

Systemic Functional Analysis of the poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”

Maryam Ashfaq

MS English (Linguistics), International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

E-mail: maryamashfaq75@gmail.com

Saira Dastgir

MS English (Linguistics), International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

E-mail: saradastgir12@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores Robert Frost’s poem ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ through the lens of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) model. The poem, written by the renowned American poet Robert Frost, encompasses various themes such as death, obligation, civilization, and nature. This research paper specifically investigates the poet’s attitude toward nature using the SFG model as an analytical tool. An ecocritical perspective is employed to examine the construction of the human–nature relationship. In the analysis of the ideational metafunction, mental and behavioral processes emerged as the most dominant. The interpersonal analysis revealed that all clauses in the poem are in the declarative mood. The textual analysis showed that all but two clauses contain a topical theme. The findings highlight the significance of all three metafunctions in facilitating a deeper understanding of the poem. Overall, the metafunctional analysis enabled us to uncover the poet’s nuanced attitude toward nature.

Keywords: *Halliday’s SFG model, humans, nature, ideational, interpersonal, textual, anthropocentric, ecocentric.*

Introduction:

Language works as a way of interaction and communication. It results in meaningful utterances. When people communicate, they construct different meanings which are related to their communication. Language has given freedom of various lexical and grammatical choices to human beings that help in constructing intentional meanings. We can express feelings, perceptions, and various moods with the help of language. On seeing this ability of language (meaning construction), M.A.K Halliday developed Systemic Functional Linguistics in the 1960s. In the study of SFG, there's been a huge debate on transitivity analysis that is used to interpret different metafunctions of language. These metafunctions of language are of 3 types i.e. experiential, interpersonal, and textual that collectively work and create meaning potentials (Haratyan, 2011). Experiential or Ideational metafunctions convey meanings that are related to different incidents and experiences. Interpersonal metafunctions talk about the relation between the participants and textual metafunction of the language describes the way of constructing the message and progression of the text. In SFG, analysis is done at the clausal level by these metafunctions of language. A clause tells us about the event. The basic premise of transitivity analysis is to explore "who or what does what to whom or what?" (Iwamoto, 2008). So, the participant, process, and circumstance are important.

At the ideational level, we explore different processes and their role in meaning construction. These processes are Material, Mental, Behavioral, Verbal, Existential, and Relational. The processes convey different meanings and are used differently according to the needs of the text. After ideational metafunctions, interpersonal metafunctions are analyzed to identify the relationship between the participants. Modalities, mood adjuncts, mood, and residue are some components of it. After this, textual metafunction is very important which tells us about the thematic progression of text, how the text is being constructed, and how different themes are glued together in the text. Thematic Progression tells us about the ways of theme construction in the text like linear, zigzag, etc. Moreover, Ideational metafunction plays a wider role in character construction and theme construction. Researchers can interpret the text by exploring ideational metafunctions of language. (Butt, D., & Macquarie University. (2000).

Kroger and Wood (2000) claimed that language is not only used for communicative purposes but also demonstrates the social attitude of the participants. Social attitudes and behaviors are effective tools in discourse construction and they depict the realities of human beings (Fairclough, 1992). The exploitation of language for different events and then the selection of particular

lexical choices is being done in various ways projecting different meanings (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004).

Several studies have been conducted on exploring the role of experiential, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions in the text. Afrianto & Zuhud (2014) worked on experiential metafunctions of the poem and came to know about various mental processes that help to contribute to meaning construction. Moreover, Ong'onda (2016) investigated newspaper headlines on terrorist attacks with the help of ideational metafunctions and analyzed that material processes are frequent in nature demonstrating that physical actions are being portrayed in this event. The findings showed that lexical and grammatical choices played a vital role in constructing and manipulating meanings.

The present study is also the systemic functional analysis of the poem 'Stopping by Woods in Snowy Evening' by Robert Frost (1923). At the surface level, it is a simple poem. On a snowy evening, the speaker stops to see beautiful woods and wants to stay there but he then acknowledges his responsibilities and realizes the long distance to travel before sleep. Numerous studies have been conducted on this poem from different perspectives such as in the domain of literary criticism and exploring the themes and style of the poem. However, Ecocritical reading is missing from the research done before. For this reason, Halliday's model can help to evaluate the ecocritical reading of the poem by exploring all three metafunctions of language. This will help to evaluate the nature-human relationship. The changing attitude of the speaker from anthropocentric to ecocentric has not been explored in previous studies. The present study investigates the transference of attitude towards nature by using SFG as a tool.

