the nature lovers, they can find the natural conception: unlike the children who are so pure and innocent to find the beauty of the nature, adults are apt to exploit the nature at random, controlled by their self-interest, thus arising resentment towards the oppression of the nature caused by the industrialization nowadays.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the perlocutionary act of interaction is embodied in two parts. Firstly, Cummings uses the device of deviation to highlight what he wants to express, which also realizes the thematic metaphorization, thus triggering the novelty and shock on readers' mind (Luo, 2004). Secondly, Cummings presents a vivid picture of spring before readers where he regards the language as the paintbrush and readers have different interpretation and feelings towards this poem due to their difference in experience, emotion and cognition as well as the effect of cultural and social context.

5. Conclusion

Visual poetry is one poetry style that hinges on the language typesetting to achieve visual effect and it is also one kind of special speech act. According to Liu's classification of perlocutionary act and Yu's foregrounding effect implementation pattern diagram, this article constructs foregrounding pattern diagram under the perspective of perlocutionary act and applies this pattern diagram to the interpretation of Cummings's poem in *Just-*, including how the writer deliver his creation intention to readers, how readers comprehend the work by exerting their subjective initiative and how words in the work influence readers' experience, emotion, thinking and so forth. This article, to some extent, discloses the interactivity of poetic discourse so as to enrich the theme connotation and research perspective of visual poetry, bringing some enlightenment to poetry learning and teaching.

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