Problem Statement:

Human beings are always surrounded by nature because we interact with it now and then. It creates a relationship between humans and nature. The extension of ethics towards nature is understood in two ways: anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism believes that nature deserves ethical concerns because the treatment of nature affects human life while the belief of ecocentrism is nature should be treated well because of its own intrinsic value. Thompson & Barton (1994) also explain ecocentric and anthropocentric approaches in their article 'Ecocentric and anthropocentric attitudes toward the environment.'

Nature is considered an important subject for prose writers and poets. The element of nature is also found in the poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' by Robert Frost. Several studies have been conducted on the poem regarding its themes and style. Hashmi et al. (2019) concluded that Robert Frost used several stylistic devices including connotation, denotation, personification,

imagery, and symbolism to show the idea of death and dismay in his poem 'Stopping by Woods on Snowy Evening.' Tyagi also stated that "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" highlights the connection between the speaker and his surroundings (2015). Although some studies explored the element of nature in this poem, however, the attitude of the poet towards nature and the role of thematic progression in building human/nature relationship have not been explored yet.

With reference to the aforementioned gap, this study aims to fill it by exploring through the lens of three metafunctions using M.A.K Halliday's Model. By examining the transference of anthropocentric to ecocentric attitudes in the poem and unveiling different processes that help in meaning construction and the role of modality, we can better understand the function of language in conveying ecocritical themes. With this understanding, researchers can critically explore relations that are built in the text. It will be effective in exploring guileful literature that is created through the exploitation of language reinforcing various events and themes.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore the function of ideational metafunction and modality in the transference of anthropocentric to the ecocentric attitude of the poet.
2. To scrutinize thematic progression in binding the human-nature relationship.

Research Questions:

1. How do Ideational Metafunction and Modality contribute to shifting the anthropocentric attitude of the poet to ecocentric?
2. What is the role of thematic progression in developing the human-nature relationship?

Literature Review:

Grammar helps a lot in meaning construction and its choices depend upon the context, so, meanings are encoded in chunks of language. Language acts as a tool for effective communication, and grammar is the basis of language so the functional grammar of Halliday is a very effective technique for a significant interaction. Language is a social activity in which we all participate. And ultimately, grammar works as a deconstruction and construction of language (it extracts meanings and constructs meanings). Butt, D., & Macquarie University. (2000)

Furthermore, Systemic Functional Grammar interprets language that is the source of meaning construction, how it works, and how the message is encoded through the language and intentions of the author. It is divided into 3 metafunctions

of language by M.A.K Halliday I.e. Ideational metafunction, interpersonal metafunction, and textual metafunction.

The present study is interested in analyzing three metafunctions of language in the poem 'Stopping by Woods on Snowy Evening' by Robert Frost. Bilal (2012) applied Halliday's three metafunctions of language to analyze the short story *Thank You Ma'am* to provide a better understanding of the text. Hassanpour and Hashim explored the depiction of women in the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad and how in poetic discourse linguistic structure and meaning are related through a systemic functional linguistics approach. Afrianto, Indrayani, and Soemantri (2014) did a transitivity analysis in order to find out which processes more frequently appear in the selected sonnets of Shakespeare.

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics approach is also implied to analyze speeches and other literary texts to interpret the meaning. Ye (2010) with the help of interpersonal metafunction understood Barack Obama's speech of victory and concluded that positive declarative clauses are largely used by Obama to convey different messages to the audience and persuade the audience with facts. According to Nur (2015) different levels of interpersonal meanings: purpose, meaning, different status, and relationship between the audience and speaker can be conveyed through different uses of modals, mood, rhythmic features, and personal pronouns. Based on the transitivity system in Halliday's systemic functional linguistics Zhao and Zhang conducted research on the inaugural address of former American president Donald J. Trump in 2017 to find out the function and distribution of six processes in his speech. The research also showed the different functions of each process.

Various kinds of research have been done by using Halliday's Model on literary pieces of text to explore their thematic units and character portrayals, For example in poems, short stories, novels, etc. Less attention has been diverted toward the poem of Robert Frost and the shift of attitude towards nature has remained unexplored. Research has been conducted to investigate its themes and style but with the help of an Ecocritical lens, this poem has remained untouched. The human nature relation depicted in the poem is obvious so it can come under the paradigm of ecocriticism. Hubert Zapf, a German ecocritic and theorist, pointed out that literature challenges and transforms cultural narratives of humanity's relationship to nature via language (Zapf, 1996). Ecocriticism claims that humans and nature are interconnected and both can affect each other (Glotfelty, 1996).

This study will analyze the text from the perspective of Ecocriticism regarding the anthropocentric and ecocentric attitudes toward nature. The depiction of the human-nature relationship and the shift of attitude toward nature will be explored with an ecocritical approach and applying Halliday's model as a tool.

Methodology:

The present research is the descriptive qualitative study of the poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' by Robert Frost. The primary data for the research is the poem and secondary data has been collected from various literature. It aims to explore the role of three metafunctions of language in shifting the anthropocentric attitude towards ecocentric. The theoretical framework for this study is Ecocriticism. The tool used in the research is M.A.K Halliday's SFG model which comprises three metafunctions of language. The text has been divided into various clauses and counted and numbered the clauses, then in the next step, each relevant clause is labeled as participant, process, and circumstance in Ideational metafunction and also find out the mood and residue in interpersonal metafunction. Finally, highlight the theme, rheme, and thematic metafunction in textual metafunction. All three metafunctions are important in the analysis because when they are combined to form a meaningful theme.

Analysis:

Transitivity Analysis

In this section of research, I am going to analyze the poem with the help of the SFG model proposed by Halliday. The research is concerned with all three metafunctions of language and how they contribute to meaning construction. In the poem 'Stopping by Wood in the Snowy Evening' there are thirteen clauses and out of thirteen clauses, there are four mental processes, four behavioral, two relational, and one material, verbal, and existential process respectively. Relational processes are of two types Attributive and Identifying, in this poem both are present. The frequency of mental and behavioral processes is high as compared to other processes. Mental processes refer to what goes on in —the internal world of the mind. These include perception, cognition, and affection. The speaker uses verbs that refer to mental processes which show the inner thoughts of the speaker. Through mental processes, the speaker shows his attitude towards nature. As C.1 and C.2 contain mental processes (cognition), and the projected clause "whose woods these are" refers to the idea of ownership. It shows the supremacy of humans as they think they are dominant over nature. The speaker carries the idea of anthropocentrism which is valuing nature for their own sake. Like the woods are protected by some humans so he can use these woods or this land to fulfill his purpose.

The poet uses an existential process in C.3 to indicate the existence of the house of the owner in a village nearby. C.4 again consists of a mental process (perception). Basically, the speaker tells the reader that the owner of these woods

is not here and does not see him stopping on his land. In the next clause by using the behavioral process the speaker shows his behavior like he fearlessly watches the woods and the snow that is falling on them. These lines again put humans at the center while marginalizing nature. The owner will decide who can watch his land and as he is not physically present the speaker can enjoy the beauty of nature. As ecocritics also claim the human-nature relation is obvious as nature is mostly referred to as second mother. Human's attraction towards nature is not only because of its beauty, nature also provides peace and solace to humans. Here the ecocentric attitude towards nature prevails. In C.6 and C.7 the speaker tells the reader about his horse the use of mental verbs in C.6 basically shows the thoughts of the speaker about his horse for example his horse considers it strange to stop between these woods surrounded by the frozen lake without any sign of civilization. By using the material process 'give' the speaker indicates the action of his horse. As the horse shakes bells on its harness to ask (Verbal process) if his owner made a mistake C.8. Here the horse is used as a symbol of awakening. The speaker indulges in nature and its beauty so he forgets his responsibilities. Relational identifying and attributive processes are used in C.9 and 10 respectively. These processes establish a relationship between the two concepts and can be referred to as "being" and "having" processes. The speaker identifies the sound of wind and snowfalling which provides calmness and peace and he finds his surroundings very alluring and describes wood as dark and deep. The speaker primarily enjoys the vibes that the woods and snowflakes provide to him. As stated by one of the ecocritics that humans are literally part of nature. The speaker cannot make him separate from nature. In the last three clauses, the speaker uses the behavioral process to show that although he loves to stay here under the shadow of nature, however, he has 'promises' to 'keep'. And he will have to cover a long distance before sleep. It highlights the ecocentric attitude of the poet towards nature (valuing nature for her own sake). As nature and humans have a deep connection with each other so that the speaker cannot stop himself from feeling the beauty of nature. The dark and deep woods attract him so he wants to stay in these woods and praises their beauty.

Interpersonal Metafunction Analysis

The declarative mood is found in all thirteen clauses. It shows that the clauses from the poem tend to declare or express feelings and ideas to the readers by using statements found in Declarative Mood. The declarative mood in the poem might have generated meanings that show a sense of interpersonal interaction between the speaker and the reader. The excessive amount of declarative clauses also shows that the poet is describing the events. Mood block gives information about the subject and also about the time of occurring the event while residue contains predicator, complement, and adjunct to make the information clearer and

tell the behavior of the characters as for example: ...'To stop without a farmhouse near 'Between the woods and frozen lake' 'The darkest evening of the year.'

The speaker uses modal finite in only two clauses that are in C.4 and C.6. Any Finite is inherently positive or negative in polarity. In C.4 future modal with negative polarity is used for example 'He will not see me...' in this clause the speaker talks about the owner of the land that he is unable to see me watching his woods. If this modal verb 'will' is replaced by 'can' then it may give a different meaning like by using 'will' the speaker is sure that the landowner will not see him so he is safe but 'can' creates a possibility. In C.6 'the use of the modal verb 'must' shows the obviousness that what the speaker is thinking about his horse will be true.

Two types of **Pronouns** are used by the speaker the first person pronoun 'I' which refers to the speaker himself and the third person pronoun 'he' for the landowner and for the horse. 'I' is the most used pronoun in the poem because the speaker is describing his ideas and views.

In the initial lines of the poem, the anthropocentric attitude is portrayed. The very first line of the poem is itself anthropocentric. It highlights the domination of men over nature and by analyzing the poem it is noted that interpersonal metafunction plays a great role in shifting the anthropocentric attitude towards ecocentric. According to ecocentrics, nature has a spiritual dimension and intrinsic value that is reflected in their experiences in nature and feelings

about natural settings. The use of declarative sentences to express the views and ideas of the speaker indicates that he feels the connection between nature and himself and that nature provides peace to himself.

Textual Metafunction Analysis

Textual metafunction is very important which tells us about the thematic progression of text, how the text is being constructed, and how different themes are glued together in the text. The Theme is the element that serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned. Thematic Progression tells us about the ways of theme construction in the text like linear, zigzag, etc.

In the poem 'STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING' there are only two textual themes and all others are topical. No interpersonal theme is found in the poem. Topical themes describe the time, place, circumstances, and subject of the poem while textual themes talk about coordination and continuity of themes. Textual analysis of any text helps in exploring writing difficulties, with topic development and text flow. This concept of theme and rheme leads to the

thematic progression in the text. This progression in the theme of the text provides coherence and cohesion to the text.

Throughout the poem, the primary focus of the poem is to create a relationship between humans and nature. The whole poem is coherent and the sequence of events and the continuity of the topical theme describes the poet's ideas and his inner perception regarding nature and how the poet is attracted to nature. The text unfolds in a straightforward thematic structure. In this poem, the clauses have explicit themes. The poem revolves around nature and human attitude towards nature. It is analyzed that there is much more importance given to the continuity of themes regardless of the subject/circumstances and mood of the poem. Moreover, with zig-zag thematic progression, the poet develops the relationship between humans and nature.

Conclusion:

Halliday's SFG model is used for the analysis of this poem. It depicts that this framework has played a vital in exploring discourses made with the help of language. The analysis tells us about who/what/why and to whom, and we can better comprehend and understand with the help of this framework. The transitivity analysis helps the researchers to interpret the meanings. The identification of the processes talks about the purpose of the text for example it is found that out of thirteen clauses mental and behavioral processes are high in number which highlights the speaker's ideas and thoughts and his perception of nature and by using this process he expresses his views likewise behavioral process talks about the behavior and attitude of poet towards nature.

In interpersonal metafunction analysis, it is noted that all the clauses have a declarative mood which describes the point of view of the poet towards nature. The sequence of events shows the transference of attitude of the poet from anthropocentric to ecocentric towards nature and the thematic progression helps in developing human nature connection. According to one of the ecocritics the world of nature and the world of humans are the parts of the same world.

Basically, Systemic Functional grammar helps to analyze the text and it makes us able to understand the language used by the poet. It extracts implied meanings provided by the poet. It helps researchers to unveil the hidden meanings of the text.

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APPENDIX

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

BY ROBERT FROST

C.1

Independent Clause	Whose woods these are I think//			
Experiential	Projected clause	Senser	Process: mental: cognition	
Interpersonal	Complement	Subject	Finite: present+	Predicator
Declarative Mood	Residue	Mood Block		
Textual	Topical	Rheme		
	Theme			

C.2

Independent Clause	I know.//		
Experiential	Senser	Process: mental: cognition	
Interpersonal	Subject	Finite Present +	Predicator
Declarative Mood	Mood Block		Residue
Textual	Topical	Rheme	
	Theme		

C.3

Independent clause	His house is in the village though;//			
Experiential	Existent	Process: Existential		Circumstance
Interpersonal	Subject	Finite: present+	Predicator ‘be’	Adjunct
Declarative Mood	Mood Block		Residue	
Textual	Topical	Rheme		
	Theme			

C.4

Independent Clause	He will not see me stopping here//				
Experiential	Senser	Process: mental: perception		Phenomenon	circumstance
Interpersonal	Subject	Finite +Future/modal	Predicator	Complement	
Declarative Mood	Mood Block		Residue		
Textual	Topical Theme	Rheme			

C.5

Dependent clause	To watch his woods fill up with snow.//				
Experiential		Process: behavioral	Range	Circumstance	
Interpersonal	Predicator		Complement		
Declarative Mood	Residue				
Textual	Rheme				

C.6

Independent clause	My little horse must think.			it queer to stop without a farmhouse near Between the woods and frozen lake The darkest evening of the year.//
Experiential	Senser	Process: mental: cognition		Projected clause
Interpersonal	Subject	Finite+ modal (Obviousness)	Predicator	Residue
Declarative Mood	Mood Block			Rheme
Textual	Theme			

C.7

Independent clause	He gives his harness bells a shake//			
Experiential	Actor	Process: material	Circumstance: Goal	
Interpersonal	Subject	Finite present+	Predicator	Complement
Declarative Mood	Mood Block		Residue	
Textual	Theme		Rheme	

C.8

Dependent clause	To ask if there is some mistake.//			
Experiential	Process: verbal		Verbiage	
Interpersonal	Finite present+	Predicator	Residue	
Declarative Mood	Mood Block			
Textual	Theme		Rheme	

C.9

Independent clause	The only other sound 's the sweep of easy wind and downy flake//			
Experiential	Token	Process: Relational: Identifying		Value
Interpersonal	Subject	Finite Present +	Predicator	Complement
Declarative Mood	Mood Block		Residue	
Textual	Theme		Rheme	

C.10

Independent clause	The woods are lovely, dark and deep,//			
Experiential	Carrier	Process: relational: Attributive		Attribute
Interpersonal	subject	Finite present+	Predicator	Complement
Declarative Mood	Mood Block		Residue	
Textual	Theme		Rheme	

C.11

Dependent clause	But	I	have	promises	to keep, //
Experiential		Behaver	Range		process: Behavioral
Interpersonal		Subject	Finite Present	Complement	Predicator
Declarative Mood	Mood Block			Residue	
Textual	Textual Theme		Rheme		

C.12

Dependent clause	And miles to go before I sleep, //				
Experiential	Circumstance		Behaver	Process: Behavioral	
Interpersonal	Complement		Subject	Finite Present+	Predicator
Declarative Mood	Re-		Mood Block		-sidue
Textual	Textual Theme		Rheme		

C.13

Dependent clause	And miles to go before I sleep, //				
Experiential	Circumstance		Behaver	Process: Behavioral	
Interpersonal	Complement		Subject	Finite Present+	Predicator
Declarative Mood	Re-		Mood Block		-sidue
Textual	Textual Theme		Rheme